

# An Eye on the Mustard-Jar

Terry McDonagh: *The Truth in Mustard*,

Arlen House, Galway, 2010 ISBN: KON0828494; RRP: €7.82  
and

Terry McDonagh with Artwork by Sally McKenna:

*Cill Aodain & Nowhere Else*, Blaupause Books, Hamburg, 2010 ISBN: 9783933498335; RRP: €19.50

Exile and dislocation are familiar themes in Irish literature and *The Truth in Mustard* by Terry McDonagh explores these to the full. McDonagh has travelled far and wide. His poetic self continually reflects on journeying and crafts images to make sense of it all. Memory, alienation and longing are leitmotifs deep within him.

The title poem points the reader back to the poet's childhood fascination with the exotic ingredient of mustard his mother used to flavour the boiled bacon, 'or even beef, if she saw fit.' She used mustard for all sorts of things; hot and potent, it fired up life. Though herself 'quiet and assertive' she always had 'one eye never far from the mustard'; it was an ingredient that gave her power. But its unintended effect was to make the poet long 'for a thimbleful of wild mustard/ to blast me off to China.'

That's the way this collection of poems reads. It's a blast off into many different countries: Germany, Bali, Kuwait, Cambodia, Japan. Inside these countries the poet uses either his own voice or that of differing personae. There's Albert, who 'grew up in Hamburg/without a father,' and the tale of the taxi driver in Budapest. The Pit Bull 'used to be a hungry child in Nigeria' then 'made his way to Marseilles,' travelling 'easily, in leather,/from city to city, blood maddened,' until finally, 'The Pit Bull was washed up in the Seine.' These rarefied figures, living in foreign tales, are often bogged down in unfortunate, murky circumstances.

Just as the potential for the exotic is found overseas, its presence too is imagined in Ireland. On his 'Skoda perch' somewhere between Lanesboro and Ballymahon, in *Three Nuns in a Pickup* the poet's pushed onto the verge by 'three sister Graces on the road.' His fantasy moves between them being 'three Muslim wives/ escapees from a harem' or three Irish Sisters 'embalmed in their off-white crook,' with absolutely 'no hint of Arab women in a Mayo mosque.' Similarly, in *A Gypsy Woman in Ireland*, a Romanian in Dublin, called Sonya, hides behind candles in churches

... (living) in the singing of my ancestors:  
homeless in Romania, homeless in Serbia;  
homeless inland, homeless in Ireland.

So at home and abroad misfortune accompanies these figures. The exotic and the familiar, the strange and the ordinary co-exist. Estranged and lonely, they try to make sense of life.

These figures are extensions of the poet's own self. He is living out his own feelings of exile within and outside Ireland. McDonagh finishes the collection with an attempt at resolution; the hope that these personal 'demons' he lives with will, like his suitcase, 'be thrown away...my scream is done/Let everything have an end.' *Let Everything Have an End* is his final and longest poem. It's an 11-page series of couplets that feels endless and moves fast; 'hurry felt good.' This poem reads as a pastiche of the poet's own travels, 'central stations must be in my blood.' Some of the images are exquisite: 'We once planted a rose garden to circle a tiny/ cottage. The roses went round and round/ keeping the little house dizzy and smiling.' Sometimes, though,

the images become a blur, soporific and confusing; no doubt reflecting the dream-like feel of continual movement. Like the collection of poetry itself, this poem tumbles with imagery: earthy, particular, ordinary, foreign:

I'd like to wake to Atlantic madness in the city.  
Let us be Ancients of Egypt for an hour,

handmade Persian rugs for a week,  
dreamers for the length of a dream,

or foxes and badgers clinging  
to every dark inch of a tongue.

These images cartwheel around the page and the reader is challenged to piece together the idea behind them. One senses the poet having to reign in the similes and metaphors himself – either by bringing the reader back to his original idea by repeating verses, or by directly telling the reader, 'Let everything have an end,' – in other words, I have to stop or I'll go off my head.

As his mother always had one eye on the mustard jar, McDonagh has one eye on home wherever he travels. The poems that work really well are those where McDonagh stops and reflects through the lens of that eye. The fire becomes refined by quietness. *An Address Somewhere in Pye* contains a whimsical reflection on some items he finds in his family home in the West of Ireland on a visit. He picks up his father's boots, plots 'their history':

They'd have walked  
footsores  
to the fair with cattle  
to the market with pigs,  
to the hill, the forge, the river  
and, in this case, never  
to or from the pub. My father  
didn't drink. We did.  
That's progress, isn't it?

It's a marvellous mixture of sensitivity, wry wit, dry humour. The old Pye radio is remembered as an object that brought the whole world into his childhood home. In this reflection his words also powerfully and simply evoke the spirit of his hometown:

I still don't know how waves work,  
but like the mystery of good turf,  
or the language of fairies, they kept  
me company until I learned my own tune.

Again we experience this lovely balanced thinking in *By the Alster Pavilion in Hamburg*. Here the poet is 'exiled in a picture on a sunny Saturday/ in November with an Irish harp in my head.' The exotic Ostfriesian tea, the gardens of Schwandenwick, become blended with the earthiness of the West of Ireland. A beautiful

dance between nostalgia and present foreign place comes in to play. A breeze lifts his imagination homeward, 'a wild child's head, ready wings.' There is a sense of rising in the last verses: 'is that the same wind/that blew the roof off our granary?' It's a delicate balance, everything lifting up, but ultimately the 'steps up' only lead to rotting floorboards and the amusing possibility of falling down on top of cows. It's a poem that carefully blends together the exotic and the longing for home. But home becomes the bump of reality, and that's not something the poet wants to contemplate: 'now is the time to stop.'

*Cill Aodain and Nowhere Else* centres itself on the poet's hometown but through another lens: one of distance in time and travel. This picture book is a collection of 28 short reflective poems remembering growing up in the West of Ireland. They are lyrical, earthy, particular and vivid:

16  
Men were real men of sin  
and wrinkles  
in and out of the rain  
in and out of the sun  
in and out of the bog  
in and out of season  
in and out of boat trains  
in and out of alien labour  
in and out  
over and back  
in out  
back and over  
for a decade or two  
in and out of work  
home for good  
in the end.

There is a mirror poem to this for women. These poems have a dream-like surreal quality. In his afterword, McDonagh talks of a veil between the real world and the world of the imagina-

tion: 'It's a hazy world. Our lives of dreams, imaginings and creativity lurk in there behind the veil, coaxing, urging and calling out for expression.' These memories and imaginings are enhanced by the naive quality of the artwork illustrated by Sally McKenna. At first these pictures and the visual simplicity of the poetry beckon to the child in our imagination. But the words themselves resonate with maturity and compassion for this small community of Cill Aodain. It's a land once inhabited by the little people, a land of bog, fishing, described by the blind bard Anthony Raftery. It's a place where religion pulled people apart, but not strongly enough to take away their deeper sense of poetic identity. It's a town now much changed but alive in imagination and we are privileged to have it remembered and shared in poetry:

27  
The time has come when I can stand  
beside Raftery's stone and bush; beside  
the gravestone of  
my great-grandfather, Thady Conlon,  
and reel in a chunk of my own story.

History has left its mark: loud calls  
from abroad gave hope, but they  
left lone men and women behind  
to dream  
of grass that might come up greener.

I remember seeing an elderly man  
weeping into a filthy Pollard bag  
at the wheel of his abandoned tractor  
in a leafy, secluded lane one Sunday.

His neighbours would have been at Mass.

*Carol O'Connor*

*Carol is a Melbourne poet and bookseller.*

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