

Borrowing of Trees

I was born under a continual
Movement of trees, bred in their gathered light,
In the high scything rhythm, the stopped flight,
The sea-sound urging through the timber wall.

And have been held. The laurel's dense glitter,
The elms at random over the hill's shoulder,
The willows with their hidden taint, the bolder
Cherry dying of isolation, fritter

Their substance, are cut one by one, and burn
Sharply or fragrantly so I'll remember.
A heritage, surely. Something which every limber
Landlord of wings must emphasise in turn,

Even the unremarkable plum, or the peppercorn
Too normal for the secretive child. And the hush
Of pines, pines, their dominant slow rush
Rides on all my summers. I was born

Under this usury of trees: Their noise
A lent wisdom of guardians talking together
Blent like husband and wife in the rusty weather
Or wound like a vine about this timbered house.

from Love Poems

10

Why should Ash-Wednesday be so blest
With three encounters in one afternoon?
Perhaps to remind us we are dust
And wetted ashes, even when we come
To such a sweetness
Of livening bodies, tongue beating on tongue.
Elsewhere, they shoot at Venus and the moon.

The flesh unresting on my bones
Would know you by the lightest step or sigh,
Could tempt you anywhere, from stones
Trees deserts storms, or blindfold from a crowd.
In that quick knowledge
I find my life's theme and my spirit's pledge:
O flesh which this sole day consents to die.

Love, in the middle of my journey,
At the beginning of my personal Lent, I came
Upon you in an arid country
And knew at once the fine vertu of love,
The living lightness,
The clear emblem, the first anointed grove
In which we find our world revived in flame.

And on this day that speaks of dust
My heart is tender as the ripe fig's heart
From knowing that I am so blest
As to receive your warmth and meet your eyes.
In the dark ashes
That move towards my brow I see your body
Gleaming; and at my face, sparkles of light.

from Eleven Political Poems

VI

Christian Gentlemen

Their noisy dying world
Deafens them like the last lapse of blood.
Corpses which, in other days,
Would have greened their crops
Block the city's drains.
Their public speeches dwell on private morals,
Neither hating nor approving great evils.
Surprised in attitudes of prayer
They struggle to remember which they chose,
A scorched-earth policy or
The laying-on of hands.

X

No New Thing

No new thing under the sun:
The virtuous who prefer the dark;
Fools knighted; the brave undone;
The athletes at their killing work;
The tender-hearts who step in blood;
The sensitive paralysed in a mood;
The clerks who rubber-stamp our deaths,
Executors of death's estate;
Poets who count their dying breaths;
Lovers who pledge undying hate;
The self-made and self-ruined men;
The envious with the strength of ten.

They crowd in nightmares to my side,
Enlisting even private pain
In some world-plan of suicide:
Man, gutted and obedient man,
Who turns his coat when he is told,
Faithless to our shining world.
And hard-faced men, who beat the drum
To call me to this Cause or that,
Those heirs of someone else's tomb,
Can't see the sweeter work I'm at,
The building of the honeycomb.

XI

Day with its Dry Persistence

In day with its dry persistence
In night warm with the first star
Down the midnight-passages
Or in the small corners of silence
Or at the bedside hot with death
A restlessness that clings and will not
Be rubbed off on paper.

Yet there are some tempos that prefer me,
Some twigs that burst with shaking
Blossom and dew, some lights that are constant,
Some movements of the earth that bring me
In constant pilgrimage to Genesis,
To the bright shapes and the true names,

Oh my Lord.

I

The hammers of iron glow down Faraday.
Lygon and Drummond shift under their resonance.
Saws and hammers drawn across the bending air
shuttling like a bow; the saw trembles
the hammers are molten, they flow with quick light
striking; the flush spreads and deepens on the stone.
The drills call the streets together
stretching hall to lecture-room to hospital.

But prop old walls with battens of old wood.

Saturday work. Sabbath work. *On this day
we laid this stone
to open this Sabbath School. Feed My Lambs.*

The sun dies half-glowing in the floating brickdust,
suspended between red and saffron.
The colours resonate like a noise; the muscles of mouth
neck shoulders loins arm themselves against it.
Pavements clink like steel; the air soft,
palpable as cork, lets the stone cornices
gasp into it. Pelham surrenders, Grattan
runs leading forward, seeking the garden's breadth, the fearful
edge of green on which the sexes lay.

We have built this Sabbath School. Feed My Lambs.

Evening wanders through my hands and feet
my mouth is cool as the air that now thins
twitching the lights on down winding paths. Everything
leans on this bright cold. In gaps of lanes, in tingling
shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines.

O Cardigan, Queensberry, Elgin: names of their lordships.
Cardigan, Elgin, Lygon: Shall I find here my Lord's grave?

IX

Fitzroy, Carlton

Even in the cemetery
where the crows and magpies
stood for hours on the bunched tops
of the few trees, they've put
flat green metal shields
like shock-troops
along the railings. The highrise flats
are guarded from the dead.

Who will guard me from the dead?

Vasko, Croat Socialist, sold me his typewriter
but couldn't bear to part. He stroked it
as he talked, and laughed. Needs the money,
and wants a friend to have it. So
a man may turn his goods into effects
while still alive.

And Roman, Ukrainian,
proud as a Turk,
practising honour in Fitzroy
as if he could stare up wheat
in Brunswick Street,
died at one corner, in the slimed oil
of his motorbike. And left his two best friends
to quarrel over his radiogram.
One flamboyant commanding
the other steady and furtive
both manoeuvring to impress me, unwilling
mediator.

And Milan, counting his books
every day,
touching the spines before he would risk entering
the long sloping lines of his diary,
pacifist, dreaming of Brazil,
the words of friendship halting on his tongue.

In my country . . . my country . . . my country.
No mothers here. All deaths flat, metallic.

X

Micro-Biology I

Been here before. Through
the smart-arsed doors
two deep stairs lock. White coated demonstrators
carry their phials in front of them like tulips
and flick you with their eyes.

I've been up here before.
If you pause, just here,
halfway up the clanking stairway,
and lift your head, let your shoulders
feel them, listen at their feet

you can hear them, over and across the shallow ceiling,
the sixth floor, a floor of dogs

the sound of them
sifting out like blows; voices,
their one voice, the building
breathes them at every corner.

Think of them at the live bone
at the tender unpeeled wood
their voices crossing like the yelps of children;
think how, in any circumstances,
the body makes will make its effort.

XI

Blake in the Body

Half-made London,
Blotched green fields.

And you with your boxer's face,
The broad limewhite forehead
Borne down on thick eyelids,
The mouth muscling down,
You came
South
To Felpham. Prophet
To the watering-places, Cockney tradesman
At the seaside,
Your boxer's head
Set at an angle for the sea air.

It was light leaping
All through the house; the unpruned vine
Reached to the roof-angles.
In the long tilting stiff-grass paddocks
With ecstasy you heard the ploughboy
Say 'the gates are open, father'.
The gates are open.
The twinned harrows' tines shone like earthshine.

Later, you called it
Your three years slumber on the banks of ocean.
Who did not sleep all night.

Dick Donnelly

In south Munster, in these groins of land from which our people have been sucked as by a sponge or engine, I thought sometimes of Dick Donnelly: last songman of his people, in fact the last member of his tribe, a man weathered as coal whose language no-one in the whole world shared. With his song-sticks he stood on the platform, a shape unfashioned as a desert rock, and while the guttural sticks beat and clacked he assured us of the short heavy songs; and sang, his eyes closed forever on the drawn-out, loving, uncomprehending applause. Or in his serge suit and deaf-man's smile he would pass us in the corridors, 'How you t'dayee?' (ah, brotherhood of poets), his ears seeking forever the lost cadence and the dead syllables.

Ceol-Beag for James McAuley

In that last hard springtime we were friends
still. I held your hand a long time, pressing
the pale erosion of the bones.

No garden
could have seemed newer, none
surprising us so much with
the Chinese green fossil at its entrance,
the sky pale and climbing,
bricks of the mellow wall unshaken
by the sun, as you sat
painfully in the wallseat
reading my manuscript. So boring.
I bent and unbent with pain, walked
in and out of the silk chill shadows
of lawn. The sea shone. We looked at it through
our pale skin, water
flashing under the long grass slopes
where we had climbed carefully as turtles.
That was how I last saw you, your fingers
crooked like wire, your voice speaking,
tissue-thin, of new experiment: 'O teaching!
We have to learn that all over again.'

For years we'd argued; *or*, I listened, laughing,
to the baroque inventions of your scorn.
Style was your art; pain, art; philosophy
an art like politics; and politics
an art, too, like drawing hair from stone.
Many a night we spent arguing
about them, boasting of our enemies,
putting them down: but always, by morning
we'd be again men of no property
and no importance, whose high-reaching jokes
could never dispossess the great.
I remember, the sunlight touched your mouth like glass.

You were a great man for a hangover;
but now, we'll drink no more, until I find
(and in your name commission them one song)
the mouthless pipes waiting, the animal skin
waiting, stretched instinctly on the drum,
to make the CEOL-BEAG, where shapes change
into music, as in the moisture of the womb.

That day the soil was melting with the first
rustlings of summer; birds dropped grass seeds.
Pound, Webb, Auden: more
and more of the immortals were dying:
with animal heads, with beautiful
cramped earth faces, while the light paled,
they faltered back into their element.
Hearing of their deaths, going from one trivial
ordeal to another,
I found the underworld journeying with me,
and heard their voices mewling in the grass.
The sea crushed into the light like ice; and you, with back
to the sunwall, feigned not to be dying.

Your letters scrape on the surface of the floor
with a long gentle sound; Rilke would have
kept them, enchanted, like a bloom on skin,
hearing and testing them with his throat muscles.
So for the small pibroch: poets,
as much as clansmen, need what courtesies
alone can kill the thirteen thousand miles
that lie between us, flat as death. I choose
a native tuning: play the first tune,
Irish. The proper music for you now.
Next, the soft second tune: the rosined bow,
a harping pipe, a round of goatskin, play

the approved lilt, and in Dundrum, with the green estate wood
opposite, I think of what you said,
'I'm terrified of the Ireland inside me.'
Her light stands in the chesnut trees: vase-shaped:
the peony leans backward, open-sided, tall, the true crimson.

Gulag I

To left and right, along the equator
the gulag spreads in the heat.
Long and broad that fungus
with its black pins heads, rafts of larvae
carrying their suck of spawn everywhere.

The gulag hooks in and commandeers
the shapes of mountains. It grows through dams.
Governors and slaves have fed into it
their most enduring treasure, their excreta.
Machines are strapped and bandaged to it.

The guards extend their guns on bare arms;
mosquitoes walk in their sweat.
The sun makes a bed for lice,
a dish for cockroaches,
skulls and ribs for the jungle.

These were men, these women,
whose flayed skin covered the sun.
Some died, rolled in their fever, some
escaped into the massacre,
some left scraps of poems in the midden
to send a few words
back to earth. Some choked on their prayers.

They stand beside us and point out
how it grows, spreads, north,
south, tundra, trades, chilled oceans,
a gulag for all climates,
even those that bind our continent
so hard, so anciently, so gently.

Gulag II

They write out scraps of poems
on old wrapping paper
and plant them in the earth
close as possible to the wire.

They hear the Amis are coming,
the liberators,
but for their mind the poems
will have taken glossy wings
and flown to the west before them.

Even skimming the lowest wire
untrained poem, go
with a full throat.

No. They know the poems are buried
without wings or breath.
Even if their own starved bones
are led out through the gate
the poems will never move.

‘They are buried, Vasil,’
in the black Hour of the night,
‘buried like memory.’
‘Yes, but so close to the wire
they might jump with our mind
skimming the lowest strand.’

Wittgenstein's Face

The skin texture, the bones
mimetic as music,
a strict system of plans
drawn for the spirit:
traced in, for example,
to Wittgenstein's grained face
that holds its aching profile
on the book's cover
till it seems, like Menuhin's,
a life's task: Is *it*
ugly or beautiful? A face
that would draw its questions down
the executioner's blade
looks out levelly, curt

with years of remissions,
and we see it as bone and flesh
at the moment of its invention,
not yet silenced; it looks out of itself
as if it presupposed hands
wrestling and talking
though wanting also to grope for
the rough edge of coat-sleeves.

The face is a closed kenning,
a riddle: *not death but dying*
is an experience within life.
Who has encoded this?

Small Brown Poem for Grania Buckley

Paleface, small fume of fire,
flame that burns nobody,
each time you come into the room
you compose a new colour.

You have mastered the trick
of hovering in doorways
with the fury of the eavesdropper,
peacemaker, magpie at nesting,

Your cardigan worn like an argument,
your runner's legs in straight trousers,
as you stand there, being praised,
as if your whole figure had just been brushed.

Even in the rashness of the close
night, you ask questions about space,
as we watch the black spread like lava
and the stars keep their grip on it
in the pale, pale cold of Kildare.

Seeing Romsey

I see Romsey through a hole in the wind
as I used to in late autumn, in the southern gales,
just there, not vibrating with changes
but like a model that has grown to its full height.
The timber houses have roofs of painted iron,
the brick ones are lowering with warm tiles.
The tree near me is the one I climbed
fifty-three years ago. I smell *roses* on the fence
where once the whole air was brushed with cypress.
Proust's madeleine, nothing. Even the smell
of trains that haven't run here
for forty years. Smelling strong as they slow down.
Smell of the comics they brought each Saturday.
Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,
or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs
or that great heap of blossom in Yeats's window.
Nothing to this. To the firesmell of the forge,
squeezing into the smell of burning hoof. Incense
through the voices singing *O salutaris hostia*
that never sing Latin any more.
I smell the printer's ink, and books,
and dust that flashes when the raindrops hit it
as it takes the rain into itself.

The Too-Lateness

for George Russell

What I hate most
is the too-lateness: when you come
to touch or accept even the smallest
good your life relishes,
you find it slipped
out of its proper time
into some other pace of being,
lost, gone; and you are left dreading
each familiar season, caught
in the mind's alternative society.

And the best, the best, you can
have then, is that freedom
which comes closest, most dear,
when all the best are dead
or dying, or love grown so late
it fastens to you, like a cry
heard decades after,
drilling the sleepless ear,
a child's wail lasting for ever.

Mute freedom of the hospital
or of the sidelines,
the unused time, vacuous with omens
mistaken for sanctity.

Heaven (the name so lovely,
the idea so distant)

lies about us, yes,
but where? From the first light
into which the town
clicks open, and the tussocks
purple like wildflowers, to the last
red tincture in the sunseting wave,
it moves steady as a clock's
alarming throb, keeping
around us like our own heartbeat;
night jasmine, soft bluebeard mint,
the cool roots of the heat; as you stand
among them, appalled by their completeness,
you'd think heaven the longing for a present
that slips keenly away:
a moment's glow
a figment of the weather.

So Christ, when he outfaced them,
or when he harried his own
with quick asperities: *You know not
the day nor the hour,*
meant: you have not come up to it,
have barely approached it,
or have dreamed past it. Here
I am, I am here,
he taught them: My time a learned time.

There's plenty of time, we said.
There was no time.
The sunny afternoons
were short as blows.

Tomorrows rushed, with less
time to count them
than to drink to their passing.
And that glow in the grass
was where it all started,
cold, with the unearthly
blood-chill of the salt life-forms,
sucked into walls porous as limestone,
to stay there, like a leaf-fossil
mimicking eternity:
the Oldest Animals.
And you and I go on, mazed
in the Byzantine closed mesh of nature
when all we wanted
was some place in a story.

Hunger-Strike

Warrior: 1. One whose occupation is warfare; a fighting man; in eulogistic sense, a valiant or an experienced man of war. Now chiefly *poet.* and *rhet.*, exc. as applied to the fighting men and heroes of past ages and of uncivilized peoples.

Shorter O.E.D.

To Redefine 'Warrior'

Through this season
of hot clouds, you have needed
to redefine 'Warrior': One
who makes war, with no weapons
but the sticks of his forearms,
the electric pain of his body
in his cell, away from the air
his family breathes, drenched with sweat
of armed men, with machines,
robots, automatics, clockbombs,
hijacked milk-lorries,
sprayguns and knapsacks of gas,
plastic bullets, shields, visors:
For the armed man is known by his tools,
but a warrior by the death of his terrors

and of their monstrous dream prototypes:
tortured heads, with holes large as faces
opened in them; a corpse hung at the ford;
a serf enduring the thousand lashes;
statues fighting; a masked man
beckoning between the armies;
a comrade lasting into his sixtieth day;
a lark, as he said to himself, at the window
but caught, crying by the foot, in black wire.

Bobby Sands: One

Now he is laid on the sheepskin rug
so that his bones will not burn him,
pads are put on his heels
against the bedsores. He is blind
and deaf. The pain they told him of
jolts its thin current
into every movement. His teeth
protrude like the bones of a dead man.
He is dying for his word. *Geronimo*.

They would not let him alone.
Day and night they came and went
stirring his pallid shadow,
interpreters of his dying.
Day and night he hung on the wire,
his curled body outlasting them
till they fell silent; 'he was the piper
walking in the front of battle'.

Then, he died in a clean place,
crooked, on the waterbed, the Pope's
crucifix proudly beside him, his mind
open as a galaxy.
Le dur désir de durer
saw him buried as Geronimo.

Sands: Two

But, before that, he was lowered
into the deep trough
of others' wills, his wire thin bones
buzzing with speeches, lights

thick on his shrinking face,
died badgered with help,
not hearing
the faraway words his mother
spoke to the microphone.

For her the hard thing
must have been keeping her eyes down,
her lips steady, while blurting out
what they had said to each other: 'We talked
about old times . . . when he was at school
. . . and in the youth club . . .'

This was the time when
everyone came to talk at him
and to come out and tell the world
what he wanted, and why
he should/should not want it
(But he wanted not to give up,
and not to die either. Geronimo.)

The sky was full of mouths: except the father,
who said nothing, the brother,
who was an arm to lean on
for the sister, who could not hide her eyes,
and the mother, all large
unweeping features, and going in,
and coming out, and going
only to come back next day
to the reporters husking like bees:
'How is he today?' 'He's dyun.'

Francis Hughes

Colonel, press your cap down hard
or keep your fingers in your belt,
searchlights and men in every yard,
the tree beside you red with haws,
Saracens in the windgreen lanes,
the day they bury Francis Hughes.

Is this the corpse you hate so much,
that awesome boy, going to Mass
on a weekday morning in Bellaghy,
loitering so the late dews pass
along his footstep to the door,
thinking the land's his own, perhaps?

Go to your tea, sergeant, trooper,
his shadow follows you with scorn
now that you've lowered his starved face
deep in the ground where he was born:
the long-eyed kinsman drumming on it
tunes you will never learn or bear.

Raymond McCreesh

Weeks later, it was his face
that loomed on the hourly news,
tilted back, fragile, laughing.
To whom someone said, on the 58th day,
do you want a drink of milk?
He was blind now. He said, I don't know.
Batlike his brain in and out
of his body-shape, the mind's landscape
entering and leaving sun and shade.

For days, on the wire services,
in press statements, they took his name:
Do you want a drink of milk? I don't know.

And they talked of his family
as if he were straining
to leave some mad priesthood, or to break
some taboo of the townland,
and the people he loved would not let him.
Eloquent assassins,
Oxbridge men, Sandhurst men,
I am almost too ashamed
to mention your shame.

Interlude for Exploration

Standing at the microphone,
he shot his cuffs and said, earnestly,
'Good God, we're not barbarians,'
while the other railed against all violence
booming, 'kill the killers.'
None of them is a barbarian
they are all against violence
which (let us be quite clear)
they totally and unequivocally reject.
What they *do* support
is the police and the army
and Saladins in the closed streets
and plastic bullets at walking schoolgirls
and blackened faces waiting in the darkness
after the local dance; and the spacemen
on each corner, with their guns cradled,
and the knowledge that the Opposition is with them

and that the Bishops, who hate violence,
will ask no hard questions, and the columnists
will be as full of similes as the poets,
lightheaded (this way, that way)
and Oxford will debate measure and process,
and the *Tablet* moral or some other theology
(all against, utterly against violence)
and the sun will rise in the West
if we want it, for we are dying
as much, but not as fast, as
their unarmed prisoners.

Interlude for Execution

On the waste ground where they shot him
two or three birds fly up
flapping, as if the air's too heavy.
The ground is drifting with lead.
Nothing grows. Vanished even
the permanent knuckles of the plane-trees,
and the people who heard him screaming
can grow nothing inside,
and can say or think nothing
while they wait for the suicide hour
flashing with law and order.

Patsy O'Hara

Fourth, Patsy O'Hara. We had seen his sister
moving from door to door,
from taoiseach to taoiseach,
with her unanswered face,
while all the time he sat, with hunched beard,

in his bugged, photographed cell,
waiting till they would make him
carry his body down the Creggan
moving in procession
slow and quiet as a milkman
while the young boys in their staring thousands
drummed their heels on Derry's walls.

Joe McDonnell

who said, and became famous for it,
'I've got too much to live for,'
and said later (or it may have been Kiernan Doherty),
'I don't want to die over a food parcel,'
died on my birthday. It was almost exact mid-summer.
The black flags at Walkinstown roundabout
were held up for hours by the waiting faces
and the midges at Phoenix Park
stung even the feckless Spanish students
in hot moist green that seemed to grow warmer
in the encroaching shadows

And Martin Hurson on Grania's birthday.
And Kevin Lynch and Kiernan Doherty
died shortly after the Commission
had failed to solve the English.

(That question of the ages:
How do you solve the English?)

And Thomas McElwee, the shy-looking cousin
countryman, a proper devil for cars;
whose eight sisters carried his coffin
into the silent crowded roadway,

then on, with other bearers, into
the roaring graveyard, where
the whole countryside swayed in late summer.

And another long-eyed northerner
enrolled in their love compact.

Ardmore Bay

This morning in the tiding the waves were green with spray
And the land seemed moving outward from the sea.
Though I must leave it soon, to go twelve thousand miles away,
Ardmore will never see the last of me.

*The angles of the light
And the blackbirds in their coursing
They fall away together
To the wide strand of Ardmore.*

The people in their kindness, in the delicate deep town,
They're living out the dignity of Here:
The sea they'll walk in summer, the land they'll keep their own,
This is the Ireland no-one has to fear.

*O the angles of the light
And the small birds in their coursing
They lift away together
From the headlands of Ardmore.*

The seagulls come down grunting on the tailspin of the gale,
They are speaking Munster Irish to our heart;
The past that gives us courage will keep our country whole
And the future lift away the bitter part.

*The angles of the light
And the blackbirds in their coursing
They fall away together
To the wide strand of Ardmore.*

Aubade

The whistle passes
the black tails of the birds pass
the street goes off
with its carping voices,
and from the ground
the raw white of rivers
forms in frost.

Those are the night colours.
You know it is morning when
the ground shakes, a light goes on,
and soon, on the road's ridge,
the sun grows light as straw.
Your memories
creep back, and stretch, furred flesh.