The Yellow Nib

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Edited by

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EDITORIAL NOTE

With this issue *The Yellow Nib*, which has hitherto appeared annually under the editorship of Ciaran Carson, enters a new phase.

It is our intention to publish the magazine twice a year, in March and December. We hope to maintain its characteristic blend of established and emerging writers and to include literary criticism, interviews with poets and work in translation. Each issue will feature a substantial poetry review section.

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The deadline for our next issue is 30 September, 2012. Contributions should be sent c/o the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, School of English, Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN, or to g.hellawell@qub.ac.uk.

Leontia Flynn
Frank Ormsby

DAVID WHEATLEY

THREE POEMS

A Bee-Hive

Sitting under the crook of the eaves
in my black and yellow jumper
I turn ultraviolet blue
in the gaze of a honeybee
I watch enter the roof.

Like a postman's round, the sex
drags on all morning, its fine
filigree residue dispatched
journey by journey to our
asylum of honeycombed dark.

All round me masterpieces
of morbid secretions find their
invisible form, perfection raised
to the level of self-devouring,
a stomach digesting its body.

The bounty of innumerable
foxglove lips parted
slaveringly has brought us to this:
a jelly pleasure sea
I float on, hapless acolyte

of a queen I nourish and dread.
Am I so much as noticed, I wonder,
I and my furious labours? I feel
the jelly throb with her need for me, me
and those billions of others, my kind.

According to Lucretius

Up to the birds on the wing the Avernian lake
dispatches a toxic draught that leaks from a crack
in the earth, poisoning a corner of heaven;
no sooner do birds pass over than a hidden
poison seizes and plunges them to their death
below in the watery source of the foul breath.
And as the fallen bird vainly flails and tosses
all life is drained from it by that halitosis.
Yet before it dies the foul breath drives it wild
with lust, for even in a place so soiled
and poisoned fresh life must be vomited forth,
so great a perversity dwells there in the earth.
Another wile practised by the infernal lake
is to shatter the air between it and the flock
with its breath, leaving a pocket of pure vacuum.
Passing birds fly into it and meet their doom:
the beating of their wings slows down and seizes up
and all their efforts leave them in a hopeless flap.
Dispossessed of the breezy luxuries of flight
they plummet earthwards under their own dead weight,
and into the empty air around them as they fall
each bird scatters through every pore its small poor soul.

Colmcille's Farewell

No horizon is not the better for want of you,
no storm at sea less welcome than your harbours.
You are the mistranscription in every manuscript,
the tuneless hymn intoned by the abbey dunce.
I would wish the Holy Mother the squealing of pigs
before the dull, click-clacking drone of your prayers.
You are a black cat's hairball on a high altar,
a rat making off with a consecrated host.
I stand on one leg like a crane to curse you,
I am squeezing my earlobe as I speak. Heavy
on my breast lies the salute I will offer
your vanishing shadow on the tide, and I am
the Bishop of Armagh asleep in a ditch, a drunkard
calling for bat's milk, a glutton dining on his
own fleas, and happy, in any world without you in it.

The Work of a Winter

St Antony's Leuven 1643

1.

It is September in the garden, the time when I would always
turn for home,
when all roads would lead me back to Donegal, to the valley
of the Eske,
to the mountains of my first name, to that great cove of my
father's place
and the little village by the Drowes, where a makeshift
scriptorium under eaves,
had been readied for the work of a winter.

I'd been travelling all summer on the roads, browned to the
colour of my robes,
like the men we'd pass at harvest, who'd toss a word and
wave at us and sometimes
bid us share a chunk of bread. We were harvesting too
but this harvest was from
the old black books, dark as the soil, my job to transplant
stories onto clean white ground.
It was work I'd been reared for as much as those men for
the fields.

By this time of year all signs would point in that one direction –
the bramble leaves
already blazing in the hedges would be beacons, lighting us
home, blackberries forming
out of blossom make a trail and swallows swooping in the air
before us were heralds
announcing our return. And sometimes in the winter, I'd find
myself walking in my dreams,
always walking, still following the long ribbon of the road.

2.

The garden here is formal: there are pear trees espaliered on
the wall and green and golden
pears stick out at all angles. Until recent days I would still help
to pick them but now
I am allowed to rest – to be an 'omelette dreamer' – as the
Spanish say of old men here.
We are in the square of the Pig Market, this house once the
House of Blackbirds,
who have never left us, singing us to sleep on summer evenings.

Those nights I would often long for home, for the white nights
of Donegal
and for Kilbarron, when the sky beyond the mountains would
never go completely dark
and I would sleep to the rhythm of the sea and wake to the
smell of oats bubbling
in the porridge pot and the glimpse of chimney-sky as I helped
my mother, Honora Ultach,
check for birds before the lighting of the morning fires.

We were a perching house, set at the very edge of things,
the castle walls contiguous
with the cliff, precipitous, seeming set one day to tumble into
the waves below.
It was never silent since the sea was always speaking: shushing
us on quiet nights,
thundering in storm, sending spumes of white waves nipping
at the castle's ankles
like terriers and sometimes showering us with foam.

3.

One of my brothers is burning leaves down near the willow tree
where I have asked to be laid. The blue smoke hangs in the still air of Leuven
and makes it sweet and sleepy. I'll be happy to rest here in this flat land
where the horizon is always lost and faraway, not like the big skies of home
when you'd think sometimes you could break the veil and see right into Heaven.

From our high, windy eerie I'd look across the bay at mountains I climbed
as soon as I was able – great rounded rocks with lakes on top that I thought
still held the waters of the Flood. They were best in this soft light of Lammas time
and I'd sleep up there under enormous skies and they called me 'Tadhg an tSléibhe',
'Tadhg of the Mountains' – since they were my second home.

I knew the brown-robed men from when I'd seen them walk the strand in prayer,
their rough robes blowing out behind them, billowing in the wind or sometimes running
out of the sea like boys, their tackle swinging, like a fresh-caught catch.
And then more sober times, before the fire, when my lessons began and I'd to learn
the seanchas, – the lore of place, of poetry, of men.

4.

I ran away from the road that was laid for me for a long time
and came here first
as a soldier, not a scholar, riding horse in the Irish regiment
of Spanish Flanders.
Those were good years too – I loved the horse and would miss
forever the feeling of its life
below me when I took St Francis's Rule in all humility to stay
lower than it always
and never ask it bear my weight again.

But even in those years with worldly men and their women
I was really God's –
keeping the childhood faith of making every minute of the
day a remembrance –
so that when I woke to put on clothes, each part would take
me to the Passion of the Lord:
closing my buttons meant the scourge, putting on my shoes
the nails and going back to bed
with the night would remind me of the tomb. The day was
punctuated in prayer.

And when I did give in and came in here, it was too late for
the Latin, so I would use
the wooden key to Heaven instead – the Irish tongue of my
place. I'd to do the chores
like all the others in the warm kitchen, in the garden here
but always headed for the page.
I'm no poet. I was not to make a new way – only to follow the
old books' paths.
My job when it began was questing but questing stories instead
of alms.

5.

Strange how the prayers of your first life become the prayers
of its ending: I word
my mother's prayers on these beads made from the seeds of
peonies, from the garden
of the great Abbey of Donegal. All the sweetness of that lost
time is the blown rose
made small but it opens for me again in memory: visits to the
Abbey before its sacking
on the Feast Days when it was a place of gardens and orchards
and continual chant.

The Abbey was a home from home, open to the sea and so
near the mouth of the bay
that the boats would sail right up under the windows of the
refectory so that the coarse talk
of the sailors would drift up like smoke through the different
music of the Lectio Divina.
In the paper markets in Antwerp I would be back in that busy
Donegal, all open windows
and talk, all colour come from far away, the bright day blowsy
with excitement.

When I returned, we were in refuge from the Abbey and all the
grandeur gone. We called it
our wilderness place, 'in deserto nostrae mansionis' – a humble
river mouth fed by the waters
of Lough Melvin and the sloping hills – no gardens or gold,
no orchards in the rushy land.
We were lying low, so as not to draw the world to us or our
busy hibernation.
Like the Seven Sleepers we hoped we might wake one day
to a world transformed.

6.

I remember my first journey out of Donegal. I'd started with
a cousin's book –
which had The Law of Adhamhnáin, who'd decreed that women
should service neither
soldiers nor their wars but then laid down the law on what they
owed him for this favour.
I took his vision later from the book of the Dun Cow and prepared
to send some leaves here
to let them see the work but there were hard parts in it that
I needed a scholar's eye on first.

At Lughanasa we made Dublin. The Rule forbade me go alone,
my socius on that first
journey a gentle man from Legfordrum who talked about his
father's home.
Dublin was poor pickings because the libraries and our houses
were suppressed –
the vellums sacked and banishéd and even with the use of the
heretic bishop's books
we found only the rule of Columcille and a poem attributed
to Brigit.

Then the Scúap Chrábaid – the Broom of Devotion – that always
reminds me of Kilbarron
and the bisom made of reeds that my mother or the maids would
sweep round the house,
shooing me out of the road. This was a broom to brush up evil
and in copying
its invocations of the far world and of heaven, I felt I was sewing
up a cloak of prayer
and of protection that I'd take with me, a breastplate for the road.

7.

Working on the old books was like swimming in a bog hole –
it would leave you dark
and smeared; as speckled as the Leabhar Breac and weary;
pages spotted with the imprint
of a mouse's foot or the holes of a worm, marred by crude
mendings but then surprises too:
the unexpected outline of a flower, a crucifixion, a horse's
back the spine of a letter F
as if lying in a sweet meadow, kicking up its feet in the air
in freedom.

Sometimes the vellums were so brittle you'd be afraid they'd
wither in your hand
and disappear. Other times they'd be damp, defaced or smell
of mould, especially
if taken out of hiding. I'd copy first in summer then retranscribe
at Drowes.
It was never my job to comment on or change, even when the
old words offended
sense or meaning – mine only to transpose onto different ground.

We whitewashed walls to save the light, the page become a bare
white field ploughed
for winter sowing, my words a blackbird's track on snow or the
spiky branches
of a hawthorn hedge, the letters black and spare, in single simple
lines. We did away
with columns, left space around each entry, liking what a rabbi
showed me once,
their holy book left ever open to addition in another hand and
in another time.

8.

The brother has gone in and left the fire and a woman's voice
from the Begijnhof
wafts in with the blue smoke of leaves, gentle as the midnight
singing in the dark
of the Clares of Lough Ree. I went there near the end to copy
the book of their rule,
a workaday one for the hard life they live day in day out –
I felt almost guilty
to be putting their austerity down so stark and I cannot say
I was not glad to leave them.

It's a sore existence they have there in the wet heart of Ireland.
They all take a part
in the drawing of turf and water for the house, tending a mucky
garden in the rain
in neither shoes, nor socks, nor stockings. They wear rough wool
against their skin
like the robes of St Clare, who thought the homespun velvet and
the rope a jewelled belt,
her wooden slippers gleaming gold in the tiny light of Mary's
altar.

They say she loved the rain on the hills of Spoleto because it
was a link to him
but rain was rare in Tuscany – we had no such problem, there
was always rain.
They prayed so hard and so unceasingly that midday seemed
like midnight
and even then they'd be up and at the matins. I stayed two days
and they are praying
for me now and will be at my death, that was their promise for
the book.

9.

Lough Ree was the closing of a circle, for there we'd worked
as four for the first time:
the two Cú Choigcríches, Fearfeasa Ó Maoil Chonaire and
myself, from sunrise to sundown,
from St Francis's Feast to Mischief Day, on the list of kings
and genealogy of saints – sifting,
straining dates and notes. On the Feast of Saint Charles of
Borromeo the sisters baked apples
in honour of his blessing of the orchards and our finishing
of the work.

That was the rhythm we took to Donegal and to the Annals –
the best days an almost silent
meditation, each man lending weight to the work of the others,
light streaming in the window
catching motes or rain dripping from the leaves all round
concentrating the room's sounds
of breath and books. Later – lucubration, redaction and
sometimes a letter from abroad
like the one from Prague on the ghostly library of Strahov
we would have loved to see.

Then the campaign against us, the accusation of the five errors
and that great work still not
seeing the light of day. I carried it with me across the North
when the flax fields were blue
to sail from that dark town in July and here when I smell the
retting beds and see the river
water turned to gold, undrinkable – it seems our work is rotting
away too with only my little
book of hard words, an accidental harvest from all the years
and journeying.

10.

It's words from that book that are lively in my head tonight
and the memory of a marvel.
We'd travelled down to Cloch Uáitéir from Dublin after
working on the miracles of Moling
and were staying in the barn of the secular priest Róbnéid
Purcell to copy his fragment
of the life of Kevin who'd lived with his disciple Solomon on a
skerry in the lough nearby.
We copied disgusting poems that day, I'm ashamed even now
to confess.

It was this time of year: I remember the lake ringed red by
the hawthorn hedges
and in the evening we lit a fire on the floor to take the chill
off the night but as we prayed
before sleep the air filled with the flurry of angels – white
wings frantic and lucent
from the flames – our own private Pentecost overhead in
absolution for those godless poems.
Even as we prayed they began to fall, St Francis's flowers.
A flock of great white butterflies,

bedding down to winter in the walls, had mistaken the heat
of our fire for an early Spring
and come back to life too soon. No angels then but marvellous
still.
Is that what death will be, I wonder, a gentle waking into the
warmth of God?
These are my last things, my litany of lost or nearly lost words
inflected by home
and memories that flit in the dusk made vivid for a moment
then gone.

I am the poor friar Mícheál Ó Cléirigh.

JOHN F. DEANE

FOUR POEMS

The Living-Room

for Raymond Deane

We worked to learn the notes, the sharps, the flats,
we tried the underlying harmonies;
remember how the piano pedal stuck?
and favourite drawing-room pieces (*The Robin's*

Return, The Maiden's Prayer) became such mush,
like re-rolled plasticine. There was that sheen on the grand
mahogany table, how our lemonade glasses
left rings that would not come off and oh! the blame!

Remember how we hid, watching the adults play
their money-games, how an inner light from the whiskey
glimmered, and firelight sent sparkles gambolling
from glass decanters on the sideboard? How perfect

in memory, it all was. On the parlour floor, remember?
just there, before the hearth, the river-otter pelt, sleek
golden fur through the underhair, silk-feel and death-grin,
how it brought into the room the stealth of water-dog,

high-jinks and romping, teeth sunk in trout-flesh,
secrecy of den and holt, the chill, the sliming… We
held to the basics, arpeggios, chords and scales;
you mastered them, remember? They have eluded me.

Driftwood

What do you say to the dying, when already
they have waded out beyond all hearing

towards a place you have not earned the right
to enter – *good-bye: farewell: or God be with you?*

Or do you, as did I then, sit silent, hurt
by the impenetrable fact of *his*

dying? who had held me safe on the water,
who had promised he would not leave me

floundering. But he disappeared, into breaking
waves, I steadfast on the long strand, watching

the shivering chevron shape the greylag make
leaving these shores, and what I heard from them

sounded like crying, a fading dirge for the seasons,
a music of inner, inevitable need. Otherwise

silt, and courage failing; otherwise only the so-far
written lines, the words like driftwood to cling to.

The Shower

And wasn't it something, after all, to be caught like that,
out in the world without coat or mac or brolly, foolish
in this our country? And to take refuge in a stand of trees,
rain plushing through the leaves and branches over you
and coming down in slow and generous drops and plops
missing you some of the time, sometimes not, and the sound
like a roomful of silent readers turning their pages all
together, till you felt embraced in your smallness
by the fragrance of rain over leaf-mould, by the green
darkness that held you, and the world out there so all
riven with grandeur and greyness that the drip drip drip
on your unprotected shoulder was the tap tap tap of someone
reminding you, just that, lest you forget, lest you take it
for granted: so you are glad you were unreasonable, unprepared.

High Tide

Dust on the beads on the vanished woman's dressing-table,
a few grey hairs in the bristles of her brush,

a Missal fat with cards in memory… I gazed
into her amber-surround small hand-mirror, as if one
might expect

the long years looking would have left some trace,
her eyes, perhaps,
watching back at me with a sign of love;

grief thickens with its selfishness, it is a loss
to the ongrowing ego, though the vanished soul, we may believe,

is settling to the banquet of the blessed. From her high window
I see the waters of Blacksod Bay, down

over the famished fields, the fuchsia hedges, the bogland wastes;
somewhere a dog is barking, and an ass

brays loudly. Around the pier, I know, thick clumps of seaweed
sway and slap in relentless process, tides

will leave them flopped and slithery for a few hours, then touch
their edges again to a salt wakefulness. She

processed her beads with a fulsome regularity, I heard the sibilance
of her almost-silent prayers, that irritating

constancy. And what can we do with loss? Replace
the mirror, draw across the curtains, turn and go out.

JOHN WILSON FOSTER

THE POETRY OF *TITANIC*

Only the poetasters were immediately sure what to do. They sprang into action on hearing of the catastrophe of the sinking. Newspapers were flooded with elegies and poets' corners became clearing-houses for bad, deeply-felt verse. Mercifully, most of the verses were brief emotional ejaculations, and their themes commonplace, usually chosen from the following: man's hubris; the superiority of nature over human endeavour; male chivalry; male heroism; the arrogance of science; the deplorable worship of Mammon.[1]

But among the poetasters, the scale both of the ship and the disaster tempted poetic ambition in both the poem and its title. And so we had such a poem as Thomas Donaldson's grandiosely titled *An Epic Poem on the Disaster to the White Star Liner "SS Titanic" which went down in Mid-atlantic through colliding with an iceberg, on Saturday Night, 14th April, 1912* (Glasgow, n.d., almost certainly 1912). The poem in 155 lines tells (badly) the story of the sinking, mentions some of the high-profile drowned, and ends with a metrical sock on the jaw for the man regarded at the time as the ship's chief begetter: "Let Solomon the great wise king,/Unto Lord Pirrie say,/'There's nothing here unsinkable,/ For all is vanity'."[2] Far more ambitious, and with better, if still indifferent, verse, was Edwin Drew's *The Chief Incidents of the Titanic Wreck Treated in Verse, together with Lessons of the Disaster* (London, 1912), a motley structure of 27 poems published within a month of the sinking. Given the quality of the verse, the self-advertisement is accurate in its inadvertent damning-with-faint-praise implication: "may appeal to those who lost friends in this appalling catastrophe".

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1 Steven Biel in *Titanica: The Disaster of the Century in Poetry, Song, and Prose* (1998) has rounded up a handful of chiefly American specimens, several of which are competent verses teetering on the verge of poetry.

2 Oddly, an identically titled poem turned up in New Zealand, published by Lyttleton Times Co., but attributed (in World Catalog) to one J. Linton. I know Donaldson's poem only because it is pasted into an enlarged photocopy of the so-called '*Olympic* Notebook' (now lost) in which are jotted down the specifications of the ship said to be in the hand of Thomas Andrews. I was kindly lent the photocopy by Mrs Una Reilly.

As punctual as Drew's work by also appearing in May 1912 was Blanca Vanini Silva's rather more interesting long poem, *Solidaridad en el Dolor (Catastrofe del* Titanic*): Poema Filosofica-Moral en tres Partes y en Romance Heroico*. The poet tells us he began on April 21 (the ship sank in the early morning of April 15) and finished the poem on May 6.[3] In his prelude Silva has the ship declare its invincibility and draws on indictments that were soon familiar to Anglo-American readers: "I am *Titanic*!, masterpiece of Progress,/prodigy of Industry and Labour,/manifest proof of man's power." In his entracte, Silva has the iceberg puncture not just the ship but its (and man's) pride and send it into the "deep abyss of death" ("profundo abismo de la muerte"). In his finale, Silva sees the ship's unwitting approach to the abyss as representative of those who do not acknowledge a higher power ruling the universe and guiding humankind and who do not recognise the deeps beyond human understanding.

Poets of stature were also drawn to the catastrophe, but warily one senses. The American poet Harriet Monroe was to become the editor of the important journal, *Poetry*, and to fall under the modernist influence of Ezra Pound. She published 'A Requiem' in the April 21 issue of the *Chicago Tribune*. The poem betrays not a shred of modernism and is a patriotic hymn to the Union dead who sank with the liner: "Your fathers, who at Shiloh bled,/Accept your company…//Daughters of pioneers!/Heroes freeborn, who chose the best,/Not tears for you, but cheers!"

Thomas Hardy was not far behind Monroe in the punctuality of his poetic response, but the appearance of haste is offset by the fact that it was probably prompted by an Elgarian sense of high national obligation – it was completed on April 24 and appeared in the souvenir programme of the Covent Garden *Titanic* theatrical benefit matinée of May 14. It is also offset by the fact that what befell the ship merely confirmed a philosophy of life that the poet had matured over years of verse and fiction. 'The Convergence

[3] The poem was published in Santiago, Chile and has been translated for me by Arthur Lipman of Vancouver, Canada.

of the Twain (Lines on the Loss of the Titanic)' was a poem waiting to be written by Hardy, just as the iceberg waited for the ship to rendezvous with it. Hardy's lines give an alarming dimension to the famous R.J. Welch photographs of the half-built *Titanic* in her gantry:

> And as the smart ship grew
> In stature, grace and hue
> In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Their eventual rendezvous is an icy parody of sexual congress and together berg and liner become "twin halves of one august event".

The philosophy of Hardy's poems and novels is itself the sinister mate of the Victorian and Edwardian ambition and achievement he refused to celebrate. There is a gratified prurience in Hardy's omniscient narrator's imagining of the sunken liner:

> Over the mirrors meant
> To glass the opulent
> The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb,
> Indifferent.[4]

'The Convergence of the Twain' is one of Hardy's "satires of circumstance"; circumstances involve Chance which permits Coincidence, the coming together of disparate events or things, what Hardy in his poem, 'Hap' (meaning accident or happenstance) called "Crass Casualty". The disparateness (between two objects, between two events, between human desire and what actually happens) is the pretext of dramatic irony and since it occurs so often, and for ill more than for good, Hardy came to believe that

[4] In such prurience, Hardy was beaten to the punch by Dr Charles H. Parkhurst preaching in the Madison Square Presbyterian Church (New York) on April 21 when he referred to "the glassy, glaring eyes of the victims, staring meaninglessly at the gilded furnishings of this sunken palace of the sea… jewels valued in seven figures becoming the strange playthings of the queer creatures that sport in the dark depths". I quote this in my *Age of Titanic: Cross-Currents in Anglo-American Culture* (2002), p. 100.

such a calamity as the *Titanic* disaster – in which coincidence or convergence takes the form of collision – was more than chance or accident: some cosmic Ironist had caused it to happen.

This was not a novel idea but what befell *Titanic* seemed to provoke it. Biel gives us Thomas Doolan's inconsequential poem 'Fate's Comedy' (1912) in which we are reminded in jaunty quatrains that the script of the disaster with its two main characters, ship and iceberg, has already been written by Fate, the cosmic dramatist, and simply has to be staged. The first half of Brand Whitlock's blank verse poem, 'The Titanic' (1912) unfolds much the same idea with the "dark Ironic Spirit" mocking and destroying the great ship, but with the gallant captain and crew (because they are of the "intrepid Northern race") in turn mocking the Ironic Spirit by aspiring to achieve and by dying bravely, thereby cancelling irony out.[5] A recurring idea in the poems that saw irony at work is the dwarfing of the giant liner by nature or the cosmos; the irony was more immediately suggested by the ship's hubristic name.

Hardy's poem was anticipated not only by his own work (anticipation fulfilled is a form of irony) but by 'A Tryst', a poem by the New Hampshire poet, Celia Thaxter, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1870s. In it, a maverick iceberg travels south while a "stately ship", "with her freight of beauty and delight", sails fatefully into its path. The poem wonders "What drew the two together o'er the tide,/Fair ship and iceberg pale". Hardy too saw the collision as a tryst, a fateful assignation, both sexual and nonsexual, at the behest of some higher inscrutable power. The similarity of design is striking. But if it is unlikely that Hardy had read Thaxter's poem, he may well have read Herman Melville's 'The Berg: A Dream', collected in 1888. In this poem, "Ice-cubes" crash on the deck of the ship that collides with the callously indifferent iceberg;

[5] Whitlock's poem appeared in *Collier's Weekly* on May 4. Whitlock was a journalist and author and sometime mayor of Toledo, Ohio. Biel furnishes no information on Doolan.

the ship is stunned, and goes down.[6] Melville's "slimed slug that sprawls/Along thy dead indifference of walls" anticipates Hardy's subaqueous imagery. Behind both poets' images may lie Clarence's dream in Shakespeare's *Richard III* of drowned men with eyes as gems "that wooed the slimy bottom of the deep".

The fate of the *Titanic* drowned appalled both Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot.[7] The famous opening line of *The Waste Land* (1922) is remarkably applicable to the *Titanic* calamity: "April is the cruellest month". One of the survivors, Archibald Gracie, told the *New York Times* that among the last women he saw on board was a Miss Evans who refused to be rescued because, Gracie said, "she had been told by a fortune-teller in London that she would meet her death on the water".[8] She had been told by the fortune-teller to "beware of water" and now "knew she would be drowned". It was a sad irony that she drowned by refusing to enter a lifeboat. 'Death by Water' is of course the title of one of the sections of *The Waste Land*, a section that consists of ten lines in the published version but in draft form was 83 lines longer, excised by Ezra Pound's fierce blue pencil. The jettisoned lines tell of a schooner that sets out eastwards across the Atlantic and is blown north towards a line of icebergs:

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6 Melville foregrounds the iceberg. So does Elizabeth Bishop in her poem, 'The Imaginary Iceberg' (1935) which may well take its rise from the *Titanic* sinking; her iceberg is animate, theatrical, soulful. The notion of a conscious iceberg recurs in *Titanic* literature.

7 Woolf and her then fiancé Leonard Woolf attended the British inquiry into the *Titanic* disaster, and her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), carries the disaster as freight: I discuss the effect of the disaster on Woolf and other British writers in the *Age of Titanic: Cross-Currents in Anglo-American Culture* (2002), republished as *Titanic: the Sceptre of Power* (Amazon Kindle, 2011).

8 He repeated the anecdote in his book, *The Truth about the Titanic* (1912) that appeared after he had succumbed to the after-effects of the strenuous swimming feat he performed in order to survive.

> And dead ahead we saw, where sky and sea should meet,
> A line, a white line, a long white line,
> A wall, a barrier, towards which we drove.
> My God man there's bears on it.
> Not a chance. Home and mother.
> Where's a cocktail shaker, Ben, here's plenty of
> cracked ice.
> Remember me.

Graham Nelson notes that the penultimate line recalls an incident recounted by Lawrence Beesley in his survivor's narrative, *The Loss of the Titanic* (1912), in which after the collision a card-player turns to an onlooker, points to his whiskey glass and says "Just run along the deck and see if any ice has come aboard: I would like some for this".[9] And although, as Nelson tells us, Eliot's widow identified "Ben" as "an obsolete nickname for a sailor", Nelson prefers to see in the apostrophe an allusion to Eliot's fellow-American Benjamin Guggenheim, the magnate who went down with the ship.[10]

After the sunken ship had settled more firmly on the bed of memory (obscured for a while by the Great War and the economic woes and political upheavals of the nineteen twenties), at least three ambitious long poems of substance were attempted.

The first was the Canadian E.J. Pratt's *The Titanic* (1935). There had been enormous Canadian interest in the disaster, with several prominent Canadians on board, Canadian ships responding to *Titanic*'s mayday calls, and bodies later recovered by a Canadian cable ship and taken to Halifax, Nova Scotia where they were buried. Pratt's poem is a considerable achievement and rivals

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[9] Graham Nelson, '*The Waste Land* Drafts, "The Engine" and the sinking of the *Titanic*', *Notes and Queries*, September 1997: 356-58.

[10] A pervasive influence on *The Waste Land* was, of course, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. References to Dante's poem recur in early writings about the *Titanic* disaster and I have glanced at these in *The Age of Titanic*, pp. 229, 231, 234 and in T*he Titanic Complex* (1997), pp. 13, 31.

Walter Lord's classic prose account in pace and energy. Written in pentameters, it grants epic scale to the disaster. But this is no airy flight: Pratt has done his Miltonic homework and knows his ship:

> For the Watch had but to read
> Levels and lights, meter or card or bell
> To find the pressures, temperatures, or tell
> Magnetic North within a binnacle,
> Or gauge the hour of docking…

He knows the origin and career of the culprit iceberg, "Calved from a glacier near Godhaven coast"; when it swings south "Pressure and glacial time had stratified/The berg to the consistency of flint" until it reaches 41 degrees latitude, "its rude/Corundum form stripped to its Greenland core". Like Thaxter and Hardy before him, and like Bishop at the same time, Pratt evokes an animated berg. By the time it endangers the shipping routes it has only the "brute/And Palaeolithic outline of a face", shambling "like a plantigrade" as though it were Yeats's rough beast.[11]

The second significant long poem of the calamity was Anthony Cronin's *R.M.S. Titanic* of the 1950s.[12] It is a poem with some impressive lines and has echoes of Auden, but the spawning Audenesque cultural rhetoric is loose and damaging. And there is a silent subtext. What is not spoken of is the city where *Titanic* took shape and was launched from; the poem manages to involve the west of Ireland (and the Famine), and oppressed Irish steerage passengers; equally oddly, the port evoked in the opening stanzas

[11] A later poet, Geoffrey Hill, in a dense little poem entitled 'Ode on the Loss of the *Titanic*' (collected 1959), makes the sea his dubious hero rather than iceberg or ship. Yeats himself ignored the *Titanic* disaster and may have influenced later Irish poets in doing so. But interestingly, his famous phrase a "terrible beauty" was anticipated by one of the ship's surviving passengers, Charlotte Collyer in her contemporary description (seen from her lifeboat) of the lighted ship just before she sank: see *The Age of Titanic*, pp. 227-28.

[12] Cronin's poem was reprinted in *Longer Contemporary Poems*, ed. David Wright (Penguin, 1966).

is Liverpool, not Belfast.[13] Belfast rates one mention ("a Belfast of exorbitant virtue") when the poet imagines a future dream-*Titanic* built with blessings on the Pope rather than (by implication) the curses against him Cronin must believe accompanied the ship's manufacture. It is hard not to conclude that Cronin inherited, and accepted, the sectarian take on the ship that as far as I can discover began only after the partition of Ireland, despite any sectarian troubles in Harland & Wolff shipyard during the time *Titanic* was built. The failure of the poem to encompass the industrial north of Ireland in its otherwise broad cultural sweep seems like evasion and encourages the cavalier rhetoric of the poem.

Pratt's poem is in part a modernist one; the poet presumes the catastrophe really happened, was momentous, even epic, and that it unified with tremendous symbolic force the diverse meanings of contemporary culture and re-lived an age-old pattern of human event, giving his poem coherence as the story of Odysseus gave Joyce's *Ulysses* coherence. The notion of tragic hubris in the poem, however, is a Romantic predating of modernism and the poem ends with the Romantic notion of Nature's superior power (the iceberg still "the master of the longitudes"). By contrast either way, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1978) is post-modernist.[14] Like Pratt's, Enzensberger's poem incorporates varieties of sources and documentation into its large structure of thirty-three cantos – survivors' accounts, wireless messages, inquiry excerpts, recorded conversations among passengers, builders' information, *Titanic* legends. But there is also a running political analogy between the sinking, the Russian Revolution, the start of the Cold War, and the leftist student revolutions of 1968. *Titanic* is to bear the weighty cargo of twentieth-century European history, an almost impossible tonnage.

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[13] One wonders if Liverpool is a mistake for Southampton to where *Titanic* sailed when its trials on Belfast Lough were complete; the ship was registered in Liverpool but never sailed there. Cronin erroneously describes a tidal wave upon the ship's sinking that didn't in fact occur.

[14] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Sinking of the Titanic: A Poem*. Trans. The Author. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.

Yet Enzensberger's ship and its cargo are also weightless. Everything takes place inside an autobiographical envelope: the poem is the story of Enzensberger (or "Enzensberger") writing this poem during stays in Havana and Berlin, 1969-1977. The poem records its own draftings and at one point records the loss of a draft and its subsequent imperfect recollection ("I fake my own work"). The "poet" is a character in the poem and what's more, is killed off before its end. The poem diversifies into a multitude of voices and perspectives. Any canard about the ship is as serviceable as any "fact". The poet even satirises his own post-modernism:

> Something always remains –
> bottles, planks, deck chairs, crutches,
> splintered mastheads –
> debris left behind,
> a vortex of words,
> cantos, lies, relics – [.]

Canto 27 can even contemplate the proposition that "There was no such thing as the sinking of the *Titanic*./It was just a movie, an omen, a hallucination." But perhaps the poem implies that we have as much let *Titanic* down as she us. It seems to be a political disappointment ever since the sinking (as much as a scepticism about our ability to know reality, and a disgust with our cultural consumerism) that inspires such doubt in that tremendous occurrence in April 1912. Enzensberger's other *Titanic* carries the ghostly weight of our disbelief, our fatigue, our talkative demise, the unbearable lightness of our being.

Perhaps for reasons of artistic and religious reticence, Ulster poets have not been as responsive to the *Titanic* disaster as we might have expected.[15] Samuel K. Cowan published a heartfelt but

[15] We might put it this way: despite the fact that there were no black passengers or crew on *Titanic*, the sung and chanted poetry about *Titanic* written and performed by black American "ballet" singers and "Toast" performers far exceeds the output of serious Ulster poetry. I discuss the black poetic response in *The Age of Titanic* and represent it in my anthology, *Titanic* (Penguin, 1999).

artistically indifferent loyalist ode, 'De Profundis', in *From Ulster's Hills* (1913). John Hewitt in his sonnet, 'Late Spring, 1912' (*Kites in Spring*, 1980) has some poignant lines on his memory of reading as a five-year-old the news of the sinking on a newsboy's bill but it was only one episode in a season of bad news (Scott of the Antarctic likewise foundered amidst ice). In 'Death of an Old Lady' (1956), Louis MacNeice wove into his elegy for his step-mother his "one shining glimpse" of *Titanic* as she steamed down Belfast Lough to the sea and combined this with the iceberg as a metaphor for the old lady's own sinking.

The best "local" *Titanic* poem is Derek Mahon's twenty-one line 'After the *Titanic*' (1985), originally called "As God is my Judge" and then 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy' (collected 1979). Mahon of course is characteristically drawn to the lost (and in this case reviled) figure amidst the crowd. Ismay, head of the White Star Line who entered a lifeboat and was saved, takes his place among the deserted places and abandoned or expelled people in Mahon's distinctive landscape. The disgraced manager speaks from his exile in those posthumous tones of which Mahon is so fond. Mahon has found a niche in Titanica that he can occupy as a Belfastman without compromising his maverick rejection of regional or local pride. In the poem, Ismay strikingly recalls (in a Mahonesque blend of the homely detail, the punning metaphor, the hollow existence, and the Herrick-like polysyllabic surprise), that:

> As I sat shivering on the dark water
> I turned to ice to hear my costly
> Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of
> Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches,
> Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime.

Robert Johnstone essays the same episode in his impressive suite of poems, *'Titanic'* in *Eden to Edenderry* (1989):

> All the innards slid forward and down:
> The boilers and the turbine came adrift.
> Its organs loose, the ship gutted itself.

Johnstone uses as epigraph for his suite lines from Enzensberger's *The Sinking of the Titanic*, neatly welding for us the local to the international. For Johnstone the wreck and its discovery excite nightmares, misshapen extrusions of a troubled psyche. The personal "soul voyage" in one poem, "Not an Explosion but a Crash" ("size had magnetised the ship to troubles"), becomes in another poem, 'Undertakers', the collective, feverish soul voyage of a riven society like Northern Ireland. This might be the most insightful local poetry yet written about the ship, its destruction and its discovery, and the society that set it all in motion.

A Unicorn in the Book of Psalms

How did this unicorn wander into the bible?
Did he cast his enchantment over the guards
so that he could creep unseen round Judah's tents
and blow his sweet breath into King David's ear?

He was young enough to turn playful tail
when he saw Bathsheba, and as he scampered away
his deer hooves splayed delicately with each fleeting footfall.
He left no prints in the earth nor was there spoor to track him by.

He entered a flowering forest in search of a handmaiden
and when he found her he lay down, resting his head on her breast.
She stroked his mane, soft and white as swansdown,

but when she saw his horn was strong and tipped with red,
she feared him, as even then she heard
so near the hunters baying for his blood.

"He heard me from the horns of unicorns" (Psalm 22:21)
"And Sirion, like a young unicorn…" (Psalm 29:6)
"My horn shall exalt like the horn of a unicorn" (Psalm 92:10)

KERRY HARDIE

FOUR POEMS

Thrush

It always begins the same way.
The young pup goes rooting
down there where the whitethorns
funnel the gloom.

A crouch and a pounce.
Something is thrashing about in the net.
There must be a way through I haven't found
where songbirds – blackbirds, thrushes – go
to pock the autumn's leavings.
Then, panicked by the pup, they rush full-flight
into the drapes and foldings of the net.

It's quiet now, the wet air stirs
the wind-chimes in an empty tree.

I catch the trapped thrush in my hand,
and sliding scissor blades beneath the down,
cut strand on strand.

The bird strains and a fresh blood marks
the soft grey stuff of breast, the mottled throat.

Then suddenly its head turns and it strikes,

then strikes again, oblique, the angle poor,
eye fixed, beak wide, an empty wrenching gape
like those old tales where tongues were torn away
to silence witness –

It stills, I still. It rests within my hands,
its life intense as mine.

The last strand gives.
A wing-rush and it's gone into the dusk.

Waning

Some days you wake in July,
but by evening it feels like September.

Yesterday it was August all day,
the thistledown drifting the roads.

Just the same, it was hard to trust life.
All that I love is alive and already ceasing.

Hoarding old bones – the splinters of saints –
would be saner. In the fields

they were reaping, the sounds drawing closer,
then circling away down the meadow.

How can we love
when love must watch life cease to live?

How can we not
when downy-seeds blow the ripe roads?

Modomnoc's Bees

When Modomnoc wanted sainthood he took himself off to Wales and sought out David.
David let him look after his bees.

No one cares any more about all those years spent in Wales, but after
he'd dipped his fingers in David's holiness, Modomnoc came back to Ireland
and dabbled about in more local mud. Hence his modest hermitage at
Tobroughney, not a million miles from where I live.

Perhaps he came back on a ship, perhaps he stepped into a skin-covered boat that skidded the waves. Stories change shape with the teller.
Whichever it was, his bees followed.

There are distant descendants of Modomnoc's most faithful disciples
buzzing around in the sunshine, stroking the sex organs of tulips and
magnolia and jonquils, all open together on account of the long hard winter
we've just put behind us. Dandelions, celandines and forget-me-nots wait for
attention. Desires less flaunted but no less urgent.

Which makes me think it's time I left off sitting at my desk, went outside, and sowed a few seeds that will flower with the summer. Flowers to
excite and arouse. Perhaps after all it was God that Modomnoc wanted.
Sainthood was only a by-product, like honey.

Away From Home

In Amsterdam the high geese stirred our sleep.
Their journeying filled our woken selves with longing.
The belling voices up there in the night.
The wavering squadrons, their vast, empty flight.

MICHAEL LONGLEY

FOUR POEMS

Sibelius, 1956

An iceberg in the dark
Where we kiss, my bristly
Chin reddening her chin.

She's a rock-'n'-roller,
I want to share with her
Symphonic fragments

Snowdrifting towards their
Theme. She sits on my knee
After a sixth-form hop:

Plastic necklace, bangles
That icicle-tinkle,
Sugar-stiff petticoats'

Rustling aroma. 'Oh,
It's a whole new world
Down there,' a friend says:

Birdcalls in her throat, flute
Notes, our finlandia,
Piccolo passerines.

Constellations

Poem ending with a line by Dermot Healy

Thistledown and meteors are streaming
Along the lazy beds of the constellations.

Pietà

How compassionate you appear
Bending over your three-year-old
And slipping your little finger
Beneath his penis to lift
The pee-arc away from his clothes.
Did Mary do this for Jesus
Among wood shavings and sawdust?
How tenderly she must have touched.

Scale Insects

a found poem

Because of their very limited size
And generally inconspicuous appearance,
Scale insects are easily overlooked.
For many years the females were not even
Recognized as insects, but were thought to be
Of a vegetable nature. The males
Are even more insignificant and
Have no mouth parts. Because of their
Sap-sucking habits the females
Are very unpopular in greenhouses.

"THE FIFTH PROVINCE": AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MONTAGUE

You have been inspired by your rural upbringing, striving as Maurice Riordan put it, to translate "the local (Garvaghey) into the universal (The Rough Field)". How much was this a matter of instinct? Did you feel you were drawing on particularly Irish traditions or poetic traditions more widely?

I believe in *dinnsheanchas*, or 'place wisdom', as part of the poet's training. People have forgotten the meaning of their own place names; so, for example, most of my Garvaghey neighbours did not know that they were living in 'the rough field'.

You were born in Brooklyn and returned to the States as an adult, to Yale and then Iowa in 1953. Later you lived in Paris. Was displacement necessary for your poetry?

It would seem to have helped; I began to dream of France in my late teens, and cycled across it in 1948, as chronicled in my recent poem, 'Vendange'. It was a strange, wounded post-war world, without tourists: the exhausted locals were pleased I was not German! And of course I longed to go the US, where I had been born, and to escape from the claustrophobic world of Ireland, especially the South. Displacement and yearning, with all the attendant paradoxes and tensions, inform my early work: my first collection is called *Forms of Exile*.

Would you agree with Thomas McCarthy that an "American strain" permeates even your most traditional poems?

O, my lost babyhood! I had a deep curiosity about America, which I tried to explore from East to West, from Yale to Berkeley, from New York to San Francisco. But these things are instinctive; remember Hopkins felt that the poet with whom he had most

affinity was that 'terrible scoundrel', Whitman. But the vast landscapes of America are not easy to love. I think only the Native people may have really known it intimately. But then my friend Gary Snyder almost made himself into a Native. I admire the various strains of American poetry, and am pleased to be included in a new anthology of Irish-American poetry, although I would be even more pleased if I could be recognised as an American poet, as well, as in 'All Legendary Obstacles'.

In 'The Water Carrier' you speak of "memoried life"; an experience "half-imagined half real". Your recent collection *Speech Lessons* shows that childhood is a well from which you continue to draw. What captivates you still about childhood memory?

Almost all psychologists agree that the early years form our interior landscape, and, strangely, such memories become more powerful as one grows older: 'the child is father of the man', as Wordsworth says. It can be eerie to feel so strongly about people and places that might have disappeared, as if the more they recede into the world of ghosts, the more solid they become. As Yeats has it: 'the living are more shadowy than they'. And Auden speaks of poetry as a 'conversation with the dead'.

Your grandfather comes to the fore in this collection. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Because I have become a grandfather myself. And also am beginning to understand the historical relevance of his position as a Catholic Justice of the Peace under Queen Victoria, in the Ulster of that time. There were few like him: Carleton said 'to find a justice of the peace not an Orangeman would have been an impossibility.'

'In My Grandfather's Mansion' presents a child who "chanted the *Proverbs and Psalms* and later bathed in the *Song of Songs*". There is a presence of God (though not always conventionally drawn) throughout *Speech Lessons*; would you describe yourself as a "spiritual person"?

At the age of 83 I feel I have to be! Seriously, I have tried to study the major religions: the Gita; the Scriptures of course; and I've attempted to fathom the Koran. And I have had some religious experiences, which have moved and surprised me.

In *The Poet's Chair* you comment that "Ulster's history remains unresolved except in the harmonies of poetry and music." Is this just a formal or aesthetic harmony, or do you think that poetry has the potential to bring order?

Wallace Stevens speaks of 'the rage for order', our necessity to make sense of things. Something filters down from the artist's healing efforts in play or poem. Even Peter Robinson speaking of 'The Planter and the Gael' years after our tour.

Auden famously speaks of Yeats as having been "hurt into poetry". Do you feel this has ever been the case for you, having lived in what could often have been described as "mad Ireland"?

Both quotations come from Auden's moving but condescending elegy on Yeats. And I would say 'mad Ulster' is more like it. Hurt into poetry? I suppose so, and that hurt was the fuel behind my early travels, and which I later confronted in poetry. Being given away at the age of four, losing my family and first land, seems to have given me a fierce devotion to my foster home, in case it also should disappear – as it is doing anyway through the building of ever-widening highways and the smashing of old moulds.

And the historical causes behind the travail of my two families, Montague and Carney (Taigs and Kernes!) could be summarised in Auden's supercilious phrase.

You were recently back in Belfast to deliver a paper on Robert Graves; can you talk a bit about the influence of his work on your own?

I liked Robert as a person, as well as a poet, because of his mischievousness; you never knew what he might do or say. I tried to catch that aspect of his character in my poem 'Robert, Old Stager'. And of course, while he did not approve of Yeats, he also placed love at the centre of his life and work.

Antoinette Quinn has described you as a "muse-poet, obsessed by the eternal feminine". Is your muse the same as Graves'?

I think my vision is now wiser, less wild, closer to Jung's anima than Graves's muse figure which can be a kind of mirage or marsh light, and which does not always take into account the particularity of an individual woman. Reared by two women, with a mother waiting in the wings, and born into a Church which worships the eternal feminine in the form of the Blessed Virgin, how could I escape a fascination with the feminine?

Do you think the notion of woman-as-muse should pose a problem for the female writer?

Only if she wants it to. The 'muse quality' of Man for women artists has perhaps not been satisfactorily analysed. Think of the powerful male (or lord) image in Emily Dickinson. And George Eliot clearly responded with passion to a male

presence in her imagination: her animus. While the original Classical Muses were, of course, female, anyone or anything can inspire the writer. Auden speaks of an abandoned mill wheel, and Stevens invokes 'the palm at the end of the mind'.

What about the rise in feminist consciousness, has it inhibited the male writer who wishes to speak freely/ honestly about his feelings towards women?

There may be hesitancy or too great a vigilance; think of the attacks by Robin Morgan and others on Ted Hughes; the career of D. H. Lawrence would be impossible nowadays. But it all happened to Byron long ago, and it can be amusing at certain levels, with a pugilistic Norman Mailer taking on his various feminist critics in public. Tensions can often create fruitful drama. But if Yeats had written '…only God, my dear,/could love you for yourself alone/and not your yellow hair' these days, would he be in trouble?

You've written several famous love poems. Does writing a love poem feel different from writing a political poem or a poem about place?

'As my province burns, I sing of love…' begins *The Great Cloak*, a long sequence on love written between my two other long sequences, *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom*. It's a matter of emotion or passion, which involves politics as well as love. So Yeats, our great master, can move from his muse, Maud Gonne, to naming the martyrs of 'Easter, 1916'.

You have also written a memoir – how does a memory become a poem and how a piece of prose?

Memory gives or sets the background to the poems, and may even find use for material which does not catch fire into poems. Robert Graves discarded his war poems, and wrote *Goodbye to All That*, leaving the stage to poets like Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas. I have sometimes jokingly called my short stories and essays the 'compost heap' of the poems, but of course prose has its own force and mystery, and sometimes memory is better expressed there: one should remember that Memory is one of the Muses.

And is the urge to write still as strong as ever?

I'm afraid I am still hooked, but less drastically than when I was young. For instance, I used to get a poem a month, but now I seem to be almost menopausal. But then surely the psyche is feminine(?), which is part of my response to the 'muse theory' of Graves.

How do you feel about the formal teaching of creative writing within universities?

Surely it depends on the quality of the instructor and the students. At the University of Iowa, in the mid 50s, I shared a workshop with Snodgrass and Robert Bly, among others who went on to publish, while Berryman, MacNeice and William Carlos Williams came to speak to us. So the whole ethos put me to the pin of my collar. But these were dedicated people, whereas I sometimes fear that today, when there is such a plethora of writing programmes, the members of workshops are cocooned, reading only one another. And ironically, I met the promising young poets of Cork among my students at a time when there were no creative writing courses at the university: they were simply determined to write.

Are there any new poetic voices that you are particularly excited by?

Old farts should not pontificate on young blood! My Faber anthology ends with people like Carson and Muldoon, who are still exciting. Among the new crop, I am intrigued by the fact that Alan Gillis writes truly contemporary stuff: his was the first Facebook love poem I ever read. Leontia Flynn is another lively voice. Leanne O'Sullivan began publishing as a teenager and is still going strong. Ted Hughes once flatteringly described me as a son of the Hag of Beare: Leanne is a daughter. And of course I have a soft spot for my niece, Mary Montague, whose 'Tribe' reminds me of the nature poems of Lawrence. But to cover it all would be a tall order, as Patrick Crotty found when putting together his Penguin Anthology. From *Southword* in Cork to *The Yellow Nib* in Belfast, the scene is rich, with *Poetry Ireland* as the fifth province.

FLEUR ADCOCK

FOUR POEMS

Coconut Matting

Trying to save our marriage, my parents
laid linoleum over the matting
I'd stitched seam by seam with a curved needle,

and stuck fake Formica on my deal table
for a surprise when we came back.
Sterile beige smothered our living-room.

How could they get it so wrong? And how could we
tell them? We muttered some nothings,
and slunk away in different directions.

Let's rush up to heaven right now and cling together,
all of us, in a huddle of sobs,
apologising and forgiving each other.

Dragonfly

In the next life I should like to be
for one perpetual day
a dragonfly: a series of blue-green
flashes over Lily Tarn,
a contraption of steel and cellophane
whose only verbs are dart, skim, hover.
One day is enough to remember.

Stick Insects

Sweeping the kitchen floor I scooped up
in the dustpan an angular wiry tangle –
part of my grandchildren's construction kit?
(This was their house). A clutter of dead twigs?
Some kind of three-dimensional puzzle?
That, certainly: a pair of stick insects
locked in complicated sexual congress.

Phasmids. Phasmatidae. Lives devoted to
being something else; relying on dignity,
for want of speed – standing around looking
vegetal, ligneous or metallic.
Once I saw one stalking across a road
by the Botanical Gardens, caught out
behaving for a change like flesh and blood.

These two had risked invading a house
(she the explorer, he clinging piggyback)
until my broom scuttled them. They seemed unhurt
and not at all inclined to disengage.
That part of Karori is green with bush.
I carried them respectfully on the dustpan,
still in their embrace, to a matching tree.

Spuggies

The spuggies are back –
a word I lifted from Basil Bunting
and was never entirely sure how to pronounce,
having only seen it in print, in *Briggflatts*,
and at the time had little cause to adopt
with the London sparrow in extinction;
but now three are cheeping in my lilacs.

The other word I learned from Basil Bunting
he spoke aloud, the last time I met him:
'bleb', meaning condom – as used, he said
(to his severe disapprobation)
by 12-year-old girls on the Tyne & Wear
housing estate where we were calling on him.
I think they asked him if he had any.

ANDREW JAMISON

TWO POEMS

Meditation on Ikea

We shop in a world of cut-price faux-pine flat-pack
of allen-keys and step-by-step manuals
of straight-laced straight-faced Scandinavian design
chairs churned out by the second in some far-flung factory
and sold by the lorry-load in big blue bags
in big blue warehouses at the express-
all-major-credit-cards-accepted self-service checkout
beside the in-store grab-and-go dine-and-dash
snooze-and-lose hurry-up-and-queue café
which serves the flash-fried speciality meatballs
next-door to the one-way three-tiered multi-storey
lifts-serving-all-floors pay-and-go car-park
by the slip-lane of the new-improved motorway
down from the one-in-one-out traffic-controlled airport
under the come-and-go clouds of an ever changeable sky
and under all those burning stars, suns, systems.

How Was New York?

Contentment was a walk in the shade of the trees
on Staten Island, a Hudson breeze.

Sunburn meant getting lost for hours in Greenwich,
satisfaction a refrigerated peach.

Disappointment the mouse droppings around the sink,
the broken toilet, the oven on the blink.

Regret was the girl beside me on the subway,
sex the Village chicks who had it all on display.

Ambition was the young man's polished loafers,
hope the busker's outstretched cap, its rattling quarters.

Spirit was the kid selling ice-cold water
out of a bucket outside the Yankees game – a bottle a dollar.

Fame was impossible as the sound of the moon,
tragedy the elephant in the room.

Freedom was strolling up Bedford Avenue,
hate the heat. Impossibility – the sky's blue.

Forgiveness was the air-conditioner,
redemption all-you-can-eat moules-frites for dinner.

Near Brooklyn Bridge I found extravagance.
At Cadman Plaza war, limestone, remembrance.

Chaos was a dash over Queensboro Bridge at rush hour,
weird the earthquake's 5.8 on the Richter.

Surprise my rooftop fire escape's Manhattan,
Manhattan a hot dog stand, a metro map, a plan.

Goodbye was Newark airport in the evening,
grief the runways lights, time zones changing.

THREE POEMS

Legacy

Leave me
a swan
and a horseshoe,

Wales
and some rain,

the ancient
and modern of love,

Leave me dusk
inching over the creek,

a pair of slippers
filled with tin-tacks

to teach me
to stand on my own two feet.

Leave me
the hour we lost
all those years ago,

and the plucked-out
eyes
of St Lucy.

Leave me to my fate.

Leave me a child
unaware of her beauty.

Leave me Turner,
Monet and Whistler.

Leave me the dust
Leave me the broom.

Lose Me

Lose me in a forest
where the moon fasts
for weeks on end

or in the desert,
where water waits for no man.

Tell me the names
of everyone you've forgotten,

write to me
on crested notepaper
from a town you've never visited.

Answer five questions
I've never asked,

touch me more tenderly
than I've ever been touched,
but only after I've been gone an hour,

say my name
in that dear voice
I never hear even in my sleep –

Do all these things,
for only the marvel of time
stands between us,

only the floodwaters
of The Dog-In-A-Doublet Sluice
divide us,

only a lintel of perilous red,
fresh and wet from Rothko's brush,
keeps us apart,

no more, no less.

Quiet Street

Dwell-time
along the quietest street in London,
no one speaks
of the death of the walnut tree.

Footfall time
along this quiet street,
a woman waits in her kitchen
for her husband to go to the tennis club
so she can read *Paradise Lost*
aloud to herself.

Put an island on my breakfast plate
the day I turn wise,
plus the deeds to a diamond mine
in the back of wherever,
be kind to me like that.

Down-time
along this quiet London street,
time to remember
his eagle's grip on happiness,
trees in Richmond Park,
the sky's lovely struggle with light,
a day full of too many days.

Charon
Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, lines 295 – 330

A road starts here that leads to Acheron river.
Here too is the roiling abyss, heaving with mud,
Venting a silty upsurge into Cocytus,
And beside these flowing streams and flooded wastes
A ferryman keeps watch, surly, filthy and bedraggled
Charon. His chin is bearded with unclean white shag;
The eyes stand in his head and glow; a filthy cloak
Flaps and flutters from a knot tied at the shoulder.
All by himself he poles the boat, hoists sail
And ferries dead souls in his rusted craft,
Old but still a god, and old age in a god
Is green and hardy.

Hereabouts a crowd
Came pouring to the banks, women and men
And high-minded heroes parted now
From their living flesh, young boys, unmarried girls,
Sons cremated before their fathers' eyes:
Continuous as the streaming leaves nipped off
By the first frost in autumn woods, or flocks of birds
Blown inland from the stormy ocean, when the year
Turns cold and drives them to migrate
To countries in the sun. There they stood, those souls,
Begging to be the first allowed across, stretching out
Arms that hankered towards the farther shore.
The stern boatman permits one group to board
And now another, but the rest he denies passage,
Driving them back, away from the sandy banks.

Amazed, then moved by all this press and pleading,
Aeneas asks his guide: 'What does it mean, O Sibyl,
This push to the river bank? What do these souls desire?
What decides that one group is held back, another
Rowed across the muddy waters?'

'Son of Anchises,'
The venerable one replied, 'O true born son of heaven,
What you see here are the standing pools
Of Cocytus and the Stygian marsh.
These are the names invoked when gods swear oaths
They will never dare to break. That crowd in front of you
Died but were left unburied, with no help or hope.
The ferryman is Charon. The ones on board his craft
Are the buried. Not until bones have found a last
Resting place will their shades be allowed across
These gurgling currents, their doom instead to wander
And haunt about the banks for a hundred years.
Then and then only are they again permitted
To approach the brink and waters that they long for.'

JOHN F. DEANE

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

I was born on Achill Island to a Roman Catholic family and culture in which everything in life was clear, established and unchangeable. Between here and eternal life there were simple, clear rules to be followed; outside those rules and regulations there was destruction. In other words, I was brought up to be impermeable to the things of this world, my focus was Heaven; the laws of Holy Church, impeccably observed, would bring me there. In tandem with such a focus, the poetry I read and studied, right up through my Bachelor of Arts degree in English, had forms and regulations that allowed the work to be called *Poetry*, (capital P) as opposed to prose. Themes were pretty well established; the language was to be "poetic", "free verse" was still an abomination and rigorous classifications of theme and development were to be followed. I had not yet encountered any form of modernism; I had not been introduced to Eliot, or Hughes, or Kavanagh. I was impermeable to the magic of metaphor and contemporary idiom.

And then I discovered the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer, in a Penguin paperback, in translation by Robert Bly. Even the title stirred me to a place I had never been before: *Truth Barriers*. I read the poems through and, because I was still impermeable, a great deal of what was going on was lost to me. But I was shivering with the excitement of discovery and I knew there was something here I had to make clear to myself. I read and read again. The imagery was astonishing to me, astonishing in itself and in what it pointed towards.

> I read in books of glass but could only see the other:
> stains pushing their way through the wallpaper.
> These were the living dead
> wanting to have their portraits painted.

There was a sense of recognition growing in me, a contact with reality that suddenly opened out into realms of wonder and acknowledgment; I felt, for the first time, that I had broken

through some "truth barrier". I had no Swedish, and yet I felt that there was something lacking in the translations I had before me. I had become permeable, I believe now, yet there was a blockage somewhere, and I felt it was in the language and movement of the translator's work; something was not quite right, at least, not for me. I can only put that down to some sort of "daimon" that spoke to me out of a hidden place in the work. A daimon that was calling to me from the originals. Thinking I had nothing to lose, I wrote to Tomas Tranströmer, care of Penguin in London, trying to outline what I felt.

The first certainty I gained that I had discovered a work, and a person, capable of answering my questions, not only about poetry, but about living, was when, eventually, and by what circuitous route I will never know, Tomas wrote me a long letter, saying that he was happy with Robert Bly's translations but that there was always, in translation, a culture and point of view out of which the translator works. And perhaps I, coming from Ireland, had a difference emphasis, a different response to the poems. And he challenged me: why wouldn't I have a go, myself. I did. Tomas had enclosed a copy of *Sanningsbarriären*, published in 1978, which Bly had translated as *Truth Barriers*. Oh Lord! but hadn't I become permeable! Without a word of Swedish, or a knowledge of Swedish grammar, I set myself down to the task.

I spent hours in the National Library in Dublin, with the Bly translations, and the originals, and with a very fine Swedish/English dictionary. I felt, and this is the core of my belief in the process of translation of poems, that I had already translated the poetry of these poems in my own spirit: I knew the poetry, I did not yet know the words. On that basis, I sent preliminary translations of my own back to Tomas, directly this time, to his home in Västerås. I think I sent three poems to him and he sent them back to me, with approval, but with suggestions, clarifications, and (forgive me!) high praise for my work.

One of the pieces was a prose poem, which Bly had translated: 'Start of a Late Autumn Novel'; Bly begins his translation as follows:

> The boat has the smell of oil, and something whirrs
> all the time like an obsessive thought. The spotlight
> is turned on. We are approaching the pier. I'm the
> only one who is to get off here. 'Would you like the
> gangplank?' No. I take a wobbly step right out into
> the night, and find myself standing on the pier,
> on the island.

Fine, very fine. But I felt this was not satisfactory for an Irish reader, at least not in terms of the fluidity of the movement and the magic of the language. I called it: 'Beginning of the Late Autumn Night Novel':

> The ferry smells of oil and there is something rattling
> all the time, like an obsession. The floodlight is switched
> on. We are drawing near the jetty. I am the only one who
> is getting off here. 'D'you need the gangway?' No. I take
> a long, hesitant step out into the night and stand on
> the jetty, on the island.

Fine, too. But it left me a little closer to the inner spirit of the original, or so I believed. And there was another one: Bly had translated it as 'Street Crossing', and the first stanza is as follows:

> Cold wind hits my eyes, and two or three suns
> dance in the kaleidoscope of tears, as I cross
> this street I know so well,
> where the Greenland summer shines from snowpools.

Yes, lovely. I had a go at it, calling the poem 'The Crossing-Place', feeling that here we were dealing with more than a street crossing:

Icy wind in my eyes and the sun's dance
in the kaleidoscope of tears as I cross
the street that has followed me for so long, the street
where the Greenland-summer shines from pools.

Comparisons are odious! and what I intended, in my efforts, was to make the poetry more resonant to myself in English, to translate the original while first *knowing* the poem through and through. I am certain that each generation may well wish to re-translate poems to their own idiom and to respond to them in their own spirit; translation, after all, is a carrying over from one place, one idiom, to another. It was always my concern to carry over the poetry; I left it to the dictionary and to Tomas's generous and kindly pointing out of any grammatical or linguistic false notes I had played in the work. Eventually, all this correspondence and effort led me to publish the whole of that original little book, *Sanningsbarriären*, with Aquila Press in 1984. Because of what this work had done for me, I called my book *The Truth Barrier*. It was very well received and correspondence with Tomas continued.

In 1983 he sent me his new book, *Det VildaTorget* and I got down to working on that in the same way. Tomas was so pleased with these translations that he agreed to come to Dublin, if I could publish the book here. In the summer of 1985, shortly after the birth of my daughter Mary, The Dedalus Press published my translation in a fine hardback edition, *The Wild Marketplace*. Tomas came to Dublin and we launched the book, with Seamus Heaney giving the introduction and Tomas reading from the book. I was nervous that somebody might ask, (and rightly so, I thought), "but Deane doesn't speak a word of Swedish!" I had my answer ready: No, not a word, but I know poetry, and I can translate Tranströmer's poetry! Nobody asked! I will always remember going upstairs with Ursula, with Tomas and Seamus, to see how our baby, Mary, was getting on in a bedroom in the hotel where we held the launch; both poets, now both Nobel Laureates, leaned over the cot and pronounced that Ursula and I had done a good job!

I was more than delighted when, in August of that year, I had a letter from Robert Bly himself in which he says: "I wanted to tell you how much I like your translation. Your words are active, lovely, vigorous, even impudent at times. That is just right". He also asked me to send a copy of *The Wild Marketplace* to Robert Hass at Ecco Press who was preparing a selected poems of Tomas Tranströmer; eventually some 6 or 7 of my translations appeared in that book. This I offer as proof of the huge generosity of spirit of Robert Bly, a spirit that chimes so well with that of Tomas Tranströmer himself.

Tragically, in 1990 Tomas suffered a severe stroke that has left him unable to speak, has caused paralysis of the right side of his body. Amazingly, he had written, in a long poem called 'Baltics', published in 1974, lines that foretold such a catastrophe:

> Then, cerebral haemorrhage: paralysis on the right
> side with aphasia, can grasp only short phrases,
> says the wrong words.
> Beyond the reach of eulogy or execration.
> But the music's left, he goes on composing in his
> own style,
> for the rest of his days he becomes a medical sensation.
>
> (in Robin Fulton's translation)

In August of 1999, Ursula and I were in Stockholm. We were invited, by Tomas and Monica, to come visit them on their island in the archipelago, Runmarö. We took a private ferry out there. It was a joy, and a grief, to live out the words of that first poem:

> The ferry smells of oil and there is something rattling
> all the time, like an obsession. The floodlight is switched
> on. We are drawing near the jetty. I am the only one
> who is getting off here. 'D'you need the gangway?' No.
> I take a long, hesitant step out into the night and stand
> on the jetty, on the island.

We spent a joyous evening, even though Monica had to 'translate' what Tomas wished to say to us. Then Tomas played piano for us, wonderfully, with only the left hand. His spirits were high; his courage enormous, his patience exemplary. His winning of the Nobel Prize has been one of the great delights of my life, one of trust, at last, in the Nobel selection process. His poetry is one that opens the world to a loving scrutiny that changes the reader's view of things. His poetry broke so many barriers in my own life that any poems of worth I may have written, I owe to his original influence. His is a deeply human and resonating voice, capacious, exciting and immensely readable.

Here is a poem, from Tomas's collection *For the Living and the Dead*, in my translation; this was published in 1994, yet I had Tomas's comments and suggestions, handed on by the gracious and loving Monica:

Deep in Europe

I, dark hulk floating between two lock-gates,
rest in bed in the hotel while the city wakens round me.
The quiet clamour and the grey light come streaming in
and lift me softly to the next level: morning.

Horizon overhead. They have something to say,
    the dead.
They smoke but do not eat, don't breathe but still
    have voices.
Soon I will be hurrying through the streets like
    one of them.
The blackened cathedral, heavy as a moon, causes
    ebb and flow.

(The Dedalus Press will publish together Deane's translations of *The Wild Marketplace* and *For the Living and the Dead* in a new volume, *Inspired Notes*; and *For the Living and the Dead*, in a slightly different version, will be published by Tavern Books in the USA in a limited special edition.)

The Dead House

(After Yannis Ritsos – An adaptation)

We live alone, my sister and I. We are the youngest,
now grown old. We are the youngest, the rest are dead.
We can't cope with the house. We can't cope with each other.
We can't sell up because our dead live here with us.
They belong to the place; they've settled in
behind curtains, under tables, in the backs of mirrors.
I can see one now, caught in the shadow-saltire
cast by my sister's knitting needles, and smiling shyly.

All the old furniture is locked away downstairs:
heavy-legged tables and chairs, sheets and blankets,
quilts of silk, silver salvers, the antique crystal,
tablecloths, monogrammed napkins, the hundred-piece
dinner service, riding habits and whips,
the piano, guitars and accordions, flutes and drums,
chandeliers, the gilt-framed dining room mirrors,
dolls and a rocking horse, gewgaws and trinkets,
the long, white dresses our mother liked to wear,
our father's uniform, his boots and spurs…

Our own clothes hang beside the clothes of the dead.

We have nailed the doors shut on all this. We keep two rooms
on the upper floor, facing west; our corridor leads
to the back-stair… now and then we walk in the garden at night.
The empty house breeds echoes: mouse-run, bat-flight,
spiders building webs in the cellar, the creep of rust in a
knife-blade.

We are not much more than shadow, a hint, a trace,
as when you cut flowers for the sick-room and a smudge
of pollen stains your fingers, or dust from the road outside
sifts in through the lattice, and the flowers carry
a dewdrop caught in gossamer: barely there.

Everything has left us, or we have left everything.
Once it was noise and light, voices and music, soldiers home
from the front: yes, I remember that...big, peasants' hands,
lice in their underwear, hard-mouthed as if they had kissed
the faces of dead comrades once too often… They would sing
in the kitchen at night. My sister and I would listen
behind the door; the kitchen was out of bounds: its smells
of blood and milk, the whisper of knives, the ribs and stumps.
Sometimes we'd find a spillage of salt,
or a cockerel's head on the path that led to the trash.

Kitchen-girls at the cauldrons conjured a wraith
from the steam: a woman in white, one of the slaughtered.
If someone opened the door for just a moment
she would sidle out and stand there looking lost.
The soldiers sang and drank; they got the girls
up on the table and lifted their skirts… I like to think
those children came to be born
in a house of fewer shadows, a house of lockless doors.

The girls knew the soldiers' song: of victory,
of banners and flags, the spoils of war,
of the General marching back at the head of his troops,
of the wound he bore on his brow, a sleepless eye
out of which stared Death, so Death and the General could see
into the souls of men, and name their sin.

'Let him come,' our mother said. 'Let him come home'.

I remember…An owl flew across the forecourt, unlucky
    in daylight.
Its shadow's still there on the lintel above the gate.
The kitchen-girls ran inside. Our mother filled a bath

with scalding water and lay there; later, she went to her room
and put on her make-up: red lips, deep red. The sun
was setting fast and all the church bells rang.

Everything has left us, or we have left everything.

We got some village women in to cook and clean.
They didn't last. They said the marble floor was sweating blood.
The locals used to cross themselves and spit
as they passed the house. Now no one comes by.
The road outside is weeds, wildflowers and thorn.

Some nights I see those long, white dresses in the orchard,
lit by moonlight, lifted by the wind,
as if they were walking or dancing… though, of course,
I see nothing, remember nothing, nor hear the music
that would play all night…and you woke, for no reason, at dawn,
the morning air thick with birdsong, no space for hope
or remorse, and time locked-off by the strangeness of it all.

Can you feel that cut in the air – the edge of Autumn?
Soon we'll close the windows against the chill
and light fires in the grates. We'll gather logs from the orchard
and from the woods beyond but, of course, if that falls short
there's plenty to burn: doors, beds, roof-beams, sideboards,
    shutters,
floorboards, tables and chairs, pictures and books,
all and everything from the downstairs rooms…

We will sit here until the fires burn out, until the ash
grows cold, until the house is held in boundless night.

GARY ALLEN

THREE POEMS

Chips

We were so hungry
we could have eaten our way through the Book of Kells
and all the false saints,

yet God did not manifest himself to us
in illuminated gold block letters

but in the sixpenny grease-proof chip bags
whose insides we sucked dry of vinegar and salt.

The unemployed men like bent H's
leaning against the walls of the public bars.

Delicate storks, they stood on one foot
to hide the holes in their socks,
the thin soles that walked the roads looking for work,

or picking berries from the hedges,
lifting nearly a whole field of potatoes.

Give us a chip, son, they'd laugh.
Stout fellows, my mother called them
until there was no work in our house

and the days turned slowly with the hours
and the men, like monks, hung in their own hands,
out on the steps, counting the cars going somewhere else.

At least you have the right faith,
the soapbox boys told them.
If you want to throw a stone at something, try the chapel.

But still the mill-gates stood closed
and the flax rotted under its own worthless weight
and the shipyards stank with oily water
and at night we listened to our stomachs dreaming of chips.

Pie in the Sky

The men are hanging round the petrol-station,
though it is closed,
the rusty chain loosely looped,

the BP sign turned round,
the tyre and engine-oil signs flaking from the brick wall,
beer-caps studding the soft tarmac of the forecourt.

Caught in the last slants of the sun,
they have nothing to do,
they have no priest or minister to speak for them.

My father applied for every penny job
until the soles of his shoes wore thin as religion –

that was back in the late Forties
when everyone was still war hungry
and he felt he was owed something for the sand in his lungs,

but bigotry endures when borders are gone,
buildings rebuilt,
and his parents' minister said:

There is no work
and charity without work is a sin,
a waste of man's esteem.

The men are like ruffled pigeons settling for the night
along the stone ledge of the petrol-pumps.
They want to burn everything down.

The garage doors are closed and seep oil,
the plywood box-office is empty.
A phone rings, then suddenly stops

as the sun sets behind the North-facing, saw-edged roof
of the engineering works,
the solicitor's office, the gargantuan bank,
and my father turns the telly on and sleeps.

Hollywood

My father looks like Jean Genet –
priest, boxer, orphan runaway,
stealing pounds from his wife's purse
small amounts from his children's school savings accounts,

paving-slabs and cement in the back of his lorry,
ruined stock from cleared-out shops.

My father looks like a Kray,
government-marked from his driving-licence photo,
hair oiled with butter and receding,
thick woollen scarf knotted under his chin,
a guillotined head open-eyed upon a cooling board,

or Cary Grant in a black beret
outside an Alexandria casino,
a Sten gun slung around his shoulder.

Mr Woodbine, romantic face in a photograph,
slack-jawed with all his teeth removed,
Hollywood pyorrhoea with a blackened eye.

An old matinee movie,
a lights-on bone-house moving out like a blazing room
in a grey morning above the housing estate.

The day he died, naked in a mixed ward,
a silver cigarette case snapped closed,
a cowboy punch to a square jaw,
the thick desert in his throat rattling. The last round-up.

The Quiet Coach

Look, three loops from the silver locks
of my predecessor
whose journey southwards,
earlier today, was a textbook
reversal of my own.

In the weirder logic of a poem,
the woman is my mother
hurtling ever
backwards
through unseasonable snow.

She is steadily un-solving my Everyman
crossword, reinstating
each blank space
as if in the wintry landscape
of her brain.

On arrival, all solutions
are undone. I bow my head
to the questions.

Night Flight

She stares upwards, follows each flicker of star,
each nervous scatter of birds. There he is –
Perseus, in his rain-soaked leathers,
stinking of the night-sky; of coal dust and feral fur.
Pioneer of the straight line, he tames the air,
unleashed from the earth, an altimeter tied to his belt.
He reaches out from an open cockpit,
touches the turrets and minarets of his empire,
a tail of gold blinking from his wing-tip lamp.
Je suis un revenant he had whispered, when he left,
in the louche light of untimely departure.
He feels flight in his palms as she smooths
the derelict landscape of their pillow,
vigilant tears falling onto her baby's head.

The wind turns like a giant shifting in his bed,
he flicks the throttle as mist thickens to ice.
The morning already an impossible gift, he heads
straight into the whale-mouth of night, where
wreckers hold up false stars, then cover them in ink.
The needle of his compass quivers as he weaves
in and out of the rocks and reefs in this sea of pitch.
If there are five acts, *this* is his unravelling.
Powerless to deliver him, she prays to the wind,
scorches her palms on the candle he lit before leaving.
There is no-one to tell him where the ocean begins,
no-one to cradle his bones and switch off the light
as he founders blindly towards a nocturnal baptism –
his radio goodbyes already the words of a phantom.

Rome

Through milky bulletproof glass the *Pietà* looks out
where not lighters but camera phones are held in the air.
We close our varnished shutters on the room across the alley;

the sounds of lovemaking from here and from there
mingle like pigeons come dawn. Roses are pressed
upon couples who don't know they must pay;

out of each poster a politician leans toward us gently,
as if trying for a clunky first kiss. Where the Spanish Steps
ascend past the Keats-Shelley house, a middle-aged man

strokes on his lap his wife's middle-aged face, her eyes closed
to the sunset, the same cheekbones, lips, beautiful
as the poet himself, in the life, not the death mask;

at street corners, vendors brandish on their hot steel trays
an Islamic crescent of roast chestnuts, knobby and dark.
Our heels turn pink as lipstick from a tourist's obligations;

the girl in evening dress who dances every afternoon
down the Via del Corso makes beautiful shapes
with her superfluous brolly, alone but for the tango

spilled like religion from her change-ringed hi-fi.
An eight-foot King Tut keeps so still on his soapbox
there might be no one at all beneath the mask and gilt sheet.

SATURDAY NIGHT, SUNDAY MORNING

Carol Ann Duffy, *The Bees*, Picador, £14.99
Lavinia Greenlaw, *The Casual Perfect,* Faber and Faber, £12.99

Performance poetry is the dominant species in Carol Ann Duffy's new hive, ominously dedicated to the National Poet of Wales, Gillian Clarke. Duffy often collaborates in her readings with a musician, and she has always written a poetry of spoken melody, connecting it, perhaps, to additional Celtic influences from her Scots-Irish ancestry. In one of the book's fine elegies, 'Premonitions,' she recalls her mother's voice, and "the joy of your accent, unenglish, dancey, humorous." Poems' voices, however, can dance too much, especially when their intention is not humorous. The rhetorical tricks recurrent in *The Bees* are the staple of British performance poetry – sing-song rhythms, emphatic rhymes, a sense of relentless crescendo, excited and often alliterative lists. Oh the lists, the lists, the lists. Too often, they substitute a forced, carbonated energy for the complex sinew-thrust of written syntax.

Scatter-gun imprecision occurs in a piece rashly called "Poetry." Like a Martian poem admiring its metaphorical muscles, it begins, "I couldn't see Guinness/and not envisage a nun;/a gun, a finger and thumb;/midges, blether, scribble, scrum." These irritating sound-effects hi-jack the metaphor before the reader can make sense of it. It's an extreme instance, but there are still too many poems that welter in alliterative ill-sortment.

The "performance poetry" influence can harm a poem in subtle ways. The line "Been deep, my poet bees" ('Bees') is grindingly ugly. How can a poet with Duffy's musical 'ear' begin a line with 'been' and end it with 'bees'? The answer is that, in recitation, a clever voice minimises such damage. The eye is a far more merciless reader.

Duffy's bees attract various metaphors. This is not a book to engage the entomologist or student of apiculture. "Real" bees, on flying visits, include endangered bees ('Ariel'), bees that make a "hard devouring sound/ in the ears of flowers" (a powerful image

from 'Talking to the Bees'), and, in a brief homage to Book IV of the Georgics, Virgilian bees, but the majority are allegorical. "Here are my bees,/brazen, blurs on paper" declares the opening poem. But, before you deduce poems = bees, the next stanza offers "poet bees," and the last, producing a surprise addressee, suggests that the speaker's "shadowed, busy heart" is also a bee. A questionable conclusion "and honey is art" seems to add to the muddle by confusing tenor with vehicle.

Sometimes, Duffy's new work suggests the grip of a Committee on Laureate Branding. Even a quiet, resonant poem lamenting the "great, masterpiece trees"('The English Elms') seems a little too aware of the nostalgia market. Poems about white horses, World War 1 and footballers (well, a certain footballer) imply an anxious English identity-politics – or crisis. There are quotations from Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas – un-acknowledged, as are the Hardy and Shakespeare references fluttering elsewhere. The anti-war poems are not bad, and might be aimed at people who would never read Owen or Thomas, but they seem over-stated, primary-coloured, a bit like drama-documentaries. Litanies of place-names from England and Scotland (not much from Wales, after all), seem driven by some self-imposed pressure to celebrate "heritage." Like the performance poem at the technical level, the eco-poem and the national celebration offer ready-made intellectual positions and too-easy closure.

The collection is at its best when Duffy quits the bee-loud glade, drops the burden of National Bard of England, and turns to love-poems and elegies. Besides 'Premonitions' there are some memorable short and wintry pieces, such as 'Cold', 'Decembers', 'Winter's Tale'. The abused melodic gift emerges as lyric subtlety in the anaphora of 'Echo'. Not all her performance poems are duds: there's the listy but lusty version of the John Barleycorn ballad, and – perhaps a children's poem, but one of my favourites – the virtuoso 'Scheherazade,' in which each stanza coils around a single-word-line, "abracadabra." Duffy can still play sparkling chromatic melodies when she resists the lazy option of a one-finger glissando.

Sunday morning to Duffy's Saturday night bees-up, Lavinia Greenlaw's *The Casual Perfect* is characteristically preoccupied with hinterlands and half-lights. Even a poem called 'Saturday Night' works against that title, depicting wraithlike adolescent girls in a ritual but impromptu dance. The sacred significance of this ritual is emphasised by the Biblical future-tense of obligation ("They shall gather/to dance on the highway'), and a stern warning to the grown-ups: "You who pass by can watch/but not enter the world of this place./You know nothing of its way/of growing tree from shadow/so that all is fixed and root./You who pass by, pass by." The movement of this is beautiful, as is the sudden arrest created by the strange adjectival combination: "fixed and root."

While the Yeatsian "cold eye" hardly impinges, a cool head watches over Greenlaw's poetry, guaranteeing its hovering balance between subjective and objective, its always judicious intensity. Sometimes, the balance is maintained over a sheer drop, as in the exact small lyric, 'Ah –': "I need the green shadows,/grey water, blue meadows./ How can I be here/when here is so bright?" Cross-stanza rhymes help clasp the dangerously bare epiphany into safe-keeping.

Elusive states – transition and absence, adolescence, "the life between/one year and another" – are grounded but never trapped. In 'Fal Estuary' the eye ranges over "a milky geography of salt and chalk/seaweed caught in the arms of an oak/a streaming field// where a hare starts out of the earth/wheels like a girl woken and told/to *surface*. Now? *Now*." Again, it's the adolescent feminine, formed here in an unexpected simile, touchingly dramatised ("Now? *Now*."), which embodies the vision of reluctant transformation.

Teenagers, like good poets, aspire to looking casual. Greenlaw's title "casual perfect" suggests, besides the art of seeming artless, a grammatical tense, the present perfect. The effect of that tense, a blurring of temporal boundaries, allows continuity with the past: so it becomes a metaphor of the way the poet's past exists in the mind of the poem.

Elizabeth Bishop, supreme impersonator of the casual, provides the epigraph for 'Saturday Night' and refreshes the wit of 'Water for Tea'. "The question must be travelled fully," Greenlaw begins, and, late into the poem, divulges that "Water for Tea" is the name of a station on the Tokyo metro. "A warrior rested at the spring.// I remember only the bowl (geranium) and the moon,/a disc of satsuma powder-paint. As to the water,/the weather or what he said, I am certain of nothing./To this day I drink tea with him." Despite these gracefully studied "questions of travel, *The Casual Perfect* has a suggestive, lyric localism. Much of it is set in the space of England – not the centre-fold England of *The Bees* but the untidy, haunted edges and corners – where identity is a secret, even from itself.

CAROL RUMENS

PROPER VALUE

Jean Bleakney, *Ions*, Lagan, £9.99
Martin Mooney, *The Resurrection of the Body at Killysuggen*, Lagan, £9 .99

These two Northern Irish poets ought to be familiar enough to readers of *The Yellow Nib*. *Ions* is Bleakney's third collection, *The Resurrection of the Body at Killysuggen* Mooney's fourth. Both poets have published all their collections with the Belfast-based Lagan Press, which, if not having a great reach outside of the North of Ireland, is a powerful poetic presence within it. Both poets are steeped in the local and the personal, in the modern Northern Irish tradition. But Bleakney and Mooney are enchanted sceptics: they sift, assess, and re-evaluate locality and personality, finding the sutures and fault-lines between the two, at times celebrating, at times expressing scepticism for, the notion of home and its identity.

In Mooney's case, celebration and gentle satire can go hand in hand to create a tone that is all his own. The collection's first poem, 'The Humours of Ballycran', consists mainly of the reported speech of "a man in his cups/holding on for dear life to the bar in The Saltwater Brig". Here, the man complains first about "the state of the roads at Six Lane Ends, and the grass that grows/through the cracks in the runways at Kirkiston airbase", bemoaning next his ageing lust: "Now I'm told I've as much chance of kissing again –/at my age, in my condition – as there is of that crab-apple tree/sprouting nine-pound notes, or nuns coming back to the Nun's Quarter". Here is the celebration of the idiomatic – slightly tongue in cheek, perhaps – that runs throughout Mooney's work, the idiom being that of his own place, Northern Ireland (in this particular case a bar on the Ards peninsula). But it is the *people* whom Mooney loves, not the political idea of the idiomatic: and here, rather than "the state of the roads" becoming a (very dubious) metaphor for the state of the nation, or the region, or whatever, it becomes a sadly comic analogy for the old man's being over the hill.

Many poems in *The Resurrection of the Body at Killysuggen* deal with the experience of middle-aged and ageing masculinity, its everyday quirks and drawbacks, the mechanics of its love and lust. Perhaps the best poem in the collection in this vein is 'Dream of the Fisherman's Wife', which takes off from the eponymous picture by the Japanese artist Hokusai, in which "The fisherman's wife is licked out by one octopus/and French-kissed by another, a tentacle/gripped in a passionate fist." This poem is beautifully and unexpectedly a sonnet but is remarkable, not only for its portrayal of male vulnerability, but for its balancing of the banal and the devastatingly insightful. "He can't believe she loves him", and can't get "the tacky/fish-porn predictability of her lust" out of his head. And because the fisherman of the piece is described as being "upset by the whole spectacle", we are reminded that this is an ekphrastic poem, a reaction to a painting; and that, as such, the fisherman is a smokescreen for the poet. Here as elsewhere, what reads so easily is actually the product of a mixture of profound self-attention and engaging, hard-won honesty.

Mooney has another characteristic mode: that of the public and historical. 'Banning *Frankenstein*', for instance, subtitled "Belfast, 1932", contains some of the collection's most intense moments. In its second section, Mooney speaks in the voice of the town's burghers, who sought to ban the film lest it should corrupt or too much excite the working class in time of economic depression:

> God's is the last word on the Police Committee
> but He casts his vote by proxy. We
>
> settle our rumps on maroon velour and feast
> our eyes on the dusty hand of light,
>
> the horror on the wall. A few minutes only
> makes up our minds: we must spare the citizens
>
> this insult to the brain, and Christ this garbled
> version of the Word, this anti-resurrection.

This is satire and protest, plain and simple. The upshot of the events described in the poem was that, in 1932, Catholics and Protestants together struck against their appalling social conditions. Mooney sets here the voice of Belshazzar against the history of Belfast, and in so doing opens this city's history to the ages. In Belfast, 2012, in time of economic depression, Martin Mooney's poems seek to celebrate the everyday and the universal on the same terms: not only of life as it is really lived, but of what in life is perennially valuable. Mooney is diffident about the status of his own "modest art" ('Avercamp: *Skaters on the Ijsselmeer*'), but diligent about telling the truth, and about what his art represents in the world and to the world.

Rather than history, Jean Bleakney's poetry excels most when it deals with memory: and in the personal voice, at that. In *Ions*, each poem is occasioned by a noun ending in '-ion'. In 'Acceleration', the word itself "catapults me to a Form Two Physics Bench" and to an oblique meditation on poetry – or more precisely, and in true Bleakneyish style, what she *loves* about poetry, and how it shows up the world and the self simultaneously. Gerard Manley Hopkins and Louis Macneice are the twin sponsors of this "jouissance" here and, I feel, more generally in Bleakney's work. In 'Acceleration' Macneice's "The drunkenness of things being various" becomes "the squiffiness of nearly-but-not-quite-knowing" – a phrase echoed semantically and tonally throughout the book. Halfway through the poem appears "Hopkins/whose mind had 'mountains, cliffs of fall'", and at the poem's end, Bleakney rings the changes on his most famous coinage: "I'm putting the boot to the floor, scattering/ loose chippings, their ping-a-long thingness/setting, in turn, a word and its inscape twanging."

'Inscape' is Hopkins's word for the 'thingness' of a thing, its unique selfhood, the experience of which (through force of 'instress') constitutes "the richest of epiphanies" (from Bleakney's 'Cogitation'). It is a similarly attentive wonder which populates the poems of *Ions*, and the wonder and attention are, as in Hopkins, directed at language and nature simultaneously. That said, each poem acquires its own 'inscape', so to speak, in that it takes off from a particular word, each poem being a witty discursion on that word. 'Evocation', for instance, is a poem very much in that Irish/Northern Irish modern poetic tradition of personal reminiscence, childhood and home. But the poem's title is a subtle disharmony, and at the end, looking at the title again, you realise that Bleakney is absolutely aware of what she is 'doing'. Though, like Mooney, she needs to celebrate the local and the idiomatic, she is too arch to do this without being aware of the terrible lulls of nostalgia. (Although, when at the end of 'Evocation' she writes "sometimes I wish… sometimes I think I'm back there", I do believe her.)

As a whole, *Ions* is remarkable for its relentless formal variety, the control and music of its poetic line, and its intelligence. It is something of a cliché of poetry reviews to speak of 'lightly worn intelligence'. But despite being a phrase which I detest, it is not inapposite to Jean Bleakney's poetry, which is notable not only for its flashes and background glow of wisdom, but for its Polonius-like, proverbial insights: "Sometimes, it's good to make mistakes" ('Circumlocution'); "Why, even nettles have flowers" ('Justification'); "For aren't we perennially/making something out of nothing?" ('Alphabetisation'). But to get the most satisfaction from *Ions* is to read it from cover to cover: the variety of form and line and tone keeps the book fresh throughout. To give an example of what Jean Bleakney is capable of, I quote 'Karstification' in full:

From the rocky overhangs of Knockmore to the
Garrison lowlands
this terrain of glacier-scoured and rain-scarred
limestone offers
rocks and rushes, high-water tables and low fertility.
Beloved
of botanists and potholers, the landscape is defined
by loss:
by cracks that widen into fissures, by lonely parishes
where names no longer spoken of nor written
have weathered down to gravestones:
Blair, Scott, Ovens, Bustard, Kerr.
'Until the day break', they pledge
day after day to no one save
the Melancholy Thistle.

In the words of Basil Bunting, there is in 'Karstification', and in *Ions* as a whole, "never a boast or a see here". Both Jean Bleakney's collection and *The Resurrection of the Body at Killysuggen* are great successes and a credit to Lagan Press. As examples of what Northern Irish poets are capable in the early twenty-first century, of what a smaller press can do, and in these straitened economic times, they are proper value for money (and proper value).

ALEX WYLIE

STILL WAITING

Sean O'Brien, *November*, Picador, £8.99
John Kinsella, *Armour*, Picador, £9.99

Sean O'Brien is still waiting. "*Who for? ... And why?*", asks the lady on horseback on whose land the poet is loitering, in the chilly poem 'Sunk Island'. He keeps his reply from her because, pathetically, "It's not my place to tell you what I mean." But he shares it with us:

> – For the flood to accelerate over this ground,
> For your helmet to circle and sink like a moral,
> For a rag-and-bone man with his cargo of trash
> To come rowing past slowly, his mind given over
> To practical matters, the pearls of your eyes
> Unforgiven and sold at Thieves' Market
> For sixpence and never once thought of again.

O'Brien is still the class warrior he has always been, calling for the abolition of the aristocracy ("self-abolition" will do), and allowing his poems to enact their "slow-motion replay of England" while he waits in the cold and mourns his city's vanished landscapes. O'Brien's is a grand canvas of fog and railways, weeds and northernness; there is a general sense of things having burned out or been starved out, as we "husband our estate of ash", "Stirring bone soup with a bone". This collection is couched in the language of decay, a bit like Huysmans' doleful *Parisian Sketches* or Baudelaire's necrophilic narratives. But unlike Huysmans, who preferred the earthy authenticism of decay to regeneration's soulless glamour, O'Brien finds little in it to celebrate. In 'Salisbury Street', the poet finds a favourite orchard much changed, and through the haze of nostalgia brings "the wreck" it has become sharply into focus:

> These woods had held their own blue light, serene
> interiors
> For autumn days like this, but now they stank –
> Stale milk and burning mattresses. Smoke hung like
> ignorance.

The poem ends with a shrug: "You can't go back." This either sounds like stinging honesty or just a cliché, but in fact it is neither: the ending leads us directly back to the start of the poem, which agrees, "Correct. You can't go back," as if the poem is in dialogue with itself. This Möbius-style trick comments cleverly on the dangers of nostalgia, its potential for paralysis and repetition. But it is as if O'Brien is confessing to something: for all its elegiac deftness, for all its emotional frankness, there is something paralysed-feeling and repetitive about the poetry. It makes us wonder whether, if "You can't go back," it is possible even to go forward. The hulking presence of a version of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre,' a poem fairly wrung out from translation fatigue as it is, suggests not, as do the overlong elegies to the poet's self-disappointed parents, fled muses, and dead friends. Like Tony Harrison, O'Brien collapses far too readily into the cliché of the working-class poet, self-indulgently blending an affected inferiority complex with insistent, often quite pretentious, French interjections. "The doctors would allege it was *nostalgie de la boue*", the poet explains in 'Bruges-la-Morte'; the doctors would be right. O'Brien doesn't just mourn his vanished landscapes, he wills them to be that way. As I write this review, I am looking over the very same orchard of the poem 'Salisbury Street' (it is still there, behind my back garden); I see no evidence of "plastic sheeting, concrete, poisoned grass and rugs", and as far as I can make out, it has not become "a sacred site/For drunks' amnesia and suicide". But it seems, for O'Brien, that the orchard could not be of much poetic use to him until it has been brought to its knees. The dereliction is theoretical, hypothetical: a way to frame an O'Brien poem that has always already written itself. As 'Bruges-la-Morte' knowingly finishes: "No danger here of stumbling on the New."

John Kinsella's poetry is starker than O'Brien's, his forms of resistance more overt. It is hard not to feel that in his latest collection he is playing a similar waiting game, though: the political change he calls for has not happened, and the poetry is bedding down for winter. The poems can be strange and surprising, coating the landscapes and life forms they describe in the slick lexicon

of science ("Hay//is embryonics; hay is cryogenics"; "trace an encephalograph on the upturned stump's biomass"). Other times they can be clunking and banal:

> Two years
> ago I wrote to the state premier
> suggesting a 'wheatbelt forum'
>
> where indigenous communities
> could discuss their issues with white
> farming communities: a place of respect,
> of working things out.

The "wheatbelt forum" idea was rejected by the premier for the state, but alas not by the poet for the poem.

Kinsella has written forcefully against nature poetry, denouncing its localism, anthropocentricism, and "racketeering", and *Armour* is conscious of the paradox within which it operates, lurching between brutal self-assertion (the poet hits a kangaroo in the dark with his car) and hasty self-denial (of a flock of passing birds he writes, "I connect with them in no way"). Yet, as often with Kinsella, in his denial lies his assertion, which takes the form of sudden bursts of surging grandiosity in which he compares himself to Mallarmé, or else a constant cringing acknowledgement that he is, after all, "an occupation of surface," and that his poems represent his environment in ways it has no say in. Equations check the poet's temptation to elegise the many deaths he encounters; finding a possum's body and wondering, "How long dead?", he works it out:

> […] Decay constant?
> $dN/dt = \lambda N$
>
> I start from this equation.

The animals themselves are not above using maths to get what they want: an owl, "a *barn* or *boobook*," finds "A component/of the algorithm: a freshly dug mousehole," like those *New Yorker* cats figuring the trigonometry involved in a leap onto a table. Kinsella is unhierarchical in his attentions: blowflies are afforded the same studied deference as a flock of western flyeaters or a hunted herd of roos. His attitude to hunters, meanwhile, seems to have shifted from disgust to fatigue; they are an antagonistic, mostly inarticulate presence, no more beatable than the drought, dryness and "fire-risk" that seasonally threaten the life of the landscape. It feels like an impasse has been reached; the attention is as keen as ever, but nothing much is changing. It is hard to see where Kinsella can go from here, and the poet himself seems unsure too: "This is my swansong," he writes. "I've nothing/more to add to the litany, the testament."

AINGEAL CLARE

BLOODY-HANDED PARABLES

John Burnside, *Black Cat Bone*, Jonathan Cape, £10

Burnside is a bloody-handed parablist. He is a poet fundamentally concerned with transcendence and, as a consequence, with violence as a threshold for the sublime. Everything transfigured has been wounded, and the poet, risking hubris in the lyrical transfiguring, paints their scars. The opening poem, 'The Fair Chase', declares:

> Everyone becomes
> the thing he kills
> – or so the children whisper, when they crush
>
> a beetle or a cranefly in the dust,
> feeling the snuff of it bleed
> through the grain of their fingers [.]

Knowing in his marrow what Hill described – "There is no bloodless myth will hold" – Burnside loiters at the scene of the crime. The blood still fresh on the carcass, he watches as:

> […] the spirit moves,
>
> from one shape to the next
> like breath,
> or warmth,
>
> infinite kinship, laid down in the blood [.]

The speaker of Burnside's 1997 novel, *The Dumb House*, observes "It's only a flaw in the language that confuses kinship with possession." The risk of such confusion animates the poems of *Black Cat Bone*, and charges Burnside's exploration of killing and consecration with latent electricity. If a divine spark is to be witnessed in the moment of birth or death, its light is altogether

unnerving. 'Hyena' describes the frenzied feeding of the pack on carrion as "anatomy's/blunt hosanna" turned to "slow alleluia". Burnside's exquisite detailing of incarnate existence roots his search for the last gasp of the numinous in what is "coated with blood,/with matter".

'Creaturely' declares "The only gift is knowing we belong/to nothing". The poems of *Black Cat Bone* teeter on this line break. In 'Pieter Brueghel: Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap, 1565', a lone skater recognizes that every animal and human is "other to his other" – close enough to pose a threat but also to offer "an old/belonging". These stanzas delight with the clean specificity of nouns and adjectives, and the subtle resonance of alliteration and internal rhyme. Burnside describes the skaters' movements, imagining also their private thoughts and secret griefs.

The scene is set "near the church", while elsewhere the dying are "mumbling prayers". Burnside courts the possibility that this is "paradise foreseen". The word "grace" appears twice, but so, too, the word "slithering", in the epigraph and final stanza. They come together to describe the lone skater, "gifted with the grace/to skate forever, slithering as he goes". The image illuminates Burnside's theology. Hunkered over a frozen reservoir, the first poem's speaker describes seeing through a glass, darkly, to "where a god […] lay waiting for a gaze to curse with knowledge". By focusing on the bottom right-hand corner of Brueghel's painting, Burnside considers the effects of the knowledge of good and evil:

> someone has built a bird trap from a plank
> set on a perch, from which a length of rope
> snakes to a half-closed door,
> and all around it, birds dip from the air,
> starling and fieldfares, redwings, unaware
> of any danger.

If the bird trap appears as a necessary tool for survival in a collection concerned with the circle of life, the verb "snakes" intimates a fatal diagnosis of human behaviour. With "slithering", it suggests we are, as the serpent, cursed with knowledge. This state explains our need of grace, in Christian terms; in others, black cat bone voodoo. These are poems composed of "chalk//and charnel in the far room of a mind//that never sleeps" ('A Garden Inclosed'). There is, in every scene, grace and evil; life and death; spirit and flesh; love and its failure.

Black Cat Bone is painted principally in black and white – from an owl's "pit-black call" ('Insomnia'), and the black and white Lucille Ball reruns ('Late Show'), to a "white Christmas turning to sludge" in the final poem. As 'The Listener' describes, this is "the usual/ gloaming: an almost white/against the almost black/of gorse and may". But the pages are streaked, too, with deer fur, meadow flowers, gunsmoke and beetle blood. Burnside employs a painterly vocabulary to present smudges of colour: celadon, murrey, cyan. The poems attest to a fastidious naming process on the part of the poet. Among the plants listed are sumac, alstrœmeria and leylandii; animals include the caracal, fanalouc and civet. The specialised vocabulary is, at times, distracting – even irritating. But such self-delighting erudition in the portrayal of violence against women and animals is, it seems, central to Burnside's poetic exploration. We are back to that line between kinship and possession. Burnside exposes the potential violence of the desire for linguistic control. The masterful poem, 'Neoclassical', marks the departure of the gods and, with it, observes the "myth of naming" going under.

That said, there are places where such exploration is less successful. The book is divided into four parts: The Fair Chase; Everafter; Black Cat Bone; and Faith. Of these, I like only the first and last sections. In the second, erudition spins into indulgence ('The Bride') and self-referential nods to the fact of authorship draw me further from the poems, as with the "Quink-blue current" of 'Disappointment'. The delicate half rhymes of 'The Fair Chase' give

way to the heavy-handed full rhymes of the second section of 'The Nightingale' (rent/spent/ consent/ascent), and with the "mezzotint// epiphanies for Michaelmas/ and Lent", language sparkles without offering an image.

Subtlety and beauty return with the haunting final line of the sonnet 'Notes Towards an Ending', where Dickinson's image of hope appears fatally wounded: "that feathered thing we brought in from the yard,/after it came to grief on our picture window". In 'Community Pool', chlorinated children are "fireflies, lit with the green//of the deep". They appear newly resurrected:

> the extinct
> and the still-to-come
>
> radioed out in their hands
> while the dark floods in[.]

The poem is a marvel, brilliantly restrained in two-line stanzas. It contains the lesson of *Black Cat Bone* at its best. We are "cumbersome mammals", violent and vulnerable, momentarily light and full of grace.

GAIL McCONNELL

IN NO STATE

John McAuliffe, *Of All Places*, Gallery Press, £10.50
Justin Quinn, *Close Quarters*, Gallery Press, €11.95

Location, (re-)location, (dis)location is the insistent theme of John McAuliffe's third collection, *Of All Places*. The certainties of belonging in one place, time or persona are disrupted and wrong-footed, subject to interference from history, from the media and – in a nod to the financial collapse – from the workings of finance and capital. In 'Continuity', a radio broadcast causes temporal (and, as a result, physical) disruption:

> There's a snatch of a shipping forecast
> and I'm unloading the dishwasher when I hear a
> new voice,
> which strands me by announcing, 'This is *The Archive*
> *Hour*,
> and that was *The Long Note* thirty years ago today'…

The speaker is "stranded" by historical repeat and return, by the compression of "thirty years ago" and today. Continuity is unexpected, dislocating; being out of time is also being out of place, transported and astray – being "in no state", as 'Batman' has it.

Physical and 'temporal' dislocations occur throughout the collection. The epigraph to (the second of two poems called) 'Of All Places' uses Bashō on the inevitability of displacement – "Even in Kyoto/ hearing the cuckoo's cry/I long for Kyoto" – while 'A Game of Li Bo' more playfully invokes *An Illustrated History of Board Games in China*: "Historically games of displacement are replaced by games of strategy". But it is Irish political history that is most pervasive. In 'The Listowel Arms', a memory of seeing Charles Haughey points forwards – "I saw not a one/of my friends and classmates, investors in the future" – and back to Parnell making his "final biblical call". In 'Crash', meanwhile, the failure of the *Aud's* mission to

deliver weapons to the Easter Rising is retold in the present tense, until that tense bleeds into the present day, into "a memorial's/ inscribed stone" which "compels us ... to remember"; the narrative then concludes in the past tense, but with the author's date stamp, "April 1916", ambiguously attached to it.

These poems leave it unclear as to whether the past is always present or whether the present is already past; certainly, however, the present is not reified, and the intermingling of past, present and future comes at a price. 'Continuity' ends "There will be time again for names and dates,/for taking it all down, for credits, for footnotes"; the last lines of 'Odd Hours' find the speaker "Retracing/ my steps, each door is open, little bits of money moving to and fro". Continuity requires the giving (or taking) of credit; retracing involves – among other things – the movement of money. Quite how this relationship works is opaque in the poems, and what we get for our money, what we can glean from history, seems airily insubstantial.

In (the first) 'Of All Places', a condensed journey from the formation of limestone and gneiss to the present day in only fourteen lines, the present can only access the past through empty symbols of resonance:

> and, now, a history of guided tours,
> making a guest appearance in videos of gap years
> with earphones and smoke and ring roads and glossy
> primary coloured photos of strangers
> and, here we are, on the cairn of stones with a pebble,
> or taking something for the windowsill, maybe a
> seashell.

Similarly, in the excellent truncated-narrative poem 'Grave Goods', the coffin of the mysterious "brother" is loaded with "acorns, his bow, fire sticks, venison/and his songs of coyote, of vulture, of grasshopper and of earthworm" – fragments, certainly, but with no sense that they can be shored against historical ruin.

If *Of All Places* speaks to a *zeitgeist*, it is not a particularly new one; rather, the post-Celtic-Tiger period seems simply a continuation of and addition to the various other *post*-periods of the last thirty or so years. Justin Quinn's *Close Quarters*, his fifth collection, also engages – on the level of theme – with the Ireland of boom rather than bust (most memorably in the wittily acerbic 'Babylon'), placing it, as in previous collections, alongside the post-communist terrain and preoccupations of his adopted home, the Czech Republic. More fundamentally, however, the collection also raises questions of the relationship between fact and fiction, reality and retelling.

As with Quinn's earlier collection *Fuselage*, there is a distinction between form and substance, and the possibility that form might gloss (or, worse, reveal) a lack of substance. Rhyme is the mediator and driver here, ostentatious and self-proclaiming: "chew it"/"fluid" and "semi-ds"/ "70s" being particularly resonant examples. Quinn's rhymes are less fructively serendipitous than Muldoon's, but they are still obtrusive enough to emphasise the distance between the language used and any simple notion of 'reality'.

In the *noir*/spy narratives in the collection – 'Hoopoe', 'Russian Girl on Pařížká' and especially 'Musílkova' – this is germane, as rhyme contributes to a sense of dramatic narrative excess, of narrative that overpowers and overtakes. In 'Musílkova', for example, boundaries between fact and fiction get blurred and layered as the murder (in a novel) of an NKVD spy colours the narrator's reaction to the streets of Prague, and complicates the real-life execution – "in 1940 for his work in resistance" – of a local doctor after whom the poem and a Prague street are named. The question of empty form is more fraught when it encounters the "close" emotional relationships pointed to in the collection's title when, for example, 'The Wedding Guests' bursts the romantic bubble of the individual wedding by placing it in the context of (tired) ritual and repetition: at the end of the poem, we are left with:

the lover waiting for the end of play
a while past midnight, checking the phone's screen
and looking down upon the road, the scene
now set for yet another wedding day.

There are many celebrations of human relationships in the book, between husband and wife, parent and child or between friends, and these offer a response to the (mysterious and violent) political forces that pervade the collection, whether through the sharing of wine, the telling of stories at dusk, or through dancing in a park in Blackrock to Aslan. If it wasn't for the existential fear of the emptiness of form and ritual, these celebrations might seem too at ease, willing to succumb to the romanticisation and nostalgia of the émigré who would catch the DART that makes the "8.10 transfer to Hy Breasal".

And it is precisely when it is not at ease that *Close Quarters* is at its best: when cultural migrations unfoot the "known"; when narrative displaces verisimilitude; or when rhyme is used to puncture pomposity, as in 'On Hearing Irish Spoken in South Dublin', for example, which joyfully queers the language question:

Thoughts float between the two official tongues
like oysters changing sex with each new season
on rocks that steeply shelve into the ocean.
Sluice the oyster down. Don't try to chew it.
And in the darker months your soul goes fluid.
It spills its love about day after day
of this Atlantic island, sweet and gay.

PETER MacKAY

THE EKPHRASTIC MUSE

Derek Mahon, *Raw Material***, Gallery Press, €11.95**

There is no success without the possibility of failure.
Raymond Chandler

In 1910 the French criminologist Edmond Locard set up the first police forensic laboratory in a Paris attic. Locard established that we leave traces of ourselves everywhere, from our bodies, our clothes, our shoes – fingerprints, hairs, fibres, paper, paint chips, soils, metals, botanical materials, gunshot residue. The microscopic debris that covers our clothing and bodies, said Locard, is the mute witness, sure and faithful, of all our movements and all our encounters. Hence he is known as the pioneer of forensic science, credited with what has become known in English as Locard's Exchange Principle: "Every contact leaves a trace." Wondering what the French original for this *bon mot* might be, I looked up the French Wikipédia, and found this: "*La Principe d'échange de Locard est un principe de criminalistique qui stipule que lorsque deux corps entrent en contact l'un avec la'autre, il y a nécessairement un transfer entre ceux-ci. En d'autres termes, lorsqu'un acte criminel se produit, l'individu responsible laisse des traces de sa presence et emporte avec lui des traces du lieu où il se trouvait*." Search as I might, I couldn't find a French equivalent of the English apothegm, though I didn't look that hard, and it might well exist; but if it does not, it is an example of how a translation, or an adaptation, can improve on the original. Locard has been called the Sherlock Holmes of France; indeed, Locard acknowledged that his work had been influenced by the fictional detective. "Sherlock Holmes was the first to recognize the importance of dust," said Locard. "I merely copied his methods." In other words – *en d'autres termes* – Locard's contact with literature left a practical trace; changing his life, it changed criminology. And one might postulate that everything a writer reads leaves some trace, unconscious or

not, on his or her writing. We are changed by what we read and what we write. "Every contact leaves a trace" – a phrase which rhymes coincidentally with Wittengenstein's first proposition in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as quoted in Derek Mahon's poem 'Tractatus', "The world is everything that is the case." But more of that anon.

When I was asked to review Derek Mahon's *Raw Material*, a book of translations or adaptations, I thought of *Lives*. In my mind's eye I saw its cover, that iconic photograph of shipyard workers leaving Harland & Wolff's in 1911 with the *Titanic* under construction in the background; and I remembered the pleasure with which I discovered the austere, elegant, ironic poems in that book. *Lives* was published in 1972, and in the intervening years I had formed an impression that it was somehow informed by the succinct exactitude of early Irish verse, or translations thereof, as epitomized by Gerard Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics*, which I first looked into around 1970, as a student of English and Celtic Studies at Queen's University Belfast. So I went to look for my copy of *Lives* among the chaos of my library, which extends on many shelves from ground floor to attic over four levels of my terrace house; but I could not find it. I reckoned I must have given it to someone – "You haven't read *Lives*? But you must!" – in one of my sporadic fits of enthusiastic generosity; drink might have been taken. I wonder where my copy of *Lives* is now, and who lived with it all these years, and whether that person is alive or dead, and if dead, whether the book has passed on to another reader, or to a recycled afterlife, translated, as it were, to another existence. Certainly, my copy has been translated in the sense of the primary meaning of the word as defined by the OED: "Bear, convey or move from one person, place, time or condition to another".

Given that translation, I conveyed myself to the Queen's Library to look for another copy. I am writing this in the reading room of the Special Collections Consultation Only section, which has a high security feel to it: coats and bags must be left in exterior lockers, and one is issued with an electronic key by which one accesses the

reading room, where one awaits, as one might a prisoner at visiting time, the book which is conducted to one's desk by a library warder. And I am as pleased to see *Lives* as a lover might be seeing her partner inside; or I greet it as a long-lost friend. It lies before me on the desk, and I am examining it as a Locard or a Holmes might do. The cover is slightly yellowed, but not nicotined, as mine is, as I remember it, and a half-inch section of the lower spine has come adrift. It has been well handled over the years, and I wonder if any other traces of other readers might be found within – a stray hair, a flake of skin, his or her dust – but as I flick through it I can find no such evidence, from which a future scientist might clone the reader in question. What I do find are some pencilled marks – some of the titles on the Contents page ticked off; vertical lines against some passages, for instance "I know too much/ To be anything any more" (from the title poem), and one piece of illegible marginalia, no doubt meaningful to its author, but perhaps not to me, even if I could read it, since my experience of the book is necessarily different. A book, a poem is not a single entity but many; it bears as many readings or interpretations as there are readers of it. Come to that, the book or poem is many things even to one reader, since he or she will read it differently at different times: nobody, *pace* Heraclitus, steps into the same poem twice. Every reading is a kind of translation.

As I skimmed *Lives*, looking for traces of early Irish verse, I found more than I had bargained for: evidence that *Lives* had influenced my own early verse, whether consciously or unconsciously, echoes of the person I had been some forty years ago. Every contact leaves a trace, and I could see how lines, images and procedures from these poems had left their traces on my own work. It would be tedious to enumerate them here. As for the early Irish business, I didn't find as much as I thought I might: true, the title poem, for instance, and others, like 'An Image from Beckett' have something of the qualities I attributed to the Irish verse, of austerity and clarity; but whether Mahon was in any way influenced by a reading of that verse, presumably in translation, is another matter. More likely, because I myself was immersed in Gerard Murphy's *Early*

Irish Lyrics around the same time as my encounter with *Lives*, I had through wishful thinking conflated the two. And my poems of that period seem influenced by both. However, I did come across these lines from 'Beyond Howth Head':

> I, too, uncycled, might exchange
> (since 'we are changed by what we change')
> my forkful of the general mess
> for hazel nuts and water cress
> like one of those old hermits who,
> less virtuous than some, withdrew
> from the world-circles women make
> to a small island in a lake.

Which is a direct enough reference to the poetry of the Irish monastic tradition. I transcribed the verse into my A6 Muji notebook. Back home, writing this on the computer, I wanted to check what I wrote; unable to return to the original, immured in the Queen's Library, I consulted the Gallery Press *New Collected Poems*, and found that here the penultimate line reads, 'the world-circles *people* make' (my italics). Whether the revision is more appropriate to the world-view of an early Irish anchorite is a moot point, but I was not specially interested in pursuing the question of Mahon's revisions, until I Googled the second line, "('since we are changed by what we change')", a quotation which was unfamiliar to me. As it happens, it is from Auden's 'New Year Letter', and refers directly to Auden's own sometimes notorious revisions, as adumbrated in an article by Edward Mendelson in *The Romantic Review*, Vol. 86, 1995. So the Auden quotation takes on another, ironic resonance. The poet changes a line in a poem, and he is necessarily changed. Whether the world is changed is another matter. Does poetry matter? It is a question which haunts Mahon's oeuvre, as expressed, for example, in an early poem which references Wallace Stevens' magnificently high-sounding 'The Idea of Order at Key West', 'Rage for Order':

Somewhere beyond
The scorched gable end
And the burnt-out
Buses there is a poet indulging his
Wretched rage for order –

Or not as the case
May be, for his
Is a dying art,
An eddy of semantic scruple
In an unstructurable sea.

Or, more bleakly in the later 'Ovid in Tomis', "Better to contemplate/ The blank page/ And leave it blank." Yet the poet keeps on writing in the spirit of Beckett's "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Are the revisions a 'failing better', or a search for an impossible perfectibility? The ghost of Beckett is forever at Mahon's shoulder, the act of writing poised between the first and last propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "The world is everything that is the case"; "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent". The later Wittgenstein retracted much of the *Tractatus*, thinking that since the world is inescapably mediated through language, our world depends on how things are said. Which brings us back to the question of translation. Wittgenstein's First Proposition reads thus in the original German: *Die Welt is alles, was der Fall ist* – a slightly different proposition, for the near-rhyme of *alles/Fall ist* gives it a proverbial, self-evidential ring, not to mention the comma after *alles*, which in German acts more as a colon than the English comma, almost as if the second half of the sentence were a translation of the first. The proposition is kind of ekphrasis as defined by the latest, online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, though here spelled 'ecphrasis', "(in Rhet.) a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing". The contemporary usage, as defined by Webster, "a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art", is ignored.

There are plenty of ekphrases in the latter sense in Mahon. Among the more obvious examples are 'Portrait of the Artist' (Van Gogh), 'Courtyards in Delft' (Pieter de Hooch), 'The Hunt by Night' (Paolo Ucello), 'Girls on the Bridge' (Edvard Munch), and 'Shapes and Shadows' (William Scott). And if we extend the term to mean a literary description of or commentary on a literary work of art, or a poem which refers to other writings and other writers, we can see that Mahon's work is littered with traces of literature. *Every contact leaves a trace*. Among the many examples revealed by a skim of the *New Collected* are De Quincey, Li Po, Proust, Chekhov, Sartre, Ovid, Camus, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, Edgar Allan Poe, Marianne Moore, Melville, Baudelaire, Sappho, Frank O'Hara, John Cleland, Verlaine, Laforgue, Bashō, and Beckett of course. And since these include writers in languages other than English, we might as well include translation as yet another form of ekphrasis, especially when we consider its etymology, from Greek *ek*, out, and *phrazein*, speak; for what is translation but a speaking out, an expression of the original? And Mahon, more than most, spends time with translation. Apart from the numerous translations or adaptations in collections of his 'own' work, there are book-length versions of Nerval, Molière, Philippe Jacottet, Euripides, Racine, Saint-Jean Perse, Edmond Rostand and Sophocles.

So why is Mahon's Muse so ekphrastic? There are times when, as he puts it in 'Everything is Going to Be All Right' – the title echoes Bob Marley – "The lines flow from the hand unbidden"; and there are times when one is faced with the blankness of the blank page. What is there to write about? How does one write it? Even when writing we contemplate the possibility of failure. I am sure I am not alone in my sometimes thinking that doing carpentry would be preferable to doing poetry. How much more straightforward it would be to take a piece of wood and make it into a chair, or even, like Van Gogh, paint a chair, or, in the last remove, take a poem about a chair in one language and turn it into another language,

as we might turn a piece of wood. There are parameters to all these activities, dictated by the material; but our 'own' poems set their own parameters, which are unknown until they are written. Mahon, in 'Resistant Days', quotes Raymond Chandler's, "No art without the resistance of the medium"; but we want our medium to be more tangible than language. We want more entanglement with things. "No ideas but in things", as Carlos Williams would have it, writing in words which are not things. How satisfactory it would be to deal with real stuff, to paint a real wheelbarrow red, or even to paint a red wheelbarrow; but we are doomed to handle the immateriality of mere words, whose resistance lies in their remaining always beyond us, yet to be discovered, not known until written; and our best poems are those that seem to come from nowhere, spoken to us by Another. We talk about the 'craft' of poetry, but the verbal operations that occur in one poem, the skills we think we have learned, can scarcely ever be applied to another poem; and if we think we can do the same thing that we did before, only with different subject matter this time, the result is often self-parody. So an honest poet is more often faced with poet's block than not, and the poet's anxiety in these blank periods might be compared to that of Sherlock Holmes when he lacks the stimulation of a case, except that instead of taking to cocaine, he takes to ekphrasis. That is not to say that great poetry cannot come from ekphrasis, Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' being a case in point; and Mahon, too, has written great ekphrastic poems (in the sense of poems inspired by other works). I thought this version or adaptation a marvellous poem when I first read it some forty years ago, and it remains so for me:

The Mute Phenomena
(after Nerval)

Your great mistake is to disregard the satire
Bandied among the mute phenomena.
Be strong if you must, your brisk hegemony
Means fuck-all to the somnolent sunflower
Or the extinct volcano. What do you know
Of the revolutionary theories advanced
By turnips, or the sex life of cutlery?
Everything is susceptible, Pythagoras said so.

An ordinary common-or-garden brick wall, the kind
For talking to or banging you head on,
Resents your politics and bad draughtmanship.
God is alive and lives under a stone;
Already in a lost hub-cap is conceived
The ideal society which will replace our own.

That 'lost hubcap' reminds us of how often Mahon's typical landscape is that of junk, of disused sheds and defunct garages, abandoned piers, a terminal moraine of Western Civilization, littered with rusting gearboxes and dumped refrigerators. The foreshore is adrift with trash and refuse barges. Recycling is breaking down. The end of the world is nigh, if not already over. In such circumstances the only true speech is mute. Stones may speak but not in so many words. Or one may enter, as Mahon does, the stone image of 'Ovid in Tomis', and speak on its behalf. He translates himself to stone. Or the opposite might be the case, for ekphrasis works both ways – take Keats' Grecian urn – and it may be the thing that translates itself and bespeaks itself to the writer, as in 'The Drawing Board':

And yet I love you, even in your ignorance,
Perhaps because at last you are making sense –
Talking to me, not through me, recognizing
That it is I alone who make you sing
Wood music; hitherto shadowy and dumb,
I speak to you now as your indispensable medium.

Hence *Raw Material*, a collection of 'adaptations' in the spirit of *Adaptations* (2006). There are wonderful versions here of poems by Ovid, Sextus Propertius, Li Po, Rimbaud and Neruda, among others. Inevitably, they sound like Mahon. Here are the first and last verses of 'The Peace of Objects', from the French of Michel Houellebecq:

> The peace of objects, strange phenomena,
> not even on speaking terms.
> Time wears us down
> while they remain
> at rest; nothing bothers them.
>
> Defined by objects made in our own image,
> through them we live our lives.
> Meanwhile, deep down, there hides
> a buried memory
> of having once been gods.

But the most remarkable feature of *Raw Material* is Mahon's adoption of a Pessoan heteronym: according to the Author's Note, "a sequence 'translated' from the Hindi of Gopal Singh, my own invention. These owe so much to real Indian poems that they must be considered unoriginal work and so qualify for inclusion." Why step into someone else's shoes? Especially when that someone is a fiction? (Who, incidentally, has a previous existence in Mahon's *An Autumn Wind*.) And we recall Edmond Locard's saying, "Sherlock Holmes was the first to recognize the importance of dust. I merely copied his methods." The title poem by "Gopal Singh" returns us to dust, and the Mahon of *Lives*:

> The recycling of old shoes
> as raw material
> makes artwork
> of the contingent real
> when sunlight,
> finding them
> among shadows,
> throws
> shadow shapes on their used souls.

Only material forms die
says the *Gita*,
the dusty soul within
alone survives
even as we discard
one body for another.
Avatar and aviator,
I who once was a virus,
once a mosquito,
began to re-imagine
my previous lives.

My previous lives were long ago
in Chittagong and Katmandu
but there is life to come
when we rejoin the dust
or drift downstream
and sink into the sand like foam.

According to contemporary science, we are made of star-dust; everything is recycled, stuff translated into other stuff. Deep down we know that when our best poetry happens we feel the words are not are own, but given from elsewhere: it is made of stuff from elsewhere, whether from books, art, translation, junk, speaking stones or speaking trees. *Every contact leaves a trace*. Poetry comes from beyond, and we wonder where it comes from. The poet wants to be something other than himself, something other than herself. We want to become the other, to read the other as one would a book not one's own. All poetry is ekphrasis. And even our failures have their place. From 'Recycling Song' by "Gopal Singh":

Throw nothing out; recycle
the vilest rubbish, even
your own discarded page.
Everything comes full circle;
see you again in heaven
some sunny evening in a future age.

It is an old dream. We all wish to be translated into something better, or at least into something else. In John Donne's words in his *Meditation XVII*: "All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another." And yet, as Mahon has it in the early 'Heraclitus on Rivers',

> Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
> The very language in which the poem
> Was written, and the idea of language,
> All these things will pass away in time.

CIARAN CARSON

TROUBLING THE LAIR

John Montague, *Speech Lessons*, Gallery Press, £10. 95

John Montague has been described as "virtually Ireland's poet laureate". The tribute is fitting, given that he has, for more than half a century, chronicled both a life, and the life of a country. Preoccupied as he is with his own story, Montague has also ghost-written much of the story of Ireland since World War II, refracting wider political and historical concerns through poems about love, about his family, and about his childhood. The journey, and the story, is an extraordinary one, from his first collection, *Forms of Exile*, in 1958, a book expressive of his own internal and familial exile and return, as it also implicitly speaks to the condition of Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; through the "rough field" of the Troubles, where his own patch of ground is symptomatic of a broader cultural malaise – the "boiling pot", as Yeats had it, in which a vast and troubling history is contained; to here, where the speech lessons, "lessons" which are, in the end, the poems themselves, become a matter of (self and societal) diagnosis and healing.

Separation and division are understood in Montague's work at the deepest level. "*Come back early or never come*" is MacNeice's haunting refrain from 'Autobiography', where the death of his mother, that primal hurt, changes the poet's own nature forever ("Nothing after was quite the same"). It's a refrain that seems unusually pertinent to Montague too, who, born in Brooklyn in 1929, was separated from his mother at the age of four. "Without help", he tells us in *The Figure in the Cave*, "we could not survive as a family. So my two elder brothers were sent home to the small town [Fintona] where they had been born…In Derry the children were shared out, and I went home with my aunt to become the last Montague, in the male line, to live in Garvaghey". He lost, in other words, "a family and a country in one sweep". "I have no doubt", he continues, "that the separation from my mother, whatever

the reasons for the decision, is at the centre of my emotional life, affecting my relationships with women, shadowing my speech: my stammer broke out for the first time after she returned to Ireland".

The last Garvaghey-based Montague in the male line; the difficulty with speech: these are the themes that haunt *Speech Lessons*. The lesson learned through more than five decades of a writing life is, not least, the finding of the poet's own voice – that achieved voice which carries, as Montague once described it, "all the pressure of [a] personality and province behind [it]". In the sequence 'Speech Lesson', which recalls the poet's speech therapy in Belfast in the last year of the War, the "chant of those carriage wheels/as we chug towards Belfast;/clickety-click, lickety-split', brings to the surface the anxieties about language and articulation that reverberate beyond the personal: "*When will I learn again to speak*"; "*Will I never, ever speak again?*"; "*Shall I begin to speak again?*". To "speak" is implicated in both courting and writing (Montague is one of the outstanding love-poets of his time), about the "tongue-tied boy" finding words for and to the girls who "chatter-and-clatter like starlings", one of whom gives him a flower, and whose perfume he can, at the close of the poem, "still smell". But the speech lessons themselves suggest broader political and cultural complexities, largely unspoken, beneath the surface:

> 'Young man, learn to speak from your diaphragm:
> *Many merry men marched many times.*
> And you should read Drummond Allison.
> He was stationed here in Northern Ireland.'
> She presses down, again and again:
> 'Consider our King: he broadcasts, stammering.
> So let the wind whistle through your lungs.
> And read poetry aloud, it can be such fun!
> From how far away did you say you'd come?'

There are suggestive hints here about a relationship between poetry and war, language and violence; there are surface assumptions about allegiances and alliances that hide a wealth of wartime ambiguity in Northern Ireland. And the last question here,

for Montague, is both simple (answer: from Garvaghey), in the context of the poem, and unanswerable, in terms both of his complex sense of origins and belonging, and of the journey he makes as a poet. "[T]o speak" is also, for Montague, to speak out, and in a context where there seemed to be no precedent for a voice such as his to emerge, "no tradition", as he puts it, "for someone of my background to work in".

It is, in part, the absence of such a tradition, and, in familial terms, of a father-figure, that fuels Montague's interest in ancestry – both literally and literarily. Part Two of *Speech Lessons*, a sequence of poems entitled *In My Grandfather's Mansion* plays on the famous passage from John 14:2: "in my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." The last of the Garvaghey-dwelling male Montagues, the poet is haunted by those who preceded him there, notably by the grandfather he never knew, "John Montague JP (1840-1907)", by the disjunction between past and present, and by his half-known inheritance: "John begat James who begat John". His father, James, is the absent presence through the sequence, as the poet is "transplanted" into his grandfather's bed, in his grandfather's house, and into his books. In the 'Prologue' to the sequence, the poet scrambles:

> …up the stairs to where
> a windowless room shelters
> the remnants of his library.
> The candle flame trembles as I read,
> rocking in his cushioned chair
> as if John Montague, JP, were still there,
> pondering his many volumes, instead of me,
> a Brooklyn urchin, troubling his lair.

The "mansions" are rooms, poems, and books ("In my grandfather's library/there were many volumes,//Bibles massive as flagstones…"); they are also the foundation stones (dolmens?) of an elusive and contradictory family history. As he observes in *The Figure in the Cave*, "Who were these John (Mon)tagues? Every time

I stir a genealogical stone a wild ambiguity appears." There's a wry humour to the poems in this sequence; the many mansions have to accommodate the renegade poet too, who is berated by his grandfather beyond the grave ("*Who are you, anyway, you whippersnapper,/sharing our family secrets with the world…*"), but who answers back, "troubling [the] lair", with aplomb: "Listen, you auld fecker, you may be my grandfather/but the round world has rolled on since then."

Given Montague's interest in the "feminine principle", and in the tradition of "*amour courtois*" inherited in part from Robert Graves, it is unsurprising that Part Two of this collection prompts for him the question: "But who was my grandmother?" She is "Silence. Or almost", a single surviving photograph, a "solemn figure/lost in the shadows…" to whom he gives a voice in the eighth poem of the sequence: "*Out of the darkness I dare to speak…*". The play of speech and silence, the love that lies beyond language, centres, for Montague, on the female principle, as in the beautiful 'Silences: for Elizabeth' earlier in the book where "There is a music beyond all this,/beyond all forms of grievance,/where anger lays its muzzle down/into the lap of silence". And it is the women, his father's sisters, of central importance to his childhood, who dominate Part Three of *Speech Lessons*. Montague is at his best here, in poems which remember, as in 'Patience and Time' or 'Home Coming', the female presences in his childhood: "my bone-tired aunt/bends to her evening task./Soon the cattle will/bed down in their stalls./A storm lamp dangles/from the rafters as/twilight closes in." It would be hard not to take pleasure in this book, in its humour, its warmth, its insights into the poet's own past, and its elegiac grace. Montague's lyric voice, forged as it is through and by difficulty, has in this collection an openness of tone, and an engaging, because hard-won, ease and clarity of style; his willingness to render the mature poetic self as vulnerable as the "little Brooklyn boy" of the 1930s is utterly disarming. There's something, surely, for everyone to learn from that.

FRAN BREARTON

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