

**TERRY McDONAGH**



**A WORLD**

**WITHOUT STONE**

BLAUPAUSE BOOKS

**Terry McDonagh**

**A World Without Stone**

**New And Selected Poems**



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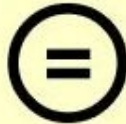
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## *For Seán*

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**I.**  
**New Poems**



## A Journey Home!

From the deck of the Prince Of Scandinavia,  
the banks of the Elbe are flat: a narrow strip  
includes the river, its bank and the tree tops.  
Houses shaped out of story books  
peer over the dykes and there is one white  
and silent lighthouse sheep-grazed up to its door.

There are no cleavages in gnarling rocks for breezes  
to weave and sway through – not here.  
Nor does the land rise even to a hiding place  
in blue cold or white heat. Further up  
in Husum or St. Peter Ording, the sea rolls  
out and out and in – halted only by its own  
gasping. Sea birds and land birds always  
eat busily there, as if not sure of the tides on  
the great flat prairies of mud.  
White horses have been seen and men lost  
cursing the goddess for a handful of shells  
or a short cut to an island. The winds do come,  
heaving walls of black and brown cloud and  
sometimes next morning, whole bits of land  
have been tossed from one place to another;  
helpless as a bad prayer.

We docked  
in our city or theirs, and I drove the streets  
seeing men and women drink beer and coffee  
standing – not the Irish way, but valid  
in a sacred way known to Hamburg and  
more and more to me. Again I think  
of the mud-flats and the trees straining away  
from the North Sea wind and my own knees  
bent by Irish prayer.

I am as far away  
as the stories I listened to as a child.

## Kasseler Hills

It's not the time of year  
for a green linnet to sing,  
but I know one  
must be singing devout song  
somewhere in the hills near Kassel.  
It's what you'd expect here  
in the way you'd expect to find  
a hook for a hat in a well-worn home.  
Mine sings –  
with the energy of colours  
while the hills roll  
round an abandoned water tank  
in their autumn coats; quiet  
as a weak defence,  
    – just one note  
in the clean air, like a traveller  
hearing an old man's joy.

## The Sculptor

On my way up to the top  
of a great mountain, I met  
an old man with deep grey eyes  
and skin like a spent drum.

It was autumn. He'd spent  
most of his life cutting stone,  
he said. We stood listening.  
He looked like one who'd left  
the crowd in his youth and gone  
to the mountain to shape it  
into lonely pieces. He'd begun  
with music; composing notes  
from the straining wind in  
scrub and low-sized bushes.  
Later, he felt the tug of  
the hard anxiety in stone.

He did leave in his young  
and lanky days, but the burden  
of returning to the blue and grey  
sang him home.

When a black cloud unveiled  
the full moon, there were  
raging sculptures everywhere.

## Coming Back To Dublin

I was in a taxi coming from the airport  
into Dublin, listening to the driver  
pinching the silence out of finished sentences.

To snatch a bit of bliss, I harboured a thought  
for the sister who had left me, near an altar  
in Drumcondra, with nothing on me

but a few pence for wax candles and  
the pitiful gaze of a virgin with child.  
I slipped out the side door without a bean

or even an excuse to my name. It was Friday.  
Later that evening, I cried a good deal  
on her breast and vowed never to leave

my own people. I didn't see her again, nor  
did I see the gay man who filled me with drink,  
promising me a one-way ticket to London.

I let slip I was a poet and he told me of  
a golden eagle he'd seen close to the sun.  
I said good luck, put my pages away,

burned up a bit and had my next smoke  
abroad. On my third signal, I met a big woman  
in a half-empty theatre in Soho.

She wrapped me in swaddling clothes and  
laid me in a manger. She had a house with  
acres by the score and I kept her to myself

for many a year, till she spied a warrior  
on the horizon. He said he'd burned  
his thumb on a fish . She was impressed.

I headed for Dublin when she promised to  
nurse him back to health.

The taxi driver was still hard at it. I told him  
about my poetry. His mother had once loved  
a man in verse. Are you really a poet?

Sort of I said, but in reality I'm a therapist  
on the blink. He stopped outside a hospital  
saying poetry was a scourge.

## **The Blush Goes With It**

Clowns chip down to the stone,  
to the last straw where  
a carnal deed is not enough.

A ballet dancer raised  
his hand and threw a shadow  
beyond the light; his best move.

A cluster of three hazelnuts fell  
when shadows and clouds had  
taken on the right texture.

I remember salmon jumping waterfalls  
on their way to their spawning beds  
and I couldn't dance a simple dance.

## A World Without Stone, March '98

There are no hills and the only rock  
of substance – a sixty ton granite  
colossus – has been discovered  
deep under the earth by a great digger  
boring back under the Elbe.

It was transported here by moving ice  
during an ice age, the newspaper says  
and it will be put on show for one and all.

This absence of rock has troubled me  
through the years. I'd love to find  
worry-stones in different shapes,  
or even a handful of pebbles, but  
sand is soft here. I've had to accept  
this, as I've had to accept that stones  
in shop windows are proper stones.  
Not that I've wanted to. But people  
talk of size, shape and healing power  
and I feel I should too – perhaps!

I have known the need for death  
and depend on solace and hard colours  
for comfort and some foothold.

# Saturdays

*For Seán*

Saturdays – nicely tucked away  
into the end of the week –  
are full days when Sean and I revel in  
the blue and naked streets of Eimsbüttel  
– and one basketball corner to the next.  
You and me against the rest! and later,  
we have curry, chop-suey,  
the same biscuits, drinks and time  
after smaller ones have taken their noises home.  
What kind of things did you get up to  
in school? We grow closer. He tells me  
a dumb-blondé joke, but keep it to yourself!

Die Sportschau begins at ten. We plan  
a longer route to get us there on time.  
We pass fallen angels and smoking pubs  
with names like Zum Billigen Egon or  
Endstation. I learn new Hamburg slang,  
see people with kick me hanging on  
to them like half whispers and  
we remember a crowd gathered round a  
mangy dog with a foreign child left  
to its own devices.



## Newgrange Megalythic Tomb

It had been a hump for years,  
a lovers covert on the side next to the sun,  
a sandpit, a quarry, a hilltop  
for Meath Indians; never a stop-off  
between Knock and Lourdes –

even Francis Ledwidge  
left it to be grazed by nimble calves  
and to the antics of whins and thistles.

After some digging had been done  
winter solstice crept in to warm  
very old spirits in their own place.

They stumble about among deserving stones,  
wet-kissing them  
as long neglected loved ones would –

a potent people merging, like a lovely daughter,  
with our jaded light and the river flowing past.

## Still Life On A Corner

There's a kiosk under a big tree  
on the corner of a quiet street, where  
a woman, down on herself, is smoking.

She doesn't see far off any more, but  
shuts her eyes and hears echoes of a family  
in a much too distant land.

A man in a wheelchair curses questions of time  
and the coming and going of cigarette smokers.  
He drinks his reserves when the air is too hard.

A younger person sifts through worn-out raindrops.  
He counts from where he stands to the end  
of his secret. There are banknotes hanging out to dry!

The big tree is nourished from below and  
its leaves hang fat and happy. Now in summer,  
it has much to give; in winter much less.

These people return each day, as history does  
to paper – unaware of what's in store for them.

Still life on a corner.

## A New Sadness

The rocks are bright and wild.  
They've always been there,  
playing to the dead and to the

living

who left with nothing, but  
the violin strings they'd wed  
from between the desolate clefts.

The old cottages fell in  
like a last great pagan  
and the people dreamt

in cities

of wind roaring music into turf.

It's a mute place now. There are  
no trees to teach daytrippers  
the way

to pluck tunes among the rocks.

## **Come On Down God!**

Farewell to loving in nooks  
and crannies on feastdays!  
I might as well be a monk  
I thought, but didn't know  
that he who laughs last  
laughs loudest.  
I was done with dancing.

I could be a saint!  
One to show love after war,  
face into the wind at night  
when looking for a forlorn child,  
or the embrace of a lost generation.  
There was a promise of goats  
and herbs in abundance,  
far from the airfield. I thought  
sisters were out of reach, so  
I promised to sing The Messiah,  
in all its parts, for a virgin  
who believed in love.

I got to know the tilt of a full moon  
and the hidden stroke of a warm drink.  
What shape's your phone? she'd ask  
again and again, knowing  
the monk in me was in the city;  
away from the bustle of goats and  
herbs, but just inside the bars of  
a high hotel window .....

Splash!

## A Visit To Thoor Ballylee

This visit was better. I didn't go in.  
Instead, I got my head well down  
into the shallow water among the swans.  
I couldn't drown, so I swam a bit.  
A proud swan ducked. I ducked as well  
and saw silver fish darting about,  
vibrant as echoes in a great house.  
There were shadows at the tower gate.  
I could hear lots of clapping;  
the kind of clapping you might hear  
if a virgin appeared to the faithful.  
A new harvest moon drew over long  
enough to polish the water. It grew late.  
The light in the tower window  
was put out. I heard the singing of  
calm beauty and turned my face up  
to the fog-falling quiet.

## Lismirrane National School

*For my mother Úna*

These days, I tune into radio this and that  
on my way to school and hear tales of  
Intel's golden braids on Irish meadows.

But I well remember the fifteen minutes  
to Lismirrane, now become Othmarschen  
via Kieler Strasse and a bit of Autobahn.

I would run that road past neighbours and cousins,  
not to be late – especially in winter  
when we had to bring firewood.  
I knew the good hedges and bracken  
that snapped in frost or rain  
and how to tie brambles with scutch.

From the back of our house, you could see  
the school, the school hill, the crossroads  
and the line of fields in between  
divided by stone fences, barbed wire or  
unresolved feud; people knew a lot about each other.

At the crossroads, I'd melt into the crowd  
pouring from other roads and fields,  
each of us clinging to a bouquet of little sticks.  
Some were crying at the school gate.

This week-end, I am here in Denmark  
to visit Hamlet's castle at Kronborg.  
Down the coast, Karen Blixen's laid to rest  
in her own sanctuary under an oak tree.

I've learned a lot since Lismirrane.

## Nettle Bait

When a jackass got past the zookeeper  
and into the zebra section, he stiffened.  
Beautiful! taking up eye-to-eye fluttering  
with a really stripey specimen who helped him  
with the gate. He was no romantic, yet  
without as much as a towel to cover  
his nakedness, he kept one ear to the wind.  
It was her first time, she said. He knew  
that tune and did what he could: he flashed  
her a sheepish smile and dropped  
a bunch of strong nettles on her hay.  
He was paler this time passing the keeper  
with his head hanging low to hide his grin.

That evening in a bar called The Straying Nag  
he moved among stallions – real studs; strident  
and huddled. What! they do it for a few nettles.  
Old jacks – out on grass, rushed back in and  
trotted off to Africa with their tails high.  
They took bridle bits, a few worn-down shoes  
and lots of exotic bait with them. Bring back a  
zebra was the motto: a young thing with a full set  
of stripes. To be fair, they did promise

a life of Reilly with greener grass on  
the other side and the usual bouquet of stingers.

Meanwhile, the first jackass had left his mark:  
a donkey female-cross with zebra legs.  
In a year, she was trendy; a funky young thing;  
a new strain to compete with mules for  
prime street corner spaces. Some, full of  
dark resentment and brooding, moved indoors.  
They lashed, kicked and half brayed to a kept diet.  
The older asses went again and again, till they  
ran out of puff and were replaced – the business  
had become full-blown and sleazy.  
There were fashionable young things  
that found their way into fairy woods  
with music-sprinkled air, but most of them stayed  
down on the boulevards nibbling nettles.

## The Shift

Maybe it was your picture  
of a boatman on a lake

that made me look inwards  
and not out to galaxies

where dreams are stars –  
eclipses are closer to home.

I need more twilight now  
to shut down on bustle,

to shift tighter with people  
among stacked cups

and a place to lie down  
near an open window.

## The Depth Of Blood

The host does not dance with refugees  
in his home, nor does he feel their solitude.  
They must promise to be good;  
not to unpack; never to forget the homeland  
and the shame of deserting untidy fields.  
Only the guilty tell tales and talk  
when the moon is out and running  
along windows of blue roses!

You cannot stay!

Washed up men, full of hard submission,  
stand motionless on the pier.  
Women, with dissolving eyes, no name  
and a flower to grace every cobblestone,  
must hide away till nightfall, when they  
drape pot-bellied men with a glow like fireflies.  
They keep their minds on whistling bridges  
and talking stones they knew, before  
the depth of blood drove them away.

This is a time for weaning away  
from lovely things.

To be taken to a strange place with  
wet confetti underfoot  
and little chance of return to a promise  
made by a school gate when the wind blew  
gently –  
    before and after love in a meadow.

## Driving Past London

*For Joanna*

Recently, I felt a heartbeat  
throb like a drumbeat  
and the whole day was full.  
I fiddled about with muse song  
to no avail. I saw you move  
through the streets, in black,  
in and out of the sun and  
into shadows – strange as new love.  
You seemed lithe,  
a missing young wind in feathers.  
With every step,  
you dropped a tone  
on the pavement, till  
an orchestra, full as a metaphor,  
had gathered round you.  
I drove on, away past London,  
to a place where night would come.

## Song Without End

I can still hear  
an old violin's impulse to grieve,  
the fall of a few worn-out berries  
and a time when I dared not  
speak my few half-cropped  
poems –

Amen!

## A Full Moon In Torremolinos

Mary knew a full moon in Torremolinos  
was risky, but with a first draft  
in her bones, she put up the chairs,  
set the wildlife free and was well  
on her way, before her husband's corpse  
could be removed from the sandpit.

She was in The Jolly Bull with pen and paper  
– doing it all for its own sake, after  
a hard landing in Malaga. Even if her husband  
weren't found, he'd have a reasonable chance  
with his maker and she would try to finish  
the poem she'd been letting herself in for  
since conception. She placed only one tequilla  
next to her page and focussed on a great line.

She could hear the spirits hunting  
through the first draught in her veins,  
and she was quickly adrift on a great leaf;  
almost totally forgetting her older German lover's  
last words: with tequilla, you warm inside  
and wear a hat outside. She checked her  
list of buttons and finished her first proof  
to her total satisfaction.

Mary was thinking of God

when a man, in uniform, floated another of the same  
into that empty space reserved for the memory  
of her dead mother. She wrote grave and visit  
just as a second man – a man versed in quarries  
and looking every bit the bulldozer,  
power-walked past a centre-back, as if  
he were on sick leave from a football stadium.

I've still got some duty-free  
and ample time for a fine line, said she  
stretching out on the beach under her  
Virgo sign. We have the sand all to ourselves  
and there's a digger picking me up at cockcrow,  
said he, long after he'd sinned no more.  
She kept her mind on more global things  
but sand still got in her hair  
and her pyjama bottoms were on their last legs.

Next morning, after the full moon had  
left its toll, he told her he was the risen Christ,  
resurrected from a sandpit in the west of Ireland.  
She considered putting her final draft on ice.

## Other Demons

The best gifts one could give a boy  
– it was felt –

were:

how to profit from a fighting cock,  
silence a virgin's lament, or walk  
to the city with the ease of a great dancer.

It would never be his duty to unstrap  
a brace of poems near a marketplace, or  
preach freedom from high sand dunes.

Women and children on foot  
were to remain soundless in place,  
walking to one side with tattered baskets.

On his death bed, black sloe seeds  
could fall from his heart  
into the lap of his faithful mistress.

He would not have seen the colour  
of wet leaves, nor smelled the dank air  
and other demons in a foreign place.

## Interflora

When Ute went to England  
on a darning course,  
she met lots of sheep farmers  
at village fairs. Her partner,  
Werner, couldn't come  
because of an important demo  
and anyway, her child  
– from her time with Lutz –  
was at the Steiner Schule.  
She knew rural English  
wasn't Queen's, so  
she talked a lot and didn't listen.

At all the fairs, there were  
sewing, knitting and darning classes;  
you only had to sign up. Ute  
was in her element. Then  
she met James – an Oxford man  
who'd taken to the hills  
in search of laylines and karma –  
and he took her to his cottage.  
He bore her o'er crystal waters  
and stitched and sewed till  
her tattered basket sang with pride.

He covered her fragile bones  
with herbs of the mountain  
and together they wove a new dress.

After a week's intensity, they concluded  
love was not all; there was music and  
there could be meditation and recurring light!  
He dropped her  
outside Interflora and she sent  
a few guilty roses home  
before returning to a deep sleep.

**II.**  
**At Home In My Shoes**



## Eimsbüttler Markt

From early on Saturdays, the market  
in Eimsbüttel is restless. There are ugly  
sisters roosting around candid civil servants;  
some out-of-work seamen; an Arab on  
a newspaper stand, and flowers and fruit  
manicured in Holland, Cranz and Israel.  
Hawkers and dealers trade quips and banter,  
while people from other galaxies exchange  
horoscopes, tchai-leaves and organic apples.

My old neighbour is shopping again:  
Kinder aus dem Haus. All business,  
with her old shopping bag and no faith in  
visitors. She showed me poems she had  
written when fruit was in her blood.  
They were soft words. She said:  
I must walk the streets again to strengthen  
my voice:

To the market,  
To the bus-stop,  
In the rain,  
In the haze,  
In the sun,  
In the fog,

To the dead  
of night  
by the great river  
under the  
stars.

I promised to tell her of my nomad friends.

One Saturday, I arrived early in an  
open carriage. I had planned to meet  
some nomads from up the Milky-Way.

They didn't show up, so I drifted over  
to a mirage and turned over a new leaf.  
Later that day, with sun out and about

and only a hint of a breeze, I whiled  
away an hour sifting therapists and  
others into bundles. I tried to interest

a woman in my ghosts. She said she'd  
stick to her own and she'd got  
a man from the East for fair weather.

## Kiltimagh

Kiltimagh used to be ill-shapen.  
It dressed up for processions  
and the cups from the top shelf  
came down for visitors. Rich men  
arrived home to fresh flowers and  
women, in pleats, read from the altar.  
The streets were adorned with  
stars and dead men and dead women;  
with wet kisses and aunts who  
had never kissed a local. Eros was  
out there in the fields among  
the cattle. To walk behind  
a cherished woman was as sinful  
as the chocolate skin of a belly-dancer.  
Boys and girls knew each other;  
the priest was the stranger.  
Proud men left and proud women  
stayed. They hung on to bits of  
cloud and dreams that often left  
them: till death do us part.  
Some stood at the same corner  
of the same bar for a hundred years,

longing for the day when the  
town would float away to China or  
Lisdoonvarna on the Nile. Others  
painted their portraits on pub walls  
and gave up talking. Teachers were  
gilt-edged and there were tinkers that  
never missed a horse fair in  
Ballinasloe or a fight in Knock.

The English cheque is done for;  
Laura Ashley has been sighted at  
the church door;  
traces of the ancient herring  
have been dug up;  
backbone is brought back  
from Lourdes, and  
girlfriends sleep soundly during  
soccer matches.

Everywhere, there are children  
of ghosts  
right out to the suburbs  
where  
lovers step into the sun.

## From The Munich Train

Around Würzburg, the wine rows  
are so straight and clean,  
their music must be dead.

I've just passed an ailing river,  
a disinfected road and  
a group of men in uniform.

It's October in lovely blue.  
An old barge slaps away  
at water; on the other side

a plough calms the valley;  
the village clock works and  
the black watch-tower is in place.

A few hang about, in chains,  
whispering important things.  
I wish those lines would go away.

## Home Birds

*For Rainer and Ruth on March 17, 1997*

In sixteen years, this city  
hasn't changed its underbelly.  
There've been new things:  
some lamps, muted gasps where  
old brick gives off new light –  
hardly ever miracles.

When seagulls glide up the river,  
I drink with a man from  
my country.  
What are you up to these days?  
he'll ask. I say  
I am planting wing-seeds  
in a dark room  
and beat hard against the wall  
during flying lessons.

A skinny woman gave such joy  
that her man built a set of sails  
for their new perambulator.  
The framework's remained steadfast,  
even though her man's hoisted  
sail after sail. They have a big family  
and enough sails for the open sea.

Then there are those winged sisters  
who can be so unpredictable.  
You stop them to ask the way  
but they're among the clouds.  
Come on down sisters! I chant.

You never did tell me what you work at?  
Planting wing-seeds is work:  
seeds close to the bone  
with all those flapping sisters  
and tears on my wet face.

They'd had geese he said,  
and a green patch and a dog  
that made the geese flap.  
He left after a Christmas dinner  
to follow a girl on a gate –  
a girl with soft thighs  
who had filled far-away hills  
with lyrical poems – with earth.  
The geese returned each year  
and her poems wore thin.  
She took him through the streets  
and was mistress of  
the finer tones – clay tones.

We went to a match on Saturday.  
The ball went wild  
and all the players were mad  
to get home before closing time.  
We had a sausage on the way  
to the pub; it was solid  
and filled our heads  
with the end of shapes to come.

One player fought for a goal  
that never was, and  
we both knew of a man  
who had died  
without a poem to his name.  
A friend goes to Clifden  
to sit among gravestones:  
wings full of names,  
people to fly to.  
Play the joker!  
the woman whispered  
before he went  
down to the seafront.  
Tales came up off the waves  
for a high-stool in Dublin.  
He left, three sheets in the wind,  
while travellers fought  
over a horse.  
The TV was showing pictures  
of his fatherland – a penalty  
that should never ever, ever!  
and a sister in full flight.

A little bird  
on the Liffey wall  
held its ground.

## A Hymn At Christmas

The man on TV is a politician.  
He says so himself. Just in  
from Europe and tail-wagging  
sweet messages at Christmas.  
He just loves to be home among  
real people. A simple man,  
he tells us; no passion, but  
a wife is a wife for all that.

He's got golf down to a tee. She  
holds a mirror to nature and  
crucifies the turkey: it's juices run  
riot, like unclean things. He's got  
twenty-two or twenty-three grown  
virgin daughters for Christmas  
dinner. Their breeders share giggles  
in the garden.

*I like Father John better, now  
that he's dropped touching  
in church. Gaudeamus Igitur!*

His permanent address is and  
will be: where my wife is.  
I focus my third eye on  
poodle powder and frills in  
Brussels, buy a gun, aim it  
at his heart and pop!  
It explodes like a ripe melon.  
To my horror, all the bits increase,  
multiply and fill the earth.

We've still got time to rescue our  
threatened maidenheads. The virgins  
gobble and he grins. His wife spreads  
turkey legs. The breeders are called in,  
and I turn both barrels on my third eye.

## A Prodigal Mother

She tells her class: Ireland has got four  
Nobel prize winners, no longer three  
and Seamus is the latest. Every night  
when the lights go down, she sits waiting  
for something to begin – perhaps to end.

She took her mother role away with her  
– she knows her daughter dreams of her  
ghost mother; the role won't go away.  
She uses it up on younger men and older men  
and she'll squeeze in a story of O' Flaherty, or  
Yeats for the brighter ones. She's a stranger  
here. She sees her daughter for the last time  
in every doorway – daily.

She went to Galway for the festival and  
to Wexford with her family, but  
she was a road-sailor with an empty  
diary and a bag full of photos. It began  
there. Life was lying dead in her gut.  
She bought a song book and a book of poems.  
She sang to her baby and read to her baby.  
She was two people in one room. She left  
to become one.

## Abschied

She wrapped up her things, packed them  
into a silver locket and left before all  
the embers had died. The wild flowers  
on the flaking wall of the opposite platform  
had their own sense of place; this time  
she saw them. Out there in her twenties,  
there'd be vagrant smells and words  
dipped into wine. Yes! It was late spring.  
The flowers were shadow-wet. They kept  
their fragrance to themselves, but she could see  
their patterns shaping her juices in a frenzy  
of evergreen and chance. An old woman  
caught her eye – Abschied!

A few others gathered like ordinary bundles,  
speaking as urgently and softly as schoolboys  
passing Virgil round the classroom.  
One corpulent person was bursting at the seams,  
while a soldier and his girl were turning words into flesh –  
she could feel her fingers snuggle up to themselves.

## Time Out

*To the memory of my father*

I've been dragging a leg  
for a week and I think  
more than I want to

think!

Thoughts seem to lie  
there like little touches:  
your new dress and the  
stink of unwanted beer  
behind closed curtains.

Cheers!

I smile at the Corkman  
who had wanted  
to throw me over the edge  
of the city, before he slipped.

A Hamburg woman, on  
a peace mission, died  
among bullets last week;

the headline said  
she had a lovely face.

And what of the old man  
who used to scrub his scars  
and talk faintly of his first wife?  
My loved one, he'd say.

Now I'm just tired  
and long to speak  
as my father used to.

## A New Language Later

*For Patrick Duffy*

I began a new language later and  
still don't know a second word for  
spate, spoke or the depth of a shadow.

I see people check ties and teeth in  
a job agency window. They face  
the same words at every  
interview; never their own.

Moses heard voices out of  
a burning bush. When my friend  
heard them, he was committed.

I often talked to myself as a child,  
found words in fields and furrows,  
made sense of croaking ponds and  
answered back. I never had to learn.

Words came, wild as weeds would  
or little threatened trees do, all windy  
and quaking. When I fell into water

screaming, I was understood; even  
our old dog raised a dog eye at my cry.

I've also lain stranded between lips  
with nothing to say. It's true!

## The Best Wells Are Deep

*For my brothers and sisters*

The diviner cycled easily, mostly away from rivers  
with rods lashed to his crossbar – a quiet man  
who never asked, but did get paid in cash and kind  
and by the sight of forty fresh pumps on the landscape.

Water was drawn to him and he to water.  
His name hung on the flight of a rod: the diviner!  
Resolute as a single note, he'd prowl and map  
field after field, till he struck the hardest vein.

Water was drawn to him and he to water.

Deep springs, or springs from rock.  
Cold, ice-cold water, water to be talked about.  
Time goes slowly around a holy well.

Here in Paris, at the airport, three men – Asian looking men –  
sit opposite. They drink.

They know everything about water, shots, shooting  
and guns buried. I'm listening for the flow and balance;  
for the deep slow breath of the man who didn't gather things  
about water; for the water in rice. *The best wells are deep.*

*There'll be no flood,* he'd repeat. Water comes  
shaped into pipe shapes, or tap shapes, or trough shapes.

What's left leaves traces in land-dips, or finds river currents  
to ease out into with the grace of a beautiful woman.

The water diviner does small things. He leaves  
a water song and there's no struggle. Water is  
drawn to him and he to water.

A silent thought.

## Kulturaustausch in Vogelsang *(Mecklenburg)*

It was late evening when  
I first drove in to Vogelsang.  
From the easy swing of the road  
the yellow windows chopped and changed  
with every bend. I stopped  
and stood by the house to  
let the land smells into my blood.  
The evening hung about  
the stark and lone countryside:  
a tom-cat crept round the doorpost.

I went in to Kulturaustausch.  
There were epics in the air.  
Some were tired, others  
half in love with death, or  
reviving God. When we sang  
there was a grief in our songs  
that made us *one*. Each of us  
must have thought of home: of  
a hamlet, in Ireland or Mecklenburg,  
with only one phone; of old people;  
of empty cottages or sounds  
we feared. I speak another language.

The sun came up, groping and  
ashen on the front wall. *Abschied!*  
I drove through villages where  
people were digging foundations  
for new houses and new icons.  
This Mecklenburg is solemn.

## The Butcher Family

The man's club-foot had always kept him out of things, like a square peg, or a smell. While other children were sailing through sparkling childhood, he limped. There were no epics or heroes at home. A saint offered a life of halos and blood sacrifice; he saw a chance in a mirror. It prompted him to serve-his-time with a butcher and make a down payment on a church pew. He yearned to be a clean butcher; a butcher with a wife and a shop without miracles. He fevered through snow with a woman. She had a complex. It held them together till they married. They had no home, but all the trappings – dry weeping.

Over the years, the tears built up like brittle undergrowth and came to nothing. His wife sold what he slaughtered and their son, cold as wrapping paper, grew into a taste for blood. Sheep dozed and huddled as the days picked into their numbers.

The son was a humane killer; a tidy shot.  
Their meat was clean; good meat, without  
love or traces of the sun. The butcher's wife  
exchanged a thousand thanks at the till, while  
the boy warmed to voices in his head.

He was learning songs of praise for  
the other side. His father sang from his pew.

## The Blind Girl

The door opened  
and the tip-tap  
of the blind girl  
worked its way  
through an obstacle course  
of bar stools  
to sit beside me.  
She exchanged words  
with her stick,  
mentioned work  
in passing, but  
her eyes lit up  
when she talked  
of the wonderful scenery  
in parts of England.



One man lived close to the bank  
of a great river. He saw birds  
that had seemed like prey  
in his youth. In later years,  
he knew their colours, felt when it  
was going to rain and took his partner  
to where their rainbow came  
down to earth in a chorus.  
He placed her many sweet names  
on the air, and her feet were  
strengthened by each name.

They lived gladly  
through a time  
when the skull was narrow;  
when there was less room  
for the tongue.

## Philip

Philip, out of Sidney,  
is sixty-two and sedentary.  
He's had a family. Here,  
in Broken Hill, he's  
the wise Englishman  
who knows everything, but  
how to avoid beer-halls  
and dice. He's got a pension,  
out of narrowing arteries,  
for church dinners and  
a hostel bed. One morning  
he took me for a walk,  
showed me a little wound  
and told me of his children.  
Behind a church, he turned  
his pockets out. They were full  
of cuttings from the past.

## Cill Aodain Graveyard On The Pollagh River

Cill Aodain graveyard's back on its feet –  
headstones are standing better than ever,  
bits of history are tacked onto walls; not enough  
for a talkative village, but enough for now.  
It's a clean monument. It pulls in the sun, but  
it's lost its flair for weeds and our hunt for  
relatives under growth – My great grandfather's  
plain to be seen; his memory needs a touch up.

This used to be  
an important place.

I had the monks from my father, fairy funerals  
from a neighbour and jackdaws for fear.  
I heard a fiddler from far away, and saw  
ordinary young fishermen swop lean worms  
on a Sunday. The pattern's darkening:  
there's open-air mass once a year,  
the eel and moor-hen lost out to a drainage scheme,  
the hundred yards down to the meeting of the Pollagh  
and the Glore, before they went on to India, used to be  
forbidding and swampy – *would you believe it!*

and a big horse cleared a fence, never to be seen again –  
its owner had tinkered with blackthorn, said a child  
from its fairy tree.

The soft elements  
  have become sullied and foul.  
We lit bonfires  
  on St. John's night!

Once when I was fishing, a king sailed past.  
I was busy with the one that got away, so  
I only nodded. The king called on me to follow.  
I knew I would when the river level dropped  
and history was tacked onto walls.

Exile is getting easier.

## From Cill Aodain To Killeenin

*Mise Raifteiri an file / I am Raftery the poet.*

No house. Nothing, but the hearthstone remains.

A whitethorn has become Raftery's bush. *Child,*  
*run and tell your teacher, before the flame dies!*

Old and young on their knees – along lines of  
rosary beads – would sing Cill Aodain between  
decades to lessen the nausea of weak faith, or  
the strut of a red-eyed schoolmaster.

His name is there: Anthony Raftery  
in The Poet's Graveyard in County Galway.  
Years ago, my father planted saplings from  
Cill Aodain in Craughwell and a small group sang

to the vision of the blind bard. They were  
respectful, as if waiting for tales  
of his withered eyes, Taffe's horse, Mary Hynes,  
or even a love song to fill in the long scar from

his hearthstone in Cill Aodain  
to his gravestone in Killeenin.

## Hands

Some grow before my eyes  
and seem to creep like spider-plants  
deep into memories.

Others, sculptured and filed,  
lie flat like a heap of stones  
talking to themselves.

This morning I watched  
a pair of hands chattering  
like busy beaks among berries.

## Moon Phases

My son tells me stories  
of men on the moon.

I remember the man  
in the moon  
lighting up playful fox-cubs  
on a hill at harvest time.

## A Blackthorn In Frost

A blackthorn in frost is sullen and black with  
a few frosted sloes to add variety to its blackness.  
On this night, the Pooka's left his Rath to  
dance on eggs in hay, or to sour milk on  
the farmer who, instead of whispering to  
the fairy wind, looked to his wife in reproach.

Fairies will defend their trees and loosen their  
winds in black dog shapes and wicked forms.  
Oh yes, we do have fairies, a young woman  
cried out playfully, then stepped into a  
slipstream of darkness on the night before  
her wedding. She would not want for sweet herbs,  
lovely absurdities, or wisdom in old age.

They are the little people of Rathes and Lisses  
who inhabit the fairy trilogy of oak, ash and thorn.  
They slip into the human heart through gaps in  
resolution and good deed, and kindle the countryside  
with pranks, gusts of mischief, or hurtful spells.



## Haunting In Mayo

*For Ollie Burke*

I'm a man about town with my window down  
the length and breadth of the street.  
Up down, hands around what's handy  
and a full tank for the call when it comes.  
At large, I supply virgins with experience,  
never on the coast – the interior is deep  
and slow and I've had my elbow out for  
twenty years. I've got tall tales for the yank:  
there are babies in the bog and mothers in  
America. That's not tall. Father Mick's the man!  
built a house for his mother, he did.

I'm a man about town,  
I've got my window down.

I talked to a furze after closing-time when  
urinating, and saw spirits spurting slurry  
till the horizon blazed. I urinated more  
and swore I'd drink in a stranger village  
where dogs still chased cars and it's summer  
for victims of house-high shadows: the long  
and short of social welfare.

A bouncer'd think twice at home, or as far away  
as Germany, or even America where they tear up  
Route 66 with elbows all in place and a  
deadly mission round the eyes. I'm small time,  
the length and breadth of the street – from  
village to village. Always alone. Girls scatter  
in a blaze of feathers and when I swivel, they fall  
one by one.

I stopped for a drink by a great river and  
the panting fish were floating. They'd come up  
for air. Big men, on the bank, sang  
The Blue Danube. I put the boot down.

A holy man was standing on a hill spraying  
all the colour away. *Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall possess the land.* The auctioneer  
was not sure, but the holy man continued  
spraying.

I'm a man about town,  
I've got my window down.

I've been working on my own grave for years –  
digging.  
Girls trip past and ask: *What's your name handsome?*  
*Paul*, I say. *Are you the saint?* I dig on.

*Better to marry than to burn.* I dig deeper  
with my elbow out.

The holy man is happy. He's sprayed most of the colour  
off the hill. *God created the world.* All in a day's work.  
He swears all the colour will be gone before Sunday.  
*Praise the Lord!*  
*Lord, I am not worthy,* said the poor woman with  
endless kids the length and breadth of the street.

Raifteiri an file was blind, but he covered Cill Aodain  
in red and black berries.

I hang about the post-box in search of news.  
Nothing!  
I turn the corner to where men abound  
and my ears go haywire:  
Haven't seen a pig for years,  
Or a carrot on the loose,  
Or a proud turnip out of plastic,  
Or a house without a lawn,  
Or a top shelf without weedkiller,  
Or even a top dog.  
When Mrs O'Brien's mule got stuck  
in the bog, she left it there.

I've got my window down, my foot off the juice.  
The neighbour, with the new bike, is talking again.  
The bog road is coming back. A witch was sighted  
on an outlying broom. *What are you having yourself?*  
*That witch'll do damage. Burn the bitch!*

I'm still a man about town with my window down  
the length and breadth of the street.

## At Home In My Shoes

*For Rike*

Even without shoes, days on the school road  
were not unkind to my feet, but I still stuck to  
the margins. The master's car fighting the hill

told us the time and kept our tiny faces  
taut. *I renounce thee Satan! Pride*  
*comes before the fall*, said the priest in

black. Bless me father: *Pure as driven snow:*  
*Hail Mary full of grace* till my feet began to  
dance and itch for their fill of earth. Song

was easier than prayer. I could sing from  
a hill-fort untouched by the love of God,  
the drone of curates or a saving grace.

I met a witch with nothing to hide. She gave me  
stones, rich curses and words to stay the wind.  
I learned to see love-knots opening and closing

in season, heard the curlew and grew to love  
the tatter of weeds. I was standing on firm ground.  
The hill path was free of sceptre and blackthorn.

The woman anointed her feet and I followed suit.

### **III.**

## **The Road Out**





# Fischmarkt

I.

Manfred grew up  
on a farm  
and he bore  
all his freshness  
to the city, married,  
had children and sold  
the juiciest fruit  
on the market.

Early one Sunday  
Manfred's voice faltered  
and died and he went  
back to the soil.

His son took over  
but fruit rotted  
at his touch.

II.

Once inside this window,  
amid accordeon music,  
I looked out  
to the farthest seagull  
and heard it call down  
in my words and all the sky  
became a white-grey flurry  
and the blood inside my heart  
swelled and I bit into it  
before plunging deep  
beyond the Fischmarkt.

I often take my pen here  
to sketch seagulls.

III.

On this and every  
Sunday morning  
the beggar sat  
with outstretched hand.

People filed past  
but it was much later  
that somebody noticed  
his hand was stiff.

IV.

I'm a bundle of nerves.  
I've seen into a poem  
where my boat ran aground  
on the street below.  
I cry land ahoy  
from my crow's-nest  
on the fourth floor.  
Passers-by shake their heads  
when my fat neighbour  
tells them the truth.  
They tear up my boat  
and leave me stranded.

I shall offer sacrifice  
'til the boatman comes.

## Zeitgeist

I sometimes need a place  
where Zeitgeist  
has another meaning:  
a little place  
where the skeleton  
of a rusting car  
lies easily among  
charred whin-bushes,  
and  
I need a house  
on shifting sands  
with windows to the wind  
and a pen  
to suck in secrets  
out of the black earth.

I could live there  
with red and black berries,  
with ghosts in naked bushes  
after November, timeless  
till spring. My Zeitgeist.

## Door Through Time

This particular uncle was timid  
with a slight limp that must have grown  
out of sadness.

He was a teacher  
but not in that way.  
He used to climb down  
into our stolen wilderness  
and among centuries of involuntary tales  
he'd stand on The Hill.  
We'd listen to the victims of the Puca,  
peer into the sealed cave under the High Fort  
and on down to Thady's headstone  
in Cill Aodain graveyard by the river.

In puddles among the rushes  
under the Easter moon  
I saw footprints of the Poet.

He'd often stand long,  
as trapped in something  
far away.  
As he had come he went,  
screaming; his voice  
only half used.

Those hills and bushes  
though smaller now,  
still dance.

## Fountains In Osterstraße

*For Patrick Duffy*

I sometimes wish  
Osterstraße had fountains  
like Aix-en-Provence.  
Maybe then my vowels  
would take on wings  
and I could stand singing  
down the language of  
the man who agreed to love.  
I could contemplate a mouth,  
hold out my lips, or  
listen to Pavarotti.  
There would be water leaking  
through rusting gutters  
in the west of Ireland,  
always something to drink  
and a soft breeze  
to carry dampness  
even further.

Just over there, where  
I'd like my fountain to be,  
I saw a man dying for a drink  
and I couldn't find my tongue.

## Alsterschwimmhalle

Shortly after twelve  
on a November Saturday  
I am sitting sunken  
and fully clothed  
in a deck chair  
by a swimming pool

The windows are fogged  
and there are boards  
from one to ten  
to test the daredevil  
and the diver.  
A life-saver  
sits perched like a priest,  
in indifference.

Down at the other end,  
there are whirlpools  
for the lazy heart  
and browning rooms  
for moth-eaten skin.

The human is at its worst  
around the water. Shoe-horned  
into flimsy fashion, it flaunts  
its forties fat fecklessly,  
while children bob about  
like corks.

One hour later,  
forced to my feet by  
circulation and pending lunch,  
I take up position  
by a pining plant, rooted  
in a pot like a schoolchild  
at its desk.

My son out there  
is full of the joys  
of nine years.

## Dreamtime Dying...!

*For Joachim Matschoss*

When an Aborigine,  
in hunger,  
took a cow's life,  
he was shot. The law  
went free.  
A shark was sentenced  
to death  
when a diver's leg  
was lost.

And today  
articles call for rights  
for Aborigines.

There are no Songlines  
in the city, but clusters  
of silent people, bandaged  
around bars, or standing  
like stolen bundles,  
waiting,  
    waiting:  
a mother stares  
past the scream  
in her child's eyes,  
waiting,  
    waiting.

On Sydney harbour  
three men play didgeridoo  
dreamless  
and down to a dollar.

But let me repeat!  
We did our best,  
built a church  
and gave them beads  
to pray with,  
waiting,  
    waiting,  
for social welfare  
in a turning room  
where a mother frowns  
to recall the birth  
of her child,  
waiting,  
    waiting,  
while the judge upbraids:  
concise,  
... do you come from?  
Home... address?  
    There was silence.  
The man saw sad sand  
trickle through his fingers  
and he heard the call  
of his Songline.

## Walls

I remember the old people  
of Ireland say,  
Those were the days  
when caves were full  
of fairies, and hills  
leaked out stories.

I lay my head  
against a wall  
in Hamburg, listening  
with outstretched hope  
to mute concrete.

Those were the days

I attended your funeral.  
Close to a weeping tree  
your boy stared, aghast  
at his birthmarks; your wonderful  
eyes in his pocket.

I came home  
in middle years  
and scraped the hills  
for word  
    of tales.

## The Piper

The piper had no order  
in his gait. He walked  
into town and set down  
on a waste patch.

Cut off, like a leper,  
he sat dangerously free,  
listening to star-coated notes  
as if forever.

And when he played,  
the children burst into blushes  
and child-song.

Clusters of garbled voices  
rumbled down sidestreets  
and congealed under signs.  
Curtains were drawn and replaced.

A kind of nervousness settled.  
Dogs snarled face-to-face  
below the square-pump.

It was late evening  
as the piper blew shapes  
into the air,  
out of reach of the leaders.  
The children played and danced,  
reached up, plucked shapes  
and built dreams into figures  
and happy endings.

The leaders could smell  
a fragrance and the stench  
of their sacred books.

They twisted inspired notes  
into drum-beat rhythms  
and struck with garb and incense;  
the town closed down.

When the church-bells rang,  
a long No  
from the children and very old  
hung on the low air.

The leaders huddled in prayer,  
to ghosts, and set forth  
with blazing dogs  
to track down their young.

A clear shot  
rang out.

They embraced  
their beaten children  
and were proud.

## The Widow

He died  
and she said  
his dying  
had been like  
the malignant emptying  
of her cherished  
room.

She is fiercely

alone.

## The Road Out

I lay on the verge  
tuned into Athlone, but heading  
for London and beyond.  
There was to be no return.  
I held out my hand, until  
a French palmist showed me  
clear lines. We exchanged addresses  
and I've never looked back.

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