

DIALOGUE IN FADING LIGHT

PHILIP CASEY

(et)



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new and selected poems

PHILIP CASEY

'Philip Casey remains always and ever a poet of great powers'

Thomas Lynch

Dialogue in Fading Light

Philip Casey's publications include the verse collection *The Year of the Knife, Poems 1980-1990*, published by Raven Arts Press in 1991. He has also written three novels: *The Fabulists*, which won the inaugural Kerry Ingredients Novel of the Year; *The Water Star* and *The Fisher Child*, both published by Picador. A member of Aosdána, he initiated and maintains the websites *Irish Writers Online* and *Irish Culture Guide*. His personal website is www.philipcasey.com

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DIALOGUE IN FADING LIGHT
First published in Ireland in 2005

by New Island,
2 Brookside,
Dundrum Road
Dublin 14
www.newisland.ie

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ISBN 1 904301 8 1 9

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by New Island
Cover design by New Island
Printed in the UK by J.H.Haynes & Co. Ltd

New Island received financial assistance from
The Arts Council (An Chomhairle Éalaíon), Dublin, Ireland



10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for Karina

acknowledgements are due to *The Atlanta Review* Georgia, USA; *Pivot*, New York; *The Whoseday Book*, Dublin; *Something Beginning with P*, Dublin; *The New Orleans Review* ; *Cyphers*, Dublin; *The Stinging Fly*, Dublin; *Forgotten Light* , Memory Poems Anthology, Dublin; *human rights have no borders*, amnesty international, dublin; *From Inniskeen to Parnassus*, Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan; *The Scaldy Detail*, Enniscorthy, Co Wexford.

The original version of *The Windfall Oak* is included in *Booking Passage*, by Thomas Lynch (London, Jonathan Cape, 2005).

Certain of the poems were written for *festschriften* in honour of Pearse Hutchinson, Leland Bardwell, Theo Dorgan, Thomas Kinsella, and James Liddy

with gratitude to Dermot Bolger, great writer, quiet enabler, steadfast friend; to Aosdána, for keeping my head above water; and to Nora's House, courtesy of Thomas Lynch, where some of these poems were written.

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My Masculine Skin

I would as soon not shave or shower.
I'd rather remain pre-Victorian,
and leave my hair for birds to nest in.
It would be good to lie on in bed
for weeks, letting the sheets slowly rot,
a sprawl of worthless books quarter read,
the mould on the dishes getting drier.

However! Happy as a pig in flight,
though still disdaining deodorant,
if I smell only
of my acidic masculine skin
and not of a stinking netherworld
I would wallow in,
it's because you draw me to the light.

Making Notes

make your own!

A b e l l struck by a fingernail

The *fl - u s h - i n g* b l o w of a humpback whale

The s t r o n g hum of a powerline

The g r o a n of a stationary train

The c r a c k of a many-ringed falling tree

The s u c k of smooth mud on a boot

An arid bush b r u s h e d with a stick

The *clock-de-deh* dance of chisel and rock

The *click-click* of high heels along a street

The p u s h of a knife through fresh breadcrust

The *chick-peck* of a child's kiss

The *rub! rub!* of sheep grazing in the mist

Sunlight of Love

The fan
slowly turns on its axis
to Mahler's *Loneliness*
in Autumn
(in my earphones),

undulating,
keeping time

with the music's
planetary rhythm.

The graceful blades
cool a man
who lies comatose
and alone,
a degree
from his mortal end.

A hawk alights
on the windowsill,
a portent
from myth,

the shapeshifting
raven
waiting for the hero
who has fought too well,
his wounds
outnumbering
his nightmares.

Ancestral
wraiths
pass through him
in procession.

In their thousands,
to the shifting sands
of violins,
as the contralto
soars,

they come from
as far
as his third eye sees,
along
a spiral path,
full of light
and joy.

The hawk
flies away.

The sick man wakes.
The fan bows to him
like a sainted nun.

Sunlight fills the room
with love.
The contralto
tears
my heart into
quivering strips
of understanding.

Hope is born
of hope that had died,
purified
of childhood fears,
holding new breath
in a blasted landscape.

Wild mountain flowers
drip
their
dew
onto
the
sterile
floor,

the teeming
drop
beginning
a stream
that will form
the first river
in all creation
flowing into
the first ocean.

Rough tea leaves
from a painted tin
make the first drink
that is not poison.

Bread
made
with full grain

by a woman's hands
quells hunger
at last,
and forever more.

The hawk
is back,
black
in the setting sun.

The fan
is gone.
The man it cooled
is gone,
taken away
on a gurney.

Dialogue in Fading Light

The moon sits in the chilled zenith.
Emptied of everything but your grace,
night long I stare at its mask of light.

I recall ice dripping into a drain.
The drain is deep and the sound faint;
the measure of the drip is ominous.

Our sun is many times the size of the earth,
and red giants like Beltegeuse dwarf the sun,
and for all I know Beltegeuse is a mote
in the scale of Creation. Yet we belong.

The eye craves rhythm and colour.
There's no healing or ease
in a vista where nothing coheres.

You renewed me by losing yourself
to our deepening dialogue in fading light.
To stardust we shall return.

A pink moon rose as we parted,
its presence over the rooftops a focus,
a celestial light through the dust of pollution,
composing all that had been in isolation.

The Warm Stone

Beneath the starlit sky
after the heat of the day,
we are talking quietly
of beliefs
which matter to us.

You're seated on the porch,
wrapped in a shawl
against the chill.
I'm slouched
in a wicker chair.

For a precious interval
we have found the ease
of hard-won simplicity.

As when, in a heat haze,
a butterfly, like a hand
conducting a silent *adagio*,
comes to land on a stone,
then is still as the stone.

Oasis

I try to be discreet
but when we meet
my whole being
gives me away.
After all these years

you are everything.
Think of a camel
enduring the desert for weeks
until it arrives at a pool
at the heart of soothing green.
Think of how deeply it drinks!

A Page Falls Open

A page falls open
and the reader's name
is there.

It always has been
and will be always.

Over the years
he opens the book,
wondering about doom
and heaven,
how they fade into
each other,
like a sensual woman
walking into the darkness
on a beach, leaving her man
to listen to the tide
as best he can.

Making Space

Sometimes, when looking at the stars
on a clear night in summer,
I wonder about light
and the energy that keeps me upright.
What does the Principle
of the Conservation of Energy
say, and does it apply to me,
and when I die
will I be transformed into a thought
travelling at the speed of light?

Perhaps you will turn me on at the flick
of a switch, to bathe your smile
while you nod off over a book.
My light and how lovely you look
will describe a time and place
as you reach out, making space
in your calm sleep
for your lost black sheep
whose molecules keep your bedroom lit.
I will burn for you all night.

Body Language

In the bright sun your lovely body
seems so light
as you go into the garden and hesitate
over which flowers to choose.
I marvel at how you've forgotten
you exist,
alive only to your aesthetic.

I leave, carrying your gift as if a token
of a night we might spend as one again
but for unspoken reasons - its scent a potent
reminder of one more pungent and heady.
Days accumulate to no perceptible avail,
and our passion, which amounts to a false trail,
goes into itself, quieted by empathy and affection.

Waking

for Agnes, Margit, Teresa, Jean, Maura i.m.

On the octagonal mountain
the blinding, powdery snow
entombs a woman of forty.

Into the octagonal valley
water falls all summer
and at noon on the 6th of June

A child's yellow gansey jibs
above the thunderous pool -
then leaps to a parachute fall.

The Judas Mind

There he lies, half-naked and lost,
chained by a drip and catheter,
the friend who became a stranger.

He struggles within a vacant past,
and, childlike, calls out my name
as if I was not beside him:

‘Frannie, don't leave me.
Not now, not now.’
Never more alone, or more tired,

I weep dry tears for the unsired,
and rage at what might have been.
What I should feel is pity;

but his sadness is mainly
a lack of chemical, wasted
by age and illness, and I cannot

conceive of his distress.
My life's companion is gone,
his place taken by skin and bone

and a plea that's an echo
of my name from another time.
This is an ending without end,

and I cannot bury him,
although I have mourned his death
for eighteen years, with every breath.

Trashed

Our culture everywhere feverishly pushes its wares
which revert to trash that will never decline.

There is no respite; every particle is infested
with profit which devours us as we consume.

The candles in churches are electric, burning power
extracted from fuels which sully Creation.

The light by which I write these lines does the same.
Corrupted by comfort, we collude with what we abhor.

When, in the delirium of commerce, the sublime
is hawked to market the superfluous,
that which is marvellous and hallowed is lost,
until we are alone with need, and motion, and time.

The Blue Tent

Light filters through the blue sheet,
like it did once as you lay
beside your loved one. Then,
you raised it with bended arms
till it bellied like a tent
in the Arabian Nights, wherein
the warm light floated,
you both floating in it
and in your laughter.
That was free of its past and future,
unfettered bodies and emotion
flowing in the blue tent scented
by her presence, when you saw each other
differently for those flushed moments
that lodged in memory, forever.
Wakening slowly into the strange,
you stare at your bended arm that lies
so motionless, so heavy, and detached,
you wonder if it has been severed
during the night by a dreaming axe -
a thought no stranger than once,
as you turned to touch
the face of your beloved
pain held you in its iron jaws.
You stared at her in surprise.

The Time of No Time

In the two thousand and tens,
when mass diasporas
were signs of the time,
and the way of our lives was determined
by fuel profiteers
and apostate corporations,
the local oracles of boom
poured the dividend of our labours
into logical concrete rivers
that flowed to our dormitory towns.

It was when an ancient, holy place
mattered less
than minutes lost
in a race to the next frustration.
Driven out of our own estate
by the profits of the nouveau-elite,
daily we spent hours
in the isolation units of our cars,
stuck in the loop of the round trip.
It was the time of no time.

Lynwood, Wet Summer

Sixteen rectangles, sixteen window panes,
through these

I see a bank of white roses, and
behind those, an elder tree, its fruit
 burgeoning.

Beyond that, a wild garden:
apple trees, red roses, pink roses,
lilac.

Rhubarb
hidden under convolvulous –
that everywhere
in the wet summer, and
snails everywhere. A voracious plague,
they seem to crave the lilac,
but the tiny young are on
almost every apple leaf.
The sun breaks through,
lights the crown of the apple tree.
Cloud, mostly grey,
has dulled the flowers and trees,
the walls and granite steps –
this sliver of the world
through sixteen panes –
for many weeks now.

Hamburg Woman's Song

Time has gone slowly by the hour,
by the year it has gone like a day
and you and I are of a sudden old.
But behind my bright eyes, papa,

I will always be a girl of ten,
and you, a grown man of twenty
when you cheated the dreaded police
who wanted to take me away.

I was born in a time and place
to a woman I look like now,
but fear grew like mould on bread
in my mother's love for her slow girl.

I remember the sirens and cobbles,
then waking at dawn by a stream
where you left me with a countrywoman
and time went slowly by the hour.

She who was my mother
died in the Hamburg fire,
and he who was my father
never came back from the east.

My hands hardened and my bones grew long.
I trusted what I could not understand
until one morning you came up the road
and happiness changed my face.

I am a woman of Hamburg
who walked to the hungry city

side by side with my new father.
I have lived here till this day.

The Question

Will you remember
that white-cold day
when you were a girl of three
when you tobogganed downhill
with your mother?
Will you remember that thrill?
And will you remember
that when the sledge
crunched to a halt
and the world was still,
you turned
and looked uphill
at me and asked your mother:
'Will he come on our sledge with us?'
When your mother said no, you asked:
'Did you ask him?'

Now, as the train glides
through the white-cold country,
the blades of the windmills
turning silently
in the white fields,
I remember the question
I will remember when I am old.
'Did you ask him?'

And Yet Again, Farewell

- for Mairéad, i.m.

The Old World is confining, the New -
a giddy expanse, scarred and various,
but pulsating in its purpose,
its vast, *laissez-faire*, individual grasp.
You go to ally your energies with
the tough dream of eluding a dead end.
And we know there is only so much time.

With each shift in the year I lose a friend,
lured away from parochial Ireland.
I drink with you to two worlds or three; drive
lost country roads after the pubs have closed,
or to a film through a timeless snowfall;
or gasping, just catch the last frantic bus
into the stretching shadows of the past.

Starling

A green net wheels across a screen
in the pattern certain starlings follow
when they flock before taking off
for the south.

A mathematician has plotted their flight,
as if she had nothing better to do,
knowing the starlings will oscillate
and skim, regardless of calculation.
It gives her a sense of lightness,
as if by juggling her figures she might
grow wings, wavering between choice,
yet flying true to the destination.

What compels her is how they synchronise,
as if they were mobiles of the sky,
a geometry evolving to shadow continents.
'The computer is to the mathematician
what the camera was to the artist,'
she mutters, as if she has coined a maxim,
watching movement and changing shape -
how the equations vary and repeat.

When she was a child she would watch,
entranced, as homing pigeons wound down
their journey before the apartment tower.
For her the sight was a musical notation.

The memory returns like a bar from a song
as she presses a key and a colony of figures
perch on a screen, tense with potential.
The net stretches tight in agreement.

As if she has left her body and intellect
behind, she feeds a cluster of formulae,
which may not make sense, into the computer,
and her study darkens with the noise
of thousands of wings, of wheezing,
chuckling and clicks, of whistling, coughs
and kisses, and a bewildered flock
blunders into the room through the screen.

‘I saw a queen in the clouds and she was myself.
Emblazoned on my thighs were triple spirals;
on my arms were stars; on my forehead the eye
of a bird.’

Into Whiteness

Winter, and green apples still unripe.
A madness even in the seasons.
The sun, like an anaemic orange
throws a watery light on an earth
as cold as the linoed bedrooms
of the poor. The seagulls will never starve
but they clash, ill-tempered, in the bright,
tingling air. A cat shivers in an
abandoned cul-de-sac, its instinct
to scavenge frozen.

In a musty bed the body of a woman
cold and stiff in death, its stench
clambering drunkenly onto the solidified morning.
Her only grandchild will visit her in two days time
with flowers to brighten her room a little;
a good, thoughtful girl who will age
within ten seconds into whiteness,
like the century

Toledo, Encore

O Toledo, I am parched
beneath your Moorish arches.
It's too cold a morning
to wake abruptly from a dream.

My love bit my lip in anger
when I looked after
everyone but her,
fulfilling bogus obligations;

but I could not free
myself to be with her.

O Toledo, I am parched.
My sense of sensual self
ebbs to a vacant point.

There was a time
when I could feel
in gracefully spoken sentences.

Toledo, you have done for me,
it's too cold a morning
to wake abruptly from a dream.

I cannot ask of another
what she cannot give,
when all I have to give
is my fullness of her.

No wonder if she turns away
in anger when I wake.

O Toledo, I am cold
in your Moorish station,
waiting for the outward train
that will never come.

All I want is happiness
for my beloved.

I have nothing left to give
as I grow old.
My love for her has stolen
all I knew and owned.

The Freedom of June

A buried gun has rusted for years
somewhere between the apple trees.
Washing hangs from the orange line,
awaiting bodies or a strong wind.
A rose hidden by weeds releases
its musky perfume to the snails,
to the cloudless suns that shine
on a yellow carpet of dandelions.

A Charter for Idlers

Before they came, you were fine.
You still buzz, shuffling along,
painting a wall blue one day,
another saffron, the next,
if you care to, which you do.
This is a model, not of
being occupied, but of trusting
the morning, your nuzzling brush
finding a new route across
the wall for you to ponder.

An active exploration,
a harvesting profession,
even if they nod, putting
you down as a charlatan,
and perhaps especially then.
It's a charter for idlers,
they suggest without saying
so, unaware that every
point of your sable and stroke
is an apprentice angel.

When darkness is for us all
inevitable, whereas
light is not; when all true
colour ends in black, you need
to discover the unseen
colour of the wall, to feel
joyous tension in the wrist
as it blooms behind the brush,
like the fresh trail of a snail
in moonlight would stagger you.

But as they lead you away
sunlight catches an eyelash
and flares it a glistening
scarlet, for a fine second.
You hold your breath deep,
as if the glister is oxygen.
To leave your walls behind you
and bring them at the same time:
this is the gift that love gives
to the lover, in the end.

An Indian Dreams of the River

I can no long smell freedom on the river.

A woman's life is always hard, but at least
I had my teeth, then. My smile was famous
in the village.

They have polluted my river with the burning leather
of their jackboots.

At night, when the fireflies eat my brain,
I think of how they broke my husband,
bone by white bone.

Curse by obscene curse they raped me,
clutching José's swollen eyelids open
to see our shame.

I cannot eat fish anymore because they remind
me of their eyes.

Sleep comes like a caravel of *conquistadores*,
gleaming Toledo bayonets flecked with blood.

Train to Westport

Startled, you glance at the handsome African:
his fine, delicate head, his skin the purest silk
which unwittingly brushes against your aura.
Your pale disquietude moves me, and I infer
that you are revealed to yourself by his beauty.

As if to taunt you, he leaves quickly at Athlone
and doesn't pass our window for a last glimpse.
The train drones to Westport, oblivious to loss.
You spot the sun setting behind Croagh Patrick,
making of it a blue, slow-breathing pyramid.

Thirst

Revealing its depth, the sky might open,
its longed-for torrents like you imagine
blood roaring over the tiny swimmer
in your brain that you now discern
as yourself.

You continue beyond this double vision,
to where a man you knew could not take
a deep breath and his back arched,
and
he stayed like that until his time was up.
You try your damndest to find acceptance
as you see it was all the poor man could do.

You stand across the dust-strewn road
from the saloon,
and think again how some men are obsessed.

Yes, yes, yes
he was dying for a drink but couldn't take a deep draught,
the drink to end all drinks (because the river was dry),
and you walk on, and stumble through the sparse grass,
scattering seed on the sealed earth, crushing flowers
that will bloom nowhere else but in this blinding colour,
further into the centre of the city where the slums
were cleared and nothing built in their place.

The light breaks your vision; fragments of children
shimmer away from where they run and stop,
and tumble and skip - one brilliant evening
and they've turned away from childhood –
and haunted, you find a mound like his grave

and dash your desiccated boot against it,
and as you weep you glance up at the concrete
and glass officeblock where the bevelled glass
is a burning amber in the setting sun,
and a lone cleaner comes to the window,
at one with her task, and you stare at her
as if she is the key to what has driven you here.

Staring at the Phone

‘This is the voicemail
of extension 13771.
The subscriber
to extension 13771
has not activated
the extension.
Have a nice day.’

Mourning

Things happen. Everyday things happen
or I make them happen - some good, some bad,
and often, when I feel like this,
there's a knock on the door, and it isn't you.
It's some salesman, or a collector for charity.
The phone rings. Somebody wants me to do
something for them, and I do it for you.
I do it and it turns out to be interesting
and I meet nice people who are fun.
Things are looking up.
After years I've come into
a little money and some foreign travel.
Things happen at speed now - some bad,
mostly neutral, a few good, and I store them away
to relate every detail when you come back.
I want to tell you everything when you come back.

Figurehead

The consumed turf nestles in the dying fire.
As one sees shapes, or the face of Christ
in clouds, I make out the outline of a man
whose body is thrust forward, as on a prow.
Intense with a calorific glow, he wears a beret
and his mouth is wide with an urgent message.
Along his body there are cavities of red heat
already grey at the edges,
and his eye harbours a restless flame.
He has much to think about in a short time.

White Horse

Nights in a hospital cot:
beyond its bars
a great toy horse
that a child's breath
could rock.

A crab blindly crawls
through blood,
to devour marrow
until the bone is hollow.

There are coloured rings
above the door –
the rings of Saturn:
space falling inward
on a pillow
in dimmed light.

A radium machine hums.
Thousands of Röntgens
are aimed at rampant cells,
burning them and the flesh
which conceals them
down to the bone.

On dirt-tracks
in the back of beyond,
under every stone;
in neon lights
blinking in the low quarter,
in the surprising embrace
and at every turn,

one of the children
will live beyond reason,
to sift long for a sign
of why one might survive
and another must die.

The answer may lie
in the hidden wedding
of things, in the distance
between the X-ray and bone;
but the dead children live
in something of them he recalls
in the story of the rocking horse
lost
in Saturn's golden clouds.

The pale Queen has passed,
astride her white horse.
No one, not even she
knows why she has chosen.

She travels towards the sun
as it rises across the earth
and lets fall one
from her purse of death
into the endeavour of rebirth.

Watch over the sleeping children,
white horse. White horse, rock.

Antonio Gaudí, Catalan Architect

-i.m. Jackie Wells, of Monaghan and Barcelona

At dawn or twilight, at the metro access,
half-closed by sleep or the stifling train
my eyes light up as I pause to muse
on your soaring towers which still affirm
for me the harmonies of another realm.

In 1883, when you unfurled
your planned *Sagrada Familia*,
were the people of Barcelona
bewildered? But you deferred
only to the greatest Master Builder.

Entranced shaper of brick,
great genius unmouldable as smoke
from your surreal chimneys,
your skills sprang from your family of smiths,
your parabolas from the Catalan earth

and sustained meditation on your faith.
Gaudí, your life collided with a tram,
but your tranquil numen will live on
in these buoyed angels, these bell towers,
in this efflorescent plaster, bronze and stone.

Parlour Game

What am I to the fly? say I.

What are you to the gnu? say you.

What is he to the flea? says he.

What is she to the sky? says she.

What are we to the tree? say we.

What are they to the way? say they.

Implications of a Sketch

*On seeing the Mies van der Rohe Centenary Exhibition,
Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1990*

His brush projects
a crude line
bristling
under
mutinous energy.

A sketch of seconds
decides
the future
of thousands,
of street and skyline.

The sketch matures, drafted
into a network of three
dimensions in blue
suspended in
'a high-rise skeleton frame.'

Its steel is dredged
from an open pit,
carried by wagon
after wagon, poured from
an open hearth at 1600°C.

For millennia, amorphous
as sand, and glinting
in prophecy,
sheet glass is realised
ton by translucent ton.

And in a derelict block
rats and the homeless
up on their luck
sleep as a pencil
circles them on a map.

Then, emigrants from his own
country, from ours,
uprooted Indians
with a head for heights
swarm above vertigo,

diverse cultures feeding
the maw of the new
corporate civilization
reflected in its “clear
and rational construction.”

Studied under glass in his line-
perfect Berlin Gallery,
his life’s work unfolds
and returns through a crude sketch
‘into the realms of pure art.’

The Red Cathedral

-on hearing Bella Akhmadulina

The Cathedral is aligned East to West,
a circle on two rectangles
over a blind spring where pilgrims sup.
Its redstone wings spread North and South.
It greets the rising sun,
and accepts darkness as it comes.
Requiring nothing, it is nothing to itself.
To enter into it
is to be given a hard grain as talisman.
Solitude touches its high, bare walls.
Grass has split the flagstones;
dust swarms in light from the stained glass.
The Cathedral is home to terrains and cities
and those who live in them
as they breathe fumes, travel on shunted trains;
and just now, a woman dressed in black and gold
is the swooned instrument
through whom the Cathedral fills with their song.
High in the dome, a swallow loops and skims
to the soar and whisper
of grief, to the little shuffle of a woman's fun.

Art and Laughter

The lake gives back nothing to its visitor
who comes down to its shore to be calmed.
If it is iced over, or its surface is chopped,
or the reflection of a wooded hill lies down on it
in a certain light when the wind has fallen,
then this is intercourse with the restless elements
made free by the depth and weight of bounded water.

The lake reflects what the suppliant brings to it.
I could not be at one with you unless I could hear
a voice from my own story answering one from yours,
like black wings overlapping though they can never touch.
But then, over the years, what we do with our stories,
or they with us, is the common wealth of friends
making art or laughter out of the cruellest pain.

Autobiography

I was eight when I dreamt
of a dazzling whitewashed wall
and a river flanked by trees.
Three years later they were part
of our new lives, and we saw
the river wash green weed, and smoke
from the cottage against the hill
betray the direction of the breeze.

The genial owner of the farm
by the river taught us to kill
trout, before he and our father
bargained, and we, in high spirits
when the deal was done, ran back
to the sparkling waters to try our skill.

When all three of us had tired
we lay against a grassy brow,
taking in the feverish blue
of the mountain in mid-summer.
In another month, we would float
through the heat of wheatfields
being razed by a hired machine,
and roam the stubbled earth.

Settled into our first winter there,
we watched the rain race across
the fields from Annagh and Croghan.
The earth had become hostile and bare,
and we knew the chill of loss
as hill and mountain turned to stone.

Those Distant Summers

The boom from a quarry
broke the sundrenched monotony.
His brother cut lush grass
in a careless arc with his hurl
as he watched smoke rise
from a June-hazed hill.

The slow rural rhythm
had continued essentially
as it had for centuries,
the happenings of the parish
still the stuff of woven lives.

On a Friday afternoon, a bomb
devastated his country boyhood,
cut him off from those distant summers.
Returned from the scarred metropolis,
tension ran through his veins
like the burden of sewers.

Against the outline of a mountain
in nineteen seventy four,
a girl lay on a rock, her body on fire.
In the bog, on a summer afternoon,
there was a twisted parking meter.

Through a Glass Brightly

Feet crunching into the clean gravel,
our first steps would be, on one side,
past yew trees and raspberry bushes;
and rhododendrons, lilac, wild roses
and only she knew what their mother
had grown and cared for, on the other.
It would remain her favoured expression.

The day would be fine,
a Sunday in late June, say,
before the stony lane
was tarmacadamed.

Then past the entrance (more flowers!)
and along the road, the grove to their left
(their father has long since reclaimed it),
the young pines filling the air
with their clean fragrance,
and the cows, refugees from the heat,
would stare as we whistled at them.
There would be wild strawberries
under the milkstand, and if we cared
to see, lilac beneath the phone wires.

Below the pine grove grew rushes
(until our father cut a trench by hand
which drained their moisture),
and on the other side of the road lay
the fallow field where we played
hurling on long summer evenings,
like partisans we would never be again.
The worn grass marked our pitch,

three jackets and a shirt stood for posts,
and hurls were hacked and planed from ash.

To the north rose Annagh Hill,
the colour of raspberry juice,
and blueberry-blue Croghan Kinsella,
with Wicklow's highest peak, Lugnaquilla,
between them in the further distance.

We'd continue, flanked by briars
(the vigorous stalks invading the road)
to the bridge once swept away by a flood,
carrying with it a man who survived
to wear a bump like a ball on his forehead.

Strong but calm (now it is weak,
widened to protect crops from flooding),
the river would be alive with trout leaping
for insects under the mature oaks.

Then we'd end our voyage,
pushing open the gate to the white cottage
and wading through guinea hens,
and as the dog barked and bared its teeth,
the old couple would set tea and cakes,
and we'd listen to the affairs of the realm.

Utterly You

I can see you as utterly you.
Your laugh is unlike the music
of angels, or the first young thrush
of the day – it's simply your laugh,
fresh to the earth, and beautifully
free of simile. Look at me now.
Your eyes are not pools of light,
but guileless flesh and blood eyes
that can break my heart with delight.
I've never see twin silver streams
glisten on your pale alabaster cheeks –
only ever salt tears, like those
I remember crying before my heart
grew calm and learned to listen.

Discovering Joy

A child swings on an old tyre
slung from the branch of an apple tree.
It's the warm, merry month of May;
winter is a distant memory.
She sits in the tyre and swings.
Dissatisfied, she frees her body
and hurls her rubber circle
into a heaven of blossoms.
They fall like carnation snow.
Drunk on delight, she cries out
and climbs the gnarled trunk
and brings the branches
to delirium, furiously.
The blossoms fall in a storm
as she labours, hypnotised.
Her transfigured face is a vision
worth the fruit of many orchards.

In Loving Memory of a Country Priest

i.m. Fr O'Regan, Monaseed

'Keep warm feet and a cool head,'
he said to the schoolchildren
before they went on stage.

'Christ, every relation,
including grannies
and greatgrandfathers
is out front,' he grinned
to the headmaster.
The children went out,
and made the mummies laugh,
and he said
they were 'bloody marvelous,'
which they were. So was the master,
and so was he.

Then at a hurling match
he'd run up and down the sideline
cursing himself hoarse,
driving his team to victory
if it was in them.
His car would almost burst
bringing the boys home,
and if they'd won,
he'd say they were 'bloody marvellous,'
which they were.
And so was he.

Answering Each Other

A voice rises faintly
over the beach as the train
passes, as the sunbathers
turn as one to wave; even
the weekend fishermen wave,
rods knifed into the sand,
friendly to anonymity
passing them by at speed, the sea
to the east, the wetlands
and mountains to the west.

Implacably the rails
connect the coastal towns
and groups dismount and
disappear, a stationmaster
pleased, distributing time-
tables, welcoming familiars.
I go in my turn to place
what I was once, once again.

Friends take me for a meal
some kilometers out of town,
Ifield's rapid yodels
a cue for hilarity as we cross
the invisible river and step
on the gas to the hillside hotel.

Morning over the mountain
beyond the housing estates:
landscape gives back memories
like rock its solar power;
a hawk alights on the gutter
of a terrace as we pass.

Again I talk with friends
over a meal, a metaphysical
moment clung to like
a reason for living, or credence
in heaven, the farmed trout
of the restaurant less succulent
than those a gleaming youngster
caught in a torrent
years before pollution,
the rain light and monotonous.

In the thunderous dark of August
we elect to drink outside.
Two combine harvesters
speed heavily down the street
as if on night manoeuvres,
leaving a faint print of fear.

In the morning we steer past
a field of winter corn
the harvesters have razed,
its grain contained by the ton.

Up past the graves of friends
we drive, then into lush valleys
and woodlands, by a cluster
of trees on the crown of a hill
until we brake on chippings
towards the end of a road,
at the house and farm
which I once called home.
It is faded and sunken
in vegetation. I carry
this impression
past the river and roofless

cottage of a long dead
and childless couple.

I catch the last train back,
the strains of a silver band
echoing over the town
and falling on the window dust.

We proceed through time,
sealed from the golfcourse
as from the copper river,
from the industrial
odours of old towns
as the train hurtles on.

A woman with palsy smiles
at a tranquil bay
as we round the Italianate
houses which command it.
She holds her smile.
They answer each other.

The Walking Shadow

Cows are not milked by hand
anymore, and so will never again
swoon to the rhythms of Shakespheare.

O MacBeth, I learned by heart
your soliliquy
against the warm belly of a cow,
every syllable matched by a rich
swish into a frothing bucket.

...In that sharp dark morning
my brothers grasp
adhesive stars of frost
on the aluminium milkcan.
The number 28 sways,
the milkcan bangs
against their ankles.

As the step of one rises,
the other's has fallen
onto the frozen gravel
towards the stand
And then is heard no more.

The Alter Life of Books

after titles by James Liddy

Esau, my kingdom is a drink.

In a Blue Smoke,
Christ and Socrates smiled.
I was forever young.

Above planning permission:
Blue Mountain.

Proposal for a mega-publisher:
A Life of Stephen Dedalus.
And his White Rabbit. 1969.

O Babóg, come into Munster with me,
And print love bonds, not war bonds.

In the Blue House we are gentlemen
And generous with time.

Of all the bars in all the world,
Baudelaire had to come into mine.

In the rock pools of Corca Baiscinn,
My body is mistaken for a flower.
I am the sea anemone
who knows how to party.

To the philistines on every mean street
Let it be known:
I have *all* the Gorey Details.

As Comyn sings his Lay,
I walk into eternity
Among the hemlock and hibiscus,
The rosebuds and the hollyhock.

I am a Bachelor of Chamber Pot Music,
a Fellow of the Tent of Many Drinks.

At the grave of Father Sweetman
I hear the old world
swan out of
James Clarence Mangan
Singing its song.

Thinking A White Thought in a White Shade,
I am in my white suit,
My birthday suit of white butterflies.

Young men should always go walking.
Mens sano in corpore sano.

After a night's drinking,
There's nothing like
A good feed of Kerr's Pinks.

Art is only for grownups
When it is noted
By the Garda Síochána.

Bowling in the Slovak Bowling Alley
I am truly happy my whole life.

In Avondale the trees
Are warmer than green:
Global village warming.

My Collected Poems
Are in full control of the Faculties.

Let my Epitaphery
Be written on Porter.

Vincey O'Rafferty
powers up his squeezebox
For Gold Set Dancing
On Croghan Mountain
One more time.

I Only Know
That I Love Strength -
(the *old glitter*)
in My Friends -
(*Mad philosophy*
Hurts them into song)
and Greatness,
The territory of Spicer, Burroughs,
Kerouac, Michael Hartnett.

Eternal Water

A great hulk goes by,
composed of fluid phrases.
All his life his speech absorbed water:
rain sheeting in from his hills
in Monaghan, or drip-dropping
into his bedsit, or falling on the canal.
Tears of loneliness and banal pain

wore away his normal life. Eternally
he is water roaring and flowing by.
He is at my ear
when I gaze on potato flowers,
blue and white in a haze of rain.
When the damp clay sticks to my shoes
he smiles faintly, canal water

twinkling in his eyes.
And when I stand before vernal students,
the downturned brim of his hat drips,
inundating the school.
He is up to all his eternal tricks,
laughing his wild watery laughter
till sunlight floods the innermost pool.

The Afternoons are Mine

The tides ebb and flow
bringing storm
or good weather.
She loves the tides.
The seasons come
and go,
whether in sequence
or no,
and she loves the seasons.
Lovers leave or show,
and she is at peace.
She loves the loving.
She has her reasons.
There is a space
for friends
to visit or to leave,
the space
in which a poem
or tale can grow
and weave its way
into a heart.
She has kept this place
inviolable from the start.

The Fabled Bed

I brush dust from the pillows
on the fabled bed.
For a night or so our peaceful heads
rested here, leaving tender hollows.

Beneath the covers and sheets,
beneath all that was left unsaid,
a calcified object lies embedded.
Lime crumbles between my finger and thumb
to reveal a rich thimble threaded
with filigreed gold, jade and platinum.

Then I see the discoloured glue
of a roll of old postage *sellos*.
I unroll them delicately
to find portraits of a withered man
happy amidst his children's children.
In another life, this man was me.

A woman's black silk jacket
hangs on the wall. It has thirteen layers,
and once belonged to you. You interrupt
your work so that we can be here, together.

Surf

Three thin cockerels
in a chorus line
on the swollen roll
of the tall wave.

Drenched to the feather-root,
imperiously
as one

they peck the breaker -

then squawking
try to break their fall
to a watery grave.

The Windfall Oak

On that childhood isle find a windfall oak
and hollow it to his measurements.
Make sure he goes in his casual clothes.
No fancy lining, just wood and bark,
the rough-cut halves secured with rope.
Seal it if you must with wax,
then form a circle around this fallen tree
to celebrate his loves and laughs,
the route of his ink, his pain, his hopes –
and do so in well-made song and verse.
Quench thirst with your favoured drink
and join if you will in a wild ceilidh.
Then plant the sapling in the earth.

The Head as Music Hall

A scratched image flickers
over the walls, the floor, the ceiling:
the dimension of the magic lantern.
At the bar, a mathematician slurs
as he calculates the arc of a dancer's kick,
or calibrates nice feelings in his loins
when she raises her skirt. To anyone
who will listen, he will say that the weight
of the earth in tons is five point eight times
ten to the power of twenty-one —
barely heavier than the heart of the loner
in the aisle seat
who finds an aspect of his lost love
in each woman he sees changing shape
from every angle.
It's not that there's a din. It's just
that the sound the hall encloses
is continuous. His cheek brushes against
the seating velveteen
and makes him shiver
as he stretches towards the ceiling
to kiss his love, who is physically no more
but whose ghost is imprinted
on the scratched celluloid projected as the hall.

Inchichore, Early Autumn, 1986

There is a mist over the roofscape of Inchichore,
and there are sun-tinted clouds heading quickly to the south-west
in two layers parted by a dark grey strip. The sun suddenly disappears
and the pink strips slip away and appear elsewhere.
I can just make out the Dublin mountains over the technical school.
If I look at the roofs and spires long enough they seem to move.
I think this is because the eye is drawn towards the four blocks of flats
beyond them, and the roofs bend to the curve of the eye.
To the right of my window, my frame, there is a smoke stack,
which is in the direct line of my vision with the distant spires.
To the left of the stack is a row of trees along the river
and the one nearest to me is spectacular, very leafy,
predominantly green but with a horizontal cross of golden yellow.
A seagull is continuously flying towards it and then at the last moment
flies back upriver again. Its whiteness stands out in the enriched light.
The derelict factory, with its rhythmically placed girders, balances the picture,
especially as, just above it, there is a yellow house.
Rows of small trees bordering two gardens fill out the foreground
until just below me, my breath flows towards the dying splendour
of the Virginia creeper, with its rich reds and yellows and fading greens.

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