

**THE SILENCE AFTER**

Noel Duffy

# The Silence After

Noel Duffy

In memory of Bernard O'Brien, a good man who kept the extent of his good works private to the end.



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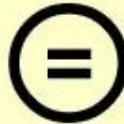
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## A Stone

An inert mass in the palm,  
egg-like, smoothed by weather,  
too cold to be living or dying.

The furious energies of matter  
are arrested here, made still for a moment  
like a breath held under water.

In the grain and speckles of its surface  
is a chronicle in miniature  
of sky and earth, a prehistory

of spirit; then letting go, the invisible  
magic of release and fall,  
gravity's angel in the undergrowth.

## The Beekeeper to his Assistant

You must understand from the beginning  
that the hive is a mind and one  
you will not comprehend. Behind

the frantic toing and froing of the bees  
order prevails: the honeycomb from nothing  
builds itself by geometry alone, cell by cell,

the Queen its centre and circumference.  
Even the pollen-drunk dance of the messenger  
returned from gardens heavy with blossoms

is a kind of mathematical waltz, calculating  
in each step the sun's slow orbit through  
the heavens. For all the talk of the nuptial flight

no one has ever seen it, though it must happen.  
Once in early summer I did see the Queen hover  
by the hive's entrance awaiting the drones.

And they came, hundreds of them, greedy  
for her scent. I saw them disappear into the shade  
of the meadow in her wake. That was all.

When they returned to the hive at dusk  
exhausted and sticky from their work, their wings  
were snapped and they were thrown to the earth.

Not even the Queen can evade the will of the bees.  
Unknowingly she gives birth to her own successor  
incubated in the brood and hidden from her.

Without a sign her servants descend on her  
in a swarm and she is smothered – by violence  
the honeycomb becomes her honeyed mausoleum.

Yet despite these explanations I have told you  
nothing. And the beehive has its secrets.

I live for those moments in late evening  
beneath the lilac blossoms when the bees  
gather in a cloud about me, buzzing flecks

of light like Einstein's vision. It is a door  
into the heart of summer where time  
seems to slip away and is lived through.

## Daisy-Chain

Sometimes on Sundays we'd take  
the old canal bank walk  
from Broombridge to the Ashtown Cross,  
my father picking daisies as we went

between questions of *How is school?*  
and *Did you score any goals this week?*  
my embarrassment at his interest  
saying, *Fine* or *Only one this time.*

Often he would talk about the past,  
of how his grandfather passed this spot  
every day for nearly thirty years  
as he drove the train from Castlebar

to Connolly Station, the canal water  
his sign that he was nearly home,  
until his early death in a red-brick  
terraced house near Great Western Square,

my father saying, *I only knew him  
by a photograph the way you know my father  
through me, as an image and likeness,  
as a man about whom stories gather;*

and all the while his fingers working  
the stems, binding them together one  
by one, a chain of flowers forming  
in his hands until joining first to last

the circle was complete and he'd  
give it to me to throw into the canal waters.  
And forgetting school and football,  
we'd watch it floating on the surface,

bobbing slightly in our world of lost  
connections, the frail wreath pulled  
slowly downstream by the current, towards  
the steady, distant thunder of the lock.

## Bella

'Her silences are my silences, her eyes, my eyes. It is as if Bella had known me forever, as if she knew all my childhood, all my present, all my future.'

– *Ma Vie*, Marc Chagall

Now that I'm too old to hold a brush,  
I paint you again each morning with words:  
Double Portrait With Wine Glass,  
Bella With Carnation, The Lover's Bouquet...

My mind is filled with colour still;  
with each stroke you are there again, my bride  
lying on our crimson bed, our wedding night.  
Things have changed. You wouldn't like it much.

The green violinist now grumbles  
into his prayer book, has retired to an old  
peoples' home in the suburb, refuses  
to play me a tune on his purple fiddle.

Lovers no longer fly over fields or church spires,  
milk cows in their Sunday best, go to the circus —  
but still I keep them alive, the images.  
I have been cursed, my love, with long life,

you dead now more than forty summers.  
The old grandfather clock has finally stopped,  
your absence no longer measured  
by its metronome, the slow arm of loss.

I count the silent hours till I give up  
the ghost. You stand before me,  
again My Fiancée With Black Gloves.  
My soul is vivid blue. It will know you.

# The Book Collector

## 1. First Edition

Strange that I authenticate a work  
Not by the brilliance of its content

But by the errors of the printer's hand  
As a letter is lost or jumbled

In the groaning printworks.  
The flaw. The mistake. The error

Of judgement and oversight;  
The missed detail and botched

Sentence that runs into the page gutter  
Like a thought that was never finished;

The missing apostrophe and comma.  
In short, all the things that went astray

In the process of passing the thing  
From one hand to another.

## 2. In The Library of Lost Objects

The words settle on the page,  
For the first time, like insects

Fixed on their pins in a dusty museum.  
Never before seen in the world.

A new thing, an order of words captured  
And reinstated from the day's flux and insistence,

A sleight-of-hand trick that holds the world back  
For a heart-beat...

Holds. Holds...

\*

And then they are passed out into the city,  
Scattered to the corners like ragged confetti,

Stacked in market stalls beside postcards and love letters,  
Lined like foot soldiers in toppling bookcases;

The unwanted gift or capricious purchase,  
Discarded, misplaced, boxed up, forgotten,

Used to keep the wind from the chimney,  
Shelved absently in the library of lost objects

Waiting for us to find them.

### 3. Inscription

And this one does somehow. Dog-eared  
from use, weathered, ossified, organic,

surviving the memory loss and detritus,  
the grinding entropy and metamorphosis.

Nothing much to look at, water damaged,  
it finds its way to me in this haphazard thrift shop

among the tattered paperbacks and half-price  
cookery manuals, the remaindered

astrologies with their outdated prognostications  
and promises of love that never happened.

*My Dearest James, in this pages we can be  
together. Let us meet here in the white spaces*

*between one word's ending and another's beginning,  
Love Kate. December. 1907.*

### 4. Books

The weight of books. Their bulk  
And physical space; how they pull

Downwards in the hand  
Like a plumb-line sighted at the ground.

The shape and texture of thought, folded  
And folded again like the lung's tennis-court of flesh.

Mind's fingerprint and after image.  
All that we're remembered by when we're finished.

## The Rings

Washing my face my eye catches  
the silver of the ring on my left hand.  
My surprise, every time!

My face stares back at me from the mirror,  
your naked body pale in the shadows  
as you bend to recover your dress

from the floor. I turn.  
There are such moments when we could  
almost believe . . . such moments.

\*

How last night in the hotel lobby the power  
failed again and we gathered around the gaslight  
with the others, Mohammed playing drums

and telling jokes I had already heard in Dublin,  
the Americans and their stories of the desert.  
How you said so little, while I, tempted at every turn,

elaborated on the details of our life together –  
you, silent and unhappy in the shadows.  
How one smile would've been enough.

\*

That day in Dublin before we left,  
the rain bucketed down on us.  
We walked out among the city streets oblivious  
in our trance of expectation.

Then stopping at a stall on College Green  
bought two matching silver rings –  
cover for our travelling together  
in Islamic North Africa, our faked marriage

and imaginary honeymoon in different  
weather. We laughed at the silliness of it,  
but pressed the rings deep into our pockets  
and thought of nothing else all evening.

\*

Today I find your ring on the dresser.  
Last night before you went to sleep  
I noticed how, tired of unnecessary

fiction, you placed it there,  
and I knew that you would not wear it again.

## Dragonflies

This is dragonfly weather,  
the air thick with pollen dust,  
the canal bank an explosion of colour  
as hedgerows come in to blossom.

And then my eye catches them,  
the minute flickers on the retina  
of the metallic reds, greens and blues  
of the dragonflies, the restless

shuttle of their flight-paths  
as they dart from one point to another  
plotting the water's surface  
with their ghost geometries.

And then as I hunker down  
at the water's edge, it is there:  
the flame-red exclamation of a demoiselle  
at eye level, its weightless flicker

and pulse as it hovers above  
the surface, a vector of pure thought  
poised and ready for movement  
should I as much as quiver.

And I do quiver, stared out  
there in the morning sunlight  
by the glass-eyed, crystalline glare  
of the living, the air trembling

with a felt absence as the dragonfly  
disappears into the shadows like  
a faded apparition of what  
had been made knowable to the senses.

## Your Photographs

Those days in late Spring and early Summer  
when you would come to life again  
after the dark months of Fall and Winter  
like the flowers you so loved to find  
out in there in the woods past Baker's Farm:  
the chance constellations of *Bloodroot* and *Shooting Stars*,  
the *Trout Lilies*, *Sundrops*, *Oconee Bells* –  
or your favourite of all the wild meadow flowers,  
the *Great Red Trillium* with its liver-red trinity of petals,  
brought so vividly into a second being  
in your exacting square of your camera's viewfinder.

I had my mug of strong coffee and morning paper,  
and my work to keep me busy while you were away till evening  
out there in the world with your old Nikon camera,  
“Chasing the present moment like a Sufi,” you quipped  
as you gathered your things in the hallway  
before you left. And then as you turned in the door:  
“To forget it when it's gone.”

Still, you kept those pictures you so carefully composed,  
catalogued each print with the studied diligence  
of a museum curator poring over the treasures  
of the past: your snapshot photographs, too avant-garde  
for the neighbours to admire, the blossoms suspended  
in an abstract haze of blues, yellows,  
crushed-powder reds, like smoked nebulae  
floating in the thin air of your mind  
as you spent the evenings locked away in your attic dark-room  
lost among the ghost-flower negatives  
hanging on pegs or dipped in basins of chemicals.

I still keep those photographs in an old black box  
with all the other keepsakes and bric-a-brac  
that I hadn't the heart to make a funeral pyre with after you left.  
I pore over them now in the house we shared  
for so many years, trawling the memoried dark  
for all the signs I missed  
in the slow unmaking of our happiness.

“To forget it when it's gone”, you said.  
*Forget it when it's gone.*  
*Forget it when it's gone...*

## Talking in Whispers

*For Bernard O'Brien*

### I

We drive in my father's car,  
the morning drizzle streaking across the windshield,  
as the wipers beat a mantra against the day.  
It is cold. We do not talk,  
your pain Bernard felt there on the empty roads.

### II

Larger than life. Chancer. Mischief-maker.  
Wild in the way my mother was sober  
arm wrestling my older brothers at the kitchen table  
after finishing your milk-round in the lorry,  
driving the back roads from Finglas  
and dropping in for tea on the way home.

There was the time you were nearly killed.  
Parked in a farmer's lane at dusk,  
your truck rolled back on you as the hand-break slipped  
and you were pinned down between a hedge  
and a concrete wall under twenty tons of fresh milk  
and a tangle of branches that softened your landing.

Miracle man, you walked away unhurt,  
defying the odds. Arm in a sling you laughed it off  
there in the hallway drinking tea with my mam.  
*A truck for Heaven's Sake!* she finally relented,  
her favourite brother saved from himself again.  
You seemed indestructible in the driveway as you left.

Maybe you were just lucky.

### III

"He is talking in whispers", my father says at last,  
"the way your aunt Debbie talked before she died  
so quiet you could hardly hear her

whispering into the darkness of the room...  
All the family leaning close in those final hours  
until she could no longer feel us there by her bedside.

The first of my sisters to make the journey.”

#### IV

All week the signs are bad. You tease and pick  
at your food but cannot eat. The soup  
and milk they give you lie untouched  
on the tray. The doctors dodder.  
The platelets in your blood count  
rise and fall from one hour to another,  
your body struggles against the *chemo*  
and its endless chemical bombardment,  
your only comfort in the unbearable minutes,  
the slow oblivion of the pain-killer injection  
working its way into your system.

#### V

It was to be a fresh start. At fifty-six  
you were packing it in after years with the dairy,  
buying a taxi plate and a new *Mondeo*.  
A cushy number, you said to my father.  
Make your own hours.  
No one to answer to in the morning.  
Drive and talk. Talk and drive.  
What could be easier after thirty years  
behind the wheel of an articulated lorry  
once you had a good map and a flask of coffee  
to guide you through the endless traffic  
and the cross-hatched maze of housing estates  
that stretch from Blanchardstown to Tallaght.

You were anxious though behind the bravura,  
starting over now that the kids were married.  
Your new life at mid-life  
an unmarked road ahead of you into the morning sunlight.

## VI

Yesterday dad told me that mam cried  
in the hospital corridor after she had visited you.  
Shocked at how you looked, hollowed out, grey, frightened,  
finally seeing what she had denied for weeks.  
That you are maybe dying there in the Mater Hospital  
with all the other terminal cases.

Maybe. Today she clutches to her rosary  
and passes the beads through her fingers  
like knucklebones, counting the hours,  
the days, the weeks, the thoughts that you have left,  
whispering her prayers to the silence of the kitchen  
as though God would listen to those  
who speak almost inaudibly of their suffering.

## VII

But you make it back somehow from the brink,  
your blood-cells pounded with the *chemo* making the fight  
that we all hope we will never have to face,

the cancer retreating from your bloated colon  
like a flood subsiding after a terrible downpour  
leaving a flattened landscape in its wake.

.  
For now at least. Who knows the future?  
We talk in whispers and say it over.  
Inhale. Exhale. Heal. Return to the living.

Take all you can in this morning of remission.

## The Silence After

'The honey bee is often described as a domesticated insect. This is wholly inaccurate. The honeybee is a wild bee. Man has never succeeded in domesticating it in the way he has domesticated other animals.'

—*The World of Ants, Bees & Wasps*, Brian Vessey-Fitzgerald

He stayed in his study all morning,  
and when I went to him  
he was standing by the window, his face  
turned towards the garden  
and the distant droning of the hive.

*Do you notice how the note  
has changed, he said, how it grows  
lower and more certain. The bees  
are about to swarm. They will gorge  
themselves on honey, then be gone.*

*It is a beautiful sight and every  
beekeeper's shame: the bees spilling  
from the hive at noon, the Queen  
in flight among them; the cacophony  
of wings, the silence after.*

*I should meet them at the hive's  
entrance as they leave, make my loud  
lamentation with pot and spoon, try  
coax the Queen back to her throne . . .  
This time, I will let them go.*

After the bees had flown, he walked  
in the garden among his flowers;  
his fingers stained a pollen-brown  
from lilac, rose, sweet-meadow,  
when he returned to the house at dusk.

He was silent then as he stood among  
the white frames of the bee boxes  
in the hall, as though his thoughts had fled  
with the swarm, his heart as empty as the hive  
he could not bring himself to look at anymore.

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## Notes

- p. 5 “...like Einstein’s vision...” In 1905 Einstein proposed that light had a particle nature, also referred to as photons or light quanta.
- p. 15 ‘Your Photographs’ is taken from a play, *The Rainstorm*, located in New Hampshire.

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