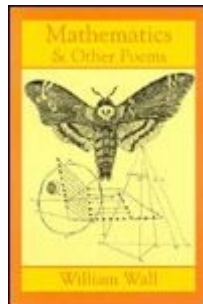


MATHEMATICS & OTHER POEMS

William Wall



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THE WAKE IN THE HOUSE

*"Anois ba mhaith liom bualadh leis
Nuair nach féider é...."*

Seán Ó Ríordáin - Rian na gCos

i

*Every return is a misdemeanour.
Childhood is the taking time. Adults will
bring the cold wind to stuttering candles
standing in red paper lighting the myth-
ical families. Ours was the warmest one,
hands cupped around the flame, faces eager
with heat. Every Christmas Eve the candles.
Every return is a misdemeanour.*

*Every return is a misdemeanour.
On Christmas Eve the half-faces of myth-
ical families drifting from light to light,
the shipwreck of old photographs, letters,
the ragged time-signature of childhood.
Every return is a misdemeanour.*

ii

During the night a knife eased off the face
leaving the insides naked like a seedcake.
A naked fireplace & bare wallpaper,
negative of a picture-frame in dust.
Whose shoulders held this building up? Who
served the tea, the bread & butter, arthritic
hands failing to dust the china dogs or dust
the wedding portrait? The embarrassment
of insides, the preposterous intestines
cooling in the wind. I have seen the great ball
from the wreckers crane swing wide & lunge
through the tenuous wall in the midriff.
& the shock is like a wound & never
again is there anything that permanent.

iii

We were probing the darkness, old dry time,
letting light follow the rafters,
sounding floorboards. We were making
the new old, reversing the old order;
imagining what used to be there,
What colour? What timber? Setting the old
house back a hundred years or so.

There were no
English dressers in white or pine,
but oak, mahogany, the trusted woods,
in sideboards, tables, chests of drawers,
dark woods, dark houses, windows burned
like lamps, huge fireplaces, black pots.

Nothing now but the house. No ghosts.
A bulging, beehived, sheltering house,
a dry place, the walls & timbers sound.
Who built it built it true as a mason would,
each stone well placed. Who lived there
kept it well, grew roses round the door.
We found his rose-tree rooted by the wall.

iv

I remember how we made fast at a buoy.
The boat lay to the tide, swinging this way
& that. We watched our lines & talked. He said
the fish would run for twenty minutes
on the rise & twenty on the ebbside,
& in between the stillness, & the lines
hung dead in the water, echo-sounders
imagining the bottom for us.

I remember his hands hard from working
the hayfork those midsummer evenings.
But then it was a miracle to watch
a tremor on the line Morse across his palm,
so sensitive, so sensitive, no one
has ever made so delicate an instrument.

It is high tide on the strand now & the eaves
are leaking. Someone is moving in the house,
making tea. The kettle clatters on a ring.
I hear the soft pop that ignites the gas.
The sound of watching. Sister & brothers
moving in shadows. We take time to wait
at the dark door, touching the ebbing pulse,
the sand-cold palm, the slack face.

My father is drawing breath over the gravel
of the water's edge. I hear his lungs crackle
as the wave draws out. Then silence.
Then I hear him, coming slowly back
along the stones, waves sparking at his feet,
moonlight on his head. I would like to be
a small boy again, watching my father's
giant strides parting the sea.

V

Based on part of "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*"

By *Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill*

I never regretted it. You had the parlour
opened
for me, the long dark table bright with silver,
rooms turned out & curtains & pelmets
freshened.

The oven was warm & smelling of soda bread.
There was a roast, I remember, that Spring's
lamb,
or perhaps it was a heifer killed not long
before.

& I slept late on the down tick, the huge soft
bed
that was like the sea around me, almost until
evening.

I recall that Springtime. Your hat had a gold
band.

Stand up now, my love, & I'll call in
neighbours

for the evening. I'll make up the big bed
with bright sheets that have been cracking in
the wind,

& the down quilt your mother gave us,
& we'll drive the cold from you one time more.

vi

The lights are on. No neighbour passes
without coming in. The occasional
insects of Spring circle the lampshade,
shadows on the ceiling. People whisper
or move their lips, their hands joined. Hands
are grasped,
shaken, held & released. Eyes meet or miss.
Relations come in gangs, some who have never
before darkened the door. Lost relatives.

Nothing is in its right place. All her
furniture
is in disarray, all her ornaments.
Her silver crucifix that was kept wrapped
in tissue in a shoe box, stands by the bed.
The crooked brass candlesticks that she loved
are not in their place on the mantelpiece.

vii

After *Adhlacadh Mo Mháthair*

by *Seán 'O Ríordáin*

He used to bring the first fruits in a soft
cap:
a nest of potatoes & clay.
He cradled them like children.

She shook the field out.

None of us saw
the deft gesture
or the dangerous word
but when she'd turn again
she'd have gold in her hands

I remember them like a face,
hands as comfortable as an old book,
a salve for sickness.

A long & white hand;
white for the candle,
white for the pages turned,
white for the clay they put her in.

The neighbours dusted their knees
& the priests faced the world.
They brought their small hands
to scrub the world on top of her.

viii

Lastly comes a clearing. The rain has gone.
& it was not the soft spring rain. It was
a slant & winter rain. The hardest thing?
That the house was not empty when we
came home. Emptiness was what we expected.
We expected the hollow sounding rain
on the kitchen windows. Instead there were
wardrobes of her clothes to be disposed,
the set of her shoulders in them, hairs on
collars, a whole press of comical hats, gloves,
shoes, crocodile leather handbags, fur boots.
We put order on them, talking in stiff
whispers. Breath-catching loneliness.
Then we laid them out for the last time,
a family of black plastic bags on the road.

ORESTES IN HIS YOUTH

This is the first disaster we have come upon
together. After the war
the smallest things sting

like wounds. How could they find
the single thread of love
that once was strong enough
to bind us all together?

I found kittens in the pocket
of my flannel dressing gown,
blind faces in the wardrobe.

Their hunger gave them away.
Mice lived frantically overhead
in the space below the slates.

They ticked across the ceiling-boards
on high-heeled shoes & early lambs
came in cardboard boxes

to our range, bottle fed with milk
& brandy. Their milk&lambsmell
nuzzled in my palm.

Morning sun on whitewash, cornflakes
& hot milk rimed with sugar,
& the pop of lighting gas.
*This is the first disaster
we have come upon together.*

Nan lived next door. She took to her bed
with her heart in 1954.
It was angina pectoris

& fish have pectoral fins, the fish my father
killed, nights in the moonlight.

The pectoral silver

where the nerves align. But Nan was content
& was not troubled by her nerves.

She played the box for me

Come back to Erin & Eileen Aroon.

& Eileen was the one

that scarlet fever took.

Our winter yard was glass & I thought of
glaciers

calving across Munster,
an ice-foot

from Dingle to Youghal, crop-headed hills
& striae torn out
of earth's belly.

It grows colder every day it seems,
leaf-fossils frozen
in the rain-barrel,

sheep lambing in snow. There is danger
everywhere & we are not cut out
to survive the ice.

*This is the first disaster
we have come upon together.*

The black kettle on the Stanley No. 8,
fire & water: Agamemnon's
futile hope.

This is the citadel. The kitchen walls
are 3 feet thick, every window
a tunnel or a rifle-slit.

My mother sleeps in her chair. The shop
is closed & she has brought
the smell of grapes

in sawdust, smoked bacon & Aran wool.
It is half-past nine. Boots tread heavily
in the yard & a match is struck.

Soon it is time for the books.
She levels the huge ledger
& numbers

lean from her hand. But the day
is never reconciled. The walls are down.
The mask is buried.
*This is the first disaster
we have come upon together.*

A heavy-footed schliemann walks
the passageways of our dusty lives
& treasures

& finding the careful ledger thinks
the key to all our lives
might be encrypted there.

'Never write anything down,' she says,
'you never know what will
become of it'.

There were faded letters tied with ribbon
locked in a slope-topped box.
My uncle's letters
declaring love before he went to war,
the last letters ever written before
the minefield

pulled him down. *'Dear mother I have found
someone I dearly love, though she
is not yet free....'*

Words pass out of our possession
like parting-shots in deadly earnest.
*This is the first disaster
we have come upon together.*

After a storm we sally out to gather
firing, counting the cost
of one night's frenzy.

The nervous rope reins between tractor
& treestump. There is the smell
of clay & carbon,

the end & the beginning. Wheels spin
on silence. The storm was here,
its footprint

on the canted trees & molar stumps.
My father dredges his origins
in the wind's carving.

The rope breaks *whipflick* - the sound
provokes the face-taut sky
to spit on us.

The whipcrack & slingshot, the swirl of
the axe & the woman's flesh
of the ash-tree

The fire's strange architecture
of cantilevered twigs & logs
& charred surfaces disclosed
the blackened pages of a library.

Winter nights we huddled over the flames
renouncing histories, the war
crackling in our faces

& out in the yard the treacherous beast
could smell our weakening sinews
& whitened hearts.

*This is the first disaster
we have come upon together.*

OUT OF DOORS

*After the description of a hermit crab
in Alexander Dumas' Grand Dictionary of Cuisine*

'Above the waist he is a knight - cuirass,
gauntlet, visor - this upper half of him
has everything.
Below the waist there's nothing.
Not even the tail of a shirt.'

Head of a lobster & tail of a slug;
he plugs himself in a convenient shell.
His preoccupation is secrecy.
Catch the hermit
out of doors & his shame is lethal.

I think of that as I watch a fat priest
slip lithely into a waiting car:
that sliding movement is out of place
on his bulk, the grace
of a geisha kneeling to the tea.

Or the local politician in Daunt's Square
shaking hands with a deft shrug.
His face is closed & smiling.
His hand is strong
& he offers it like viaticum.

The tall blond girl on Wellington Road
resting her hand on a boy's sleeve,
I see that her life is open-air,
her face is a sea of gifts
an engagement without armour.

LETTER TO GREECE

Picked white as a bone,
a dry wind over broom,
a house as dry as salt,
hollow as catacomb.

No one lives here,
but you come for love
& the baby you lost,
a *volte face*.

But the whiteness
is decadent, a classical pun
on purity, where virgins
are never quite.

& you, by tradition
a hedonist,
hoping to provoke
the unconscious,

to reposes
what was, after all,
your early strength
& the energy of your fall;

you will find heat
& the sea, structure
or form, chimeras,
religious stricture,

but no oracle.
No violence. The place
exists only
as a meaning to espouse.

THE SEER

*How did you find yourself
on this illiterate island?*

The wind rouses the dead.
They clank & rustle,
changing places constantly.
When you looked at the wind
You saw a white tree
& you could have knelt.

Branches in the moonlight
like the small bones of a girl.
You would have gathered them
into your arms & danced.
You looked around,
wry-eyed like a stray dog.

How did you find your way
to this sense-starved place?
You say we should carry
our gravestones on our backs,
& when our epitaph is written
it will be *they have forgotten*.

A cold wind is blowing
over our high moral ground.
A car sweeps light over
the trees & halts in a clearing.
They settle down to the ruthless
riffle of underclothing.

You want to call to them
to swing away into the shadows
on a crazy dance of joy.
I cannot imagine their chagrin.
I think it will be the death of you,
they are deadly earnest about sin.

THE TOPOLOGY OF SHELLS

On the death of my pupil James Dowdall who died in Paris

The apparent movement in the spiral cortex is Yeats' gyre calcifying. A world worn down by the sea is a pebble rattling on a beach, its dormant energy provoked by the ebb.

Dried wrack is scantling. You stood here that August evening skimming stones, each skip ramifying across the emptying ocean, connecting us to the shore of that country

in one great ring, the stone at the core. They will fly your coffin over those rings. But which way does the gyre go inside the shell?

To spiral inward is to voyage down

the iridescent memory, backwards in time, the world coiling into order, tapering to a place so small & so intense that there's no release. You'll have no luck that way. To go outwards

means losing touch, to swing loosely at the world's rode while the strands unravel. The frailest fibres hold you back. The view is breathtaking. Do not be afraid.

God is somewhere in the chaos, an aimless boy
playing with knots & stones. When you throw
skimmers there you will see your corona
amplify across the cosmos. Beyond that

is beyond our scope - the riding lights
stand so far out their loom will never
reach into our time. There is no other way.

HOUSE OF CARDS

two elegies

eileen

She lay in the crashed mini
in the small hours
maintaining a universe of fire,
dead-ends, split nerves ,

as if she were sitting
in the college bar
not breathing
on a house of trembling cards.

I recall the night,
& there was not a breath
of wind that could account
for her tumble into death.

marie

She heard the strand shifting,
sand shifting its weight
like the old earth loosening.

She heard the clamour of children
in hollow rooms. She heard
twigs releasing leafstems.

She heard her own breath
like a trapped rag on a thorn
or a sudden squall against glass.

She heard death, in the morning,
when the street was busy,
going on without her, an easy thing.

AN MHAIGHDEAN MHARA

You wore a green coat
& we traipsed
across the huge beach,
the frozen ripples.
There was a low light
to lie along our path
(I have a photograph)
& your hair
stood out like beaten gold.)

Frost made air
real for us. Bells rang
& we did not miss
the water; it was there
always, sighing
on the edge of hearing.

In a hunker
of second-hand suites
grey-faced tinkers
kindled a fire
& a brown-eyed girl
stood with her hands
on the lip of a churn.

You held my hand
in your pocket,
tender with dawn chill,
the memory-metal
of what we had done.

You came out to clear your head.
You did not know
that you had left forever,
that the dogs in the street
were talking about us,
that you would always
walk the estuaries
& the hillside fields,
looking back at the sea.

Let me explain to you
why the world sounds
like water & the air is cloying:
it is because you are
out of your element.
Your beauty belongs
in the shapeless world
of the drowned city,
in the staves of the whale's song,
& out beyond the grey line
where the sky falls.

GARDEN NEAR COGNAC

You are halving an apple & the sun
catches the blade as it tightens onto your
thumb.

A sweet spit marks the equator.
You have come through the sunflowers;
there is pollen on the down of your arm.

We arrived here with de Maupassant
& Mauriac in mind - a kind of hesitant
pilgrimage. We read nothing & sleep
in the warm days. Your cherry skin is moist
& shining. It appears we have apostatised.

Remember love, how years ago we drove
up through the Comeraghs in snow.
When we passed the last bush there was no
colour,
not even the grey black of a stone.
That rigorous landscape shaped our lives.

A river divided the valley below
like a knife-mark in white skin.
Snow dusted off the exposed ridges.
There was no room for sentiment,
a momentary lapse of concentration

could have been the death of us,
the old Volkswagen careering down the shale
into the snow. We came to rest at last

near *Eas na Machan*. Through the windows
we could hear the frozen falls ticking.

That was the country of cold people,
Donncha Rua was buried within sight.
We parted stiff clothing & seamed our skins
clean as a knifeblade on appleskin.
In those cold mountains it was an act of faith.

Here in the welling silent summer
in a garden near Cognac love-making
is not so dangerous. There is no sheer fall,
& our bodies lie as finely separated
as the slit in the shallow skin of your apple.

RADIANCE

The jets fly over our house at night.
three lights, heeled slightly to the east,
& the noise of movement follows them
 briefly into the stars.

Sometimes we hold hands on the garden-seat
like Victorian lovers waiting for an eclipse
for privacy, psychologists of air, trembling
 at every windchange.

We imagine the passengers, faces bleached
against the glass, descending into deafness.
They are looking down at the radiant berries
 of our cotoneasters.
We are their stars.

ATALANTA

after Ovid

She was naked
& the flush of her skin

was like the purple
hangings of a divan.

She ran light as air
& her body smelled

like sweet grapes,
splits ripe with mould,
taken in the hand.

WOMEN IN THE WOODSHED

"This is where we were to have spent the honeymoon".

Eva Trout - *Elizabeth Bowen*

There are women in the
woodshed.
They will not acknowledge
your call. They behave
unspeakably
(& in perfect silence).
Stand by the hedge

& cough & hear
a determined
woodshedness.
Scrape a shoe on the
limestone
edge - a stutter of hands,
like bats' fingerful wings.
Go no nearer
the woodshed, my dear.
Those hands are dangerous.
They have the capacity of
osmosis.

Taprooting in the wet
bodysoil, they will leach
blood.
I see your glorious body
veined with wadis
& quake-fractures. You will

implode.

WASHING LINES

Suburban air luscious with woodsmoke,
not evening but *gloaming* - a better word.
In grey springeary winterclothes
suburban women operate the tumblers
of Yale locks. A girl in woman's clothes
strains a small breast to hang her T-shirt
out to dry. Her quick, wistful children
in clown pants, stare at passing strangers,
their tear ducts clear as pinpricks.

In the darkness of our house, built 1888,
a slum clearance building, a miracle
in its time, we face the limestone wall
of the Protestant school. There is no view.
We dry our clothes across the cooker.
At night the suburban washing-lines
glow in our memory like filaments.

GOING TO BED WITH THE SNOWMAN

I have gone to bed
with the snowman,
in the dead of night.
I have seen the lights
gleaming briefly off & on

a radiance that could not
be accounted for
by the humour
of the moment,
or his perishing crystals.

That nothing is forever
is known. & people
live too long these days.
But this I can swear:

there was a cold kind of loving
when I lived with the snowman.

TROUBLE WITH NUMBERS

albert einstein

We have put our faith in the man
(& the first words were
bisher was alles in ordnung)

The universe is his plan.
Only four men understand it
& so far there have been no women.

The trouble with numbers is
that there are so many of them,
an infinite variety of endings.

the number of ice

The number of the ice crystal is 6
the hard-edged, hard-nosed hexagon.
But the language of ice is domestic -
needles & flakes & blankets.

All the prismatic clarity of numerals
culminates in the snow-verb
to *flocculate* & then we have snow.

vertigo & wordprocessor

My words fall in
like fragmentation bombs
among the noughts & ones.
I worry about
what they will become
when all is said & done,
down among
the rioting electrons.

MATHEMATICS

for Liz

"Mathematics possesses not only truth but supreme beauty

- a beauty cold and austere, like that of a sculpture."

Bertrand Russell

insects

Drawn by the window-light, two insects, contraptions of wire & glass perform Euclidean love. We are safe to assume they have arrived at these positions from first principles, *ab ovo*, so to speak, or at least without the benefit of the *Kama Sutra*. Nature beggars the imagination in so many unexpected ways.

While we are aground solidly on the bed, leviathans making token gestures with our tails.

So where is your Euclid now, my love, whose elegant proposals postulate the perfect forms by laying on of lines?

butterfly

The caterpillar is all belly but
the butterfly is obsessed by sex.
The chaotic flight is a safari
of painted ladies, a random whorey
weariness. Then she lays her down in dust
- the shuddering & the symmetric wings -
& drops her million peppery seeds
to probe with fetal hands & eat & die.

Each life is built on the last, simple
addition of bulk & belly, until
the ultimate appearance of order
& symmetry in the butterfly's wings.
The series has no meaning, a pattern
of recurrence. Each term is appetite.

mushrooms

This, she says, is the magic circle. These are the odd ones out. (All I saw was the odd ones out.) She pulled the strays & lo there was an obvious magic circle. This is the scientist in her, her mathematical eye. She knows the essence of things & what is negligible & that the truth is economical. Careful deduction teaches her reality is slightly exaggerated. She never reads between the lines, the lines themselves are the real thing. She knows the leys that mark the space between the a's & b's of lexicon, & reads the arcane signs.

astronaut

O what is it like to have a baby?
The mirror frosts around your Os & sends
you back pale light of hair, the hyalite
& glass seashadows. Your stippled flanks, love-
lighting every ripple, & you
pirouette. In the reach a fish rolls in
gracious arc. (Put out your nets. The seas are
full.)

The body is water. A baby space-

walks in a frictionless aquarium
in the moon. He is practising
to be an astronaut. His head is
too big to be born. It is a helmet
he must remove. He will emerge with it
under his arm, waving like Gagarin.

gift

"*He, acqui violetas, golondrinas....*"

No Hey Olvido (Sonata) Pablo Neruda

What should I give you if not a poem?
I am fearful of dangers - reluctance,
profanity - awaiting propitious
moments, a clear night, a quiet time. Things
you will simplify in the long run,
reductio ad absurdum. But love
puts the tenon in the mortise, & glues
the parts & the frame, holding us together.

But, love, there are violets, swallows, stones,
& these are referential constants
& prove, in spite of logic, that there are
gifts not within our power, things given
never to be returned, immediate
things that have their being in themselves.

aristotle's bat

*"Just as it is with bats' eyes in respect of daylight,
so it is with our mental
vision in respect of those things which are by nature
most apparent."*

Aristotle - *Metaphysics*

His eyes, I notice, are a waste of space.
The bat's life is less sensuous than light.
But inside the cone of his projection,
is an imagined topography
more exact & more intense than Shakespeare's,
a world where what is not immediate
is infinite, a world of bottomless
silences, of plane geometry
& linear inequalities. Nor
is he at home in a laboratory;
his thoughts turn to the purest processes.
His sphere is theory. So when he flies
it is in absolutes, following
a graphed terrain the dimension of his brain.

femme fatale

There was a dead star in her. Accelerated things approached, bent out of course, taking up orbital routes that centred on her. & her occasional moments of gravity were not enough to hold onto them (no one believed in her) & obscure equations threw them out again, screaming through space, peopling galaxies.

I heard once she fell under a passing subway train somewhere in Kensington, they had to shovel her up in a plastic bag. Later still she fell from a bridge. She's living outside London now, just off the Orbital. Works in the City, dealing in futures, pulling the money in.

parabola

A cloudburst on the hill, a fall of down,
is the death of a bird, an explosion
of feathers, the burst heart. The gunman
breaks cover & stoops & retrieves. He waves.
We glimpse her hightail & confident breast
& her loose head in the maw of his bag.
We are aware of the afterimage,
an untidy resonance in the light.

There is no swan-like end & the time comes
& snuffs the light & the sum is zero.
Oh but she had the trajectory
in her bones. She lived a parabola
between earth & air, a careless arrangement
of spars & down. She had no other day.

the 'opticks'

The Daunt lightship, pitching at her station,
the cold loom of light on a whale-black tide.
Great-grandfather Brice in his merchantman's
serge noting the state of the sea, marking
time,
reading the glass, pacing the planks from
gunwale to gunwale. The edge of his world
was the surf-line of winking lights on shore -
the secular world of the keeper of light.

By complex approximations range
& clarity is achieved. Light is a thing
that there are no absolutes in:- *Aragand*
lamp, diotptric lens - though the language of
light
is symbolic the practice is ordinary
& Newton's ghost walks through it.

sight reductions

& in the half-mirror the impression of moonlight gathers, then the appearance of a leaden disc or coin & heads dip together & then we know where we are & the place is exact. We have taken the altitude & it is time for sight reductions & numbers. There is little certain about the moon but my uncle trusted their numbers 1,000 times & he was amazed - the symmetry & the ineluctable locus that marked him at the meridian between Murmansk & home, in the moonlight, on a cold sea.

THE SAFETY OF WOOD

You were twenty-seven when you remembered
that he had climbed this hill the night he
died,

a thin man with bicycle-clips, carrying
a treat of chips for you, wrapped in an old

Munster Express. He fell dead in the street &
someone
stole his wallet. You were a child & he was
making

a new bed, a big girl's bed, instead of your
cot,
your carpenter father. Ever since, you long

for the comforting roughness of the grain,
the heft of it to the hand, the safety of wood.

Like the cherry at our gate, the sycamore,
the deep timber eaves, our old front door

raddled with glass, the secret Miro face
shaped in the leading, a charm against wind

& very little else. Our mahogany bed
with the warped headboard, as big as a ship,

sheer-sided, impractical, a place to shelter
in,
linen like sails driving us safely to the isles

of the blest.

Our wooden windowsills deep as ramparts,
gleaming at the world, with polished reserve.

You know there is no hidehole here, no perfect
curtainwall that can keep out the raiding enemy

the ratatat on the brass knocker,
death knocking, standing on ceremony.

But mindful of the thin man with the bicycle-
clips
who went out & never came home again you always

say goodbye twice, hand on the wood of the
door-frame,
trusting it to be there when you come back.

SICK CHILD

Spindle-thin, uneasy axis,
his cheeks kindle against her.
She is his armature,
equation of stress & distress.

When she cradles him
he is a bundle
of broken sticks,
an armful of kindling.

FINDINGS ON A SEACOAST

sea & land

All along this stretch of coast
the sea has its work cut out for it -
it shifts its weight against the cliffs
& the friable stone flitters into sand;
it etches shelving where children swim
to lure them in; it humps its silt
into the inlets, then humps it out again;
it afflicts houses, obscuring
window-glass with salt.

the beam

At the Flat Rock
the world is different. Black slabs
swivel buttocks to the waves.
The path across them is precarious.
In a cave there I found
a black cross-tree, a roof-beam,
a pillar of wood
wedged in the cave's groin,
keeping the cliffs apart,
eaten & etched, retaining only
the remnants of fairing,
safe at last, lodged in the geology
of the womb.

the people

At Guileen a house fell
into the sea one night. It was empty.
Next door, neighbours woke
in the morning-after calm & found
their garden gone, the garden wall
cocked over the cliff
like a petrified erection.
A few houses down two brothers
went to lift their pots & drowned
in sight, seaburst on the Bruhóg rock.
The crooked paths wind to the sea
& old men launch lobster-boats
or sit in car-seats at their front doors.
If you stare out you barely feel
the empty space. Do not look down
to see the cliff hooked away under you,
the concave sweep down to the sea.

buoy-yard

In the buoy-yard of the lighthouse
the formal shapes of cone & can,
green & red, the topmark ciphers:
the concrete has been whitewashed,
the keeper's pride & joy. There is green water
at the pier. I dive down & find
darkness without stars, ear-splitting
silence, pressure, pain, strange fronds
& fluid tentacles. On the way back
the broken colours of the buoy-yard
light me to the surface.

the accident

A capstone of cloud has settled
on the low hills, closing the valleys down.
This place is famous for its fog.
I dip the lights & head for home
resigned to the muffled crawl, watching
for haloes in the rear-mirror,
watching ahead for the loom of a light.
The edge of my world is the estuary
mud-flat varicosed with streams,
the roadside alder trees.
I come upon the breached shell of a car,
a road spattered with glass & blood.
Where has the driver gone?
I think of him dragging his body
into the alders, heading for high ground,
to escape the amniotic mud,
the chest-constricting water, the fog.
There is no cave, no house, no light.
He will die on the fog-bound hillside,
drowning in the wet air.

BEYOND YOUGHAL

Maidin Domhnaigh 's mé dul go hEochaill

A fine autumn's morning, out beyond Youghal,
a suspicion of breeze lifting dresses & hair,
sun on the wide sweep of bay & the river:
such a morning! If I should chance on a poet

(a dead poet, like most of them) coming perhaps
from Lismore, or Donncha Rua home from Cobh,
I would not be surprised. It is all implied.
Transcendence is in the air, unknown to
fishermen

& people eating sandwiches at Council picnic
tables.

There are coaches grating past, full of dead
men

from the roadhouses of Cork or Waterford.

& crossing the bridges, where two men were
lifted

to death by a strong breeze, I thought I could
still see

the skull of their van half-in half-out

of the estuary mud & their faces flat on the
glass

like human goldfishes on the wrong side of the
bowl.

ABANDONING ITHACA

for Anton & Carol-Ann Floyd

return to ithaca

Ithaca looms out of the mist,
a humpback's silent breach.
The sea is deeper here
than at home, the echoes drown.
In Vathí the stones are sharp,
the mountain winds fall down

like blinding slingshots.
We know the story, or the bare
bones; Odysseus in secret
walking the olive groves
finding Penelope embattled,
a bewilderment of lovers.

There's something lacking too.
We'll never drop our headline
into Homer's words.
Maybe one past is enough
for any of us. It should
be enough to find

Cúchulainn or crooked Finn
in cunning Gaelic,
or track the rambling wheel-ruts
of Tennyson's killarney car,
it may be a sufficient myth,
maybe enough to save us.

a stone

Bring me a stone from Ithaca,
you said. My friends,
there is nothing Ithaca would
rather part withal.
The stones would break your heart.

But if I could bring you
the stony sound of the cicadas,
if I could bring you
the unbreathable heat
you would have a something

to turn into wood or paint.
But a stone is such a small thing
on Ithaca's broken face.
Even the islanders
have found no peaceful use for it.

leaving

They are abandoning Ithaca.
They have no Troy to go to.
Australia & New York
are closer than empty shells
across the Hellespont.

Concrete houses look
sternly across Kioni bay
onto a fishless sea.
Earthquake & poverty.
These stubborn people

could make common cause,
in Melbourne or the Bronx,
with Spiddal & Dunquin,
swapping subtle jokes,
complaining about tax.

I imagine a currach here,
a sharp edge in the water.
The hump of Ithaca
could be the Blasket.
I can hear his creaking oar.

GNOSIS IN EAST CORK

knowing the weather

The rain under the trees is slow,
the leaves blink
& he is reminded of wind-chimes.
The news predicted lightning,

& it is just the day
that splits & reveals
something infernal
above the East Cork hills.

man of the world

Sea lurches up the blowhole
a reprise toilet-flush,
7-Up bottles, deodorant cans, sticks.
A plastic bag
swims upward like a jellyfish.

I know this
is the arsehole of the world,
an old god's gut
rumbling & incontinent.
Here is the terminus.

godparent

Some god's horse
put a hoof here
& made this horseshoe bay.
I knew it for
thirty years.

I crawled out of it
in cretaceous times,
with no clear view
of where I was going,
a spermy sea
dribbled after me.

I can still hear
the tide ticking
through the wormcasts
& bladderwrack,
promising godparents.

the efficacy of prayer

Something must have given
the old god a charge then
(the bone-moon stood still).
An electric fingernail
dipped in shit
created consciousness.

There was no second chance.
Now, seamy & inconstant
the idols lose their energy
in perversity.
There'll be nothing new
from that quarter.

THE FIRE PEOPLE

*'Not to release them
from their ancient curse"*

Derek Mahon *"Last of the Fire Kings"*

Over there beyond that stretch of water
there are people who are born in fire:
their hair is the colour of fire
their eyes flash like lighthouses
their hands are as hot as steam
their loins are like cinders
their feet scorch the stones
their houses are built inside out
their roofs are open to the skies
& they sleep on water

& this is not a curse or a visitation
& they are not gods or devils
& they neither burrow nor fly.
It is just a different kind of life
& it would consume you entirely.

THE GUNBOAT IN THE MUD AT BALLINACURRA

What hurts the eye
is her persistence,
her adamantine silence.

The rotting punts,
trawlers, salmon yawls
put up with oblivion

with provincial gravity,
skeletal sides raised
in the mud, flayed animals,

inverted spiders, a welter
of strakes & gunwales,
slob marking the wake.

The buck tooth
of an abandoned grainstore
cants over them. The quay

eases its stones onto the weed
like a black maternal breast.
The harbour packet no longer calls

bartering coals for greens.
but leaden in lead mud,
square-veined by rust,
bulging rivets, the gunboat

is arrogant with history, under
crossbarred gantries.

No small port will gentle her sort.
When the wall is gone
& the gantries crumbled,

the gunboat will still divide
the young flood & drive
the homing boats wide of their course.

SERVICE ALBUM

Gunboats on the Yang-Tze River;
manning the yard at Portsmouth;
some old boat half-steam half-sail;

hammocks between decks & the tot
of rum - the old navy where you grew up.
The Hood by night, lit up like a city

of order, the nightwater black as oil;
the phosphorescent oars of a shore-party
in a twelve-oar cutter, jaunty, quarrelsome.

The steel plates stood between you
& chaos. The whale-sound of ships
plunging at anchor was maternal.

The night the *Glowworm* sank, holds full
of shells for Stalin, in a sea freaked
with diesel flames you saw the knife-prow

of your ship prick out your mates like tapers,
a vengeful god over the arctic, his sky
alive with searchlights & aurora borealis.

BURYING JJ

We climbed the hill, leaving
the glass-calm bay, the bright
village houses, & found ourselves
stumbling with your box
in a graveyard mined with briers,
sweeps of stone buried in grass.

These limestone walls were raised
with mortar made of seasand:
they weep in heavy weather,
in sunshine mica gleams.
Names here go back to Cromwell.
How many knew the knife,

the shot, the ball, the blade?
I admire their rootedness,
the way they persist. Their names
attend your burial,
a dead impressment
turned out to welcome you,

though you used to say you
dodged them all by running off
to war; the farmers sons
& butchers sons, the neutral friends,
who never left the sod.

You will be more at home among
the jetsam graves of sailors
who enlisted for the clothes,
who spewed their gorge
on the whale's world, dupes
of the sirens gone for a song:
our uncle Willie, mate, third class,

died of thirst in a lifeboat
in the Indian Ocean; Uncle Joe
who fought at Jutland;
brother Dónal, leading stoker,
mined off Alex in the *Neptune*,
all hands lost in the wreck;

ship's carpenter, Ed Williams,
& leading seaman, Westy West,
your best friend. Three times
the ocean went for you,
(torpedoes & magnetic mine)
& threw you out like a bad coin

between Scapa & Murmansk,
shit & guns & fear
in the guts of your ship.
Against the odds you died in bed,
a haven home you thought,
after all the shiftless years;

but death got past the booms
& put one in before you knew.
There was no klaxon to start you
from your sleep when the wolf
came through the dark perimeter.
Never a word of the growth
gathering like ivy in your gut.

In Murmansk one winter,
when the portholes froze
like coins on a dead face,
your nerves taut as a hawser,
between sleep & watch
you heard the ghost of voices
in your head: *We lost the Neptune.*
That was your brother dead
& it was months before you knew.

The churchyard yews & oaks
are full of wind today,
straining like masts in a head-sea.
You are holding station
out on the edge, standing by
for signals. The evening blinks
& you are gone, a grey shape,
head down, slipping into
the arctic night, sheltered by silence.

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