

Goldcrest Falling R

GOLDCREST *regulus regulus*

Our smallest bird. Has needle-like bill, large dark eyes and proportionately large head with seemingly short neck. Underparts greenish with two pale wingbars and underpart yellowish buff. Adult male has black-bordered orange crown, that of the female being yellow; juvenile lacks adult's crown markings. During breeding season, found in areas of mixed woodland, conifer forests and sometimes in gardens. In winter, becomes more widespread and then seen in deciduous woodland as well.

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(*title to be checked)

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The Young Fire-Tamers of Knockaville

Those days it was the world's most natural thing to do,
to cradle fiery combustion in our calloused hands.
We vied, one with the other, who could hold
the glowing turf the longest in the firegame.

When the stroke-aged school mistress limped outdoors
we played Prometheus at national school.
Old Mammy Burke dragged her bad foot
to the toilet. In her absence, we played with fire.

Christy McNamee, he was the star performer.
His eyes never flinched as he held the ember.
He could turn it for ages through deft fingers
talking of pucks or the antics of scrub bulls:

go on, dare you, hand to hand, blow the flame.
Your go to move the live coal palm to palm.

Ordered Out To Play

The parents made such a meal out of it all.

“Out with ye now into the back meadow
and play!”

Your mother’s order after a neighbour
cut her short, “Mind the childre!” in the words
of Chaucer’s people, the first settlers.

Salacious goings on were touched upon
downtown in Westmeath.

“*What* did I axe ye?” We trooped from the kitchen
through the backyard where roosters straddled hens,
drakes their ducks,

sty bonhams decoded reciprocal scent of pee.

Up into the back meadow, as we were bid,
where cow rose on cow, the young on the old
if round, if no means of, chance for copulation.

In the next field, a bull with licks, many groans
heifer-shadowing(such moans)

rose for ejaculation, grazed daisied ground.

Generally the sanity of shagging all around.

To Rob a Nest

On our Holy Communion day I confided to Bridie
as we walked up the slope to her father's workshop
"I want to rob a nest today, so I do."

She upbraided me and said she'd tell
if I didn't say I wouldn't and three times.
Well, not on that day anyway. She looked at me.

But the evil way within me had taken root
and through the days that followed I looked round
the April hedges for robins, chaffinch in the walls.

Each day a wren entered, re-entered the thatch
above our back window, a tell-tale sign.
The yellow beaks of fledglings trusted me.

And I became the ringleader, plotting day and time
with the least likelihood of our getting caught.
Towards dusk was best, around milking time.

And we played piggyback to desecrate the nest
Throw the fledglings like evicted on the grass
Where they hopped at our feet near enough, yet not yet, to fly.

It must have been the furore of the motherwren round the house
woke the head-flanked milkers strigging in the shed
and we scattered to the wind, cowered out of reach.

I saw Tommy place the fledglings back in the thatch
while the motherwren clung to the wireless pole
crediting a morsel or so of trust in humankind.

Lucky for me she took to the nest and her young.
I heard it tasked into my unreddened ears for days
to slink away daily alone with greater shame.

To Make the Tea

One might be lucky, or unlucky, to have female cousins
in the days when they played interminable babbyhouse.
Who were told to get out from under her feet in the kitchen
which was small, and when all the beds were made.

And we boys already in the yard, roared out of the way,
as Clydesdales were marched off down tillage fields. We
jumped aside as huge iron-rimmed cart wheels neared,
slewed over and back on cobbles with a grinding sound.

Negotiating forks three times our manly size,
we were assigned the doleful tasks of byres,
or stood knee-high in the horse-shed by the well to
fork out horseshit or stand tongue-whipped at noon.

There were other chores assigned to us as well, the girls
calling from the babbyhouse with leaky teapots in their hands.
Unbuttoned, or unzipped, taken in their silky fingers
we filled their steaming pots, suffering “it’s *wake*”

Or mid-morning praise,” You could trot a mouse across *that!*”
Critique of kidneys and their function. We learned to be
turned on, or off, at will in their chapped hands, like a tap.
They shouted for us to come back, re-christen the pot.

Seated in the half-empty turfshed, little fingers crooked,
they raised broken cheynes with the latest gossip
to their lips, spilt our exertions on the turf mould.
Invited in for tea, we were taught to say *no, thank you,*
with grace.

Blood Oranges

Harry O'Hara, six-foot tall, pipe in his teeth always lit
never short of an orange for a child when he rambled,
never came in the house with one hand as long as the other.

Seen bathing naked in his late sixties in the stream
dammed for the potatoes one balmy July evening;
his favourite expletive was *Bejakers O Bejakers!*

Seated on his allotted chair out in the farmyard –
someone leant over his shoulder, held the piglet,
another splayed the back trotters on his knees.

He'd already sharpened his big penknife to a razor-edge
bent over, slit the skin, flipped out the little testicles
which he sliced clean off, tied sinews, sowed the skin
in seconds;

afterwards poured on lukewarm water white with Dettol.
Waiting for the next pig, he talked of the latest politics
like a surgeon talking yachts between life and death.

Sometimes someone else sat down, held the screaming piglet,
just to show no coolness (little tearful faces at the pigsty gate)
while he knelt on two hempen sacks for the next few geldings.

Feastday for the snarling dogs, the neighbouring dogs come in.
All the thrown dispensable pig testicles. But the best would be
those blood oranges deep down bulging his greatcoat pockets.

First on the Pond Ice

The sickening crack
as the pond-ice groaned, serrated below my eyes.
My depth and more to the bottom.
Breath stopped in my windpipe.

Trapped beneath the air-bubbled, sliding, mirror-like ice.
The sound, the pool, were real.
Winter deluges. Black ice. Thick ice in watery tiers.
Bare ash, beech and elm stood round like sentinels

in thorn hedges at right angles, whose diminishing crimson haws
blackened in the steady north-east wind.
A knife plunged randomly round my red lungs.
What was level, true underfoot, had given.

The axis of my universe was up for grabs --
How the freezing water rushed my kneecaps!
I saw the world tilt on me out on the ice,
felt rapefear in that forge-field hollow.

Found the adrenalin to spring toward the edge of the pond
studs digging in the lower tiered ice cracking too, fell flat
with flailing hands feet kicking out froglike. I bellied
to the first grass tuft:

pulled clear with the aid of a withered dock,
saw at my back the centre ice beyond repair
no matter what frosts might stay with us for
fun evenings, ice fit no more for skating on.

At a Skulling of Cattle

No bawling as the nose ring gripped, as stripped off carts, chains barely cracked as back with forefeet touched, our hands bowled the young bullock over. Orgy of kicking of a sudden went numb. Eyes rolled upward and a harsh tongue lolled sweat grass.

Red bricks of lifebuoy and hot water to wash the bullock's head she left on a shed window sill for fear the beast lunged. As the sawing of horns to the bone started in the dusk with lanterns, my mother thought the mist that fell was mist falling or midges grasped vainly in the bloody fist.

Sawing through the horns sounded poor, like sawing a hempen sack, or sacks together as the bullock peed. The collie barked. Crows cawed in the twilight eternally towards Lynch's and the pine plantation. Water splashed from a basin as she lashed the milky water on sliced flesh where the horns had grown.

Head runny with blood to be dry before morning, and the flies, the bullock unchained staggered off shaking his hornless skull all down the long garden. Then the next bullock, and the next, eyeing us through torn galvanized.

All over bar the handwashing, wiping blood off the saw with April grass. In the kitchen as men sat down to a meal, a faint odour of blood on overcoats hung in the porch. Outside, below the elm tree, thin bracelets of hair adorned horns piled in a heap at the gate post into the long garden.

Young Calf Dying

His eyes rolled to the sky at the cowhouse door
where three of us carried him, laid him down, in from the frisking pasture.
His brothers and sisters grazed on in the lush cow-slipped field.

I remember most the mid-May eyes. And the whites.
How they widened at the end! Everybody silent.
Calf mouth was frothing as he gasped for breath.

Westmeath was a county where death called like the postman.
Be prepared, whether fattened animal, or old man.

Swallows flew in and out twittering at their nests.

The late dew had barely dried on his white hooves
delicate as her only set of porcelain in the glasscase.

I do not recall what malady left him prostrate kicking,
made him bawl so. On farms then it happened all the time.
Mortality for the young where half a century before
children fell down in swathes from diphtheria.

But the eyes! Staring at us, through us, round him
as we cradled his head with an armful of fresh straw.
Our mother, "It's natural, his last long look
at all the world".

.....

Caoineadh na hÓige/Lament for Youth

Long dock roots trailed from his pockets and from mine
to be fired high up on any May-time whitethorn hedge
left to wither, slip root-dead, sapless, back to the earth.
“I have seen the two days,” he’d stop, turn to me
as we hoed the potatoes in the mountain field;
that long ago when he still grubbed, moulded drills,
and there was not a deathly spray for every weed.

“The two of them died and I grown a bare thirteen
and I’d to march behind a plough to feed ourselves
scream of the gulls in my ears, wailing poorhouse
as the old horse strained up the field we’re in now.
Five brothers down to the cradle and three sisters,
I became a god in their eyes out in our four fields.
Nellie skint the rabbits, stewed them for the table.

“Thin as a whistle those days, my arms grew strong
piking hay on endless ricks for farmers better off.
Old Bartle said to me, ‘Son, go round the far side
pike up again what you threw across the men.’
The rick-builders couldn’t handle my forkfuls.
And all the while I dreamt markets, buy and sell.

“Staffords, Walshes, Lynams to their credit paid
me back in labour, the few bob. I bought a Pierce
first around and bid good riddance to the scythe,
dealt in pollies, vegetables, pigs, sheep from the Cheviot
Hills till noisy yard and fields breathed with new life.
Nellie kept the poultry; Kathy churned; Mary Ann

“Sold butter. We were family till Lord Kitchener
fingered us as we played Sunday pitch and toss,
heard of Dublin 1916 here in sleepy Knockaville.
When De Valera broke jail, I dipped a branch in tar
at Coralstown where they tarred the Dublin road
whooped the horse and cart home with the news.

“Old Tom Coyne by the cherries muttered to his cattle
‘Is that an idiot or drunk let loose over on the road?’
Ferment everywhere. Guns wrapped in the loft we’d
poplared, hid in that double ditch across. Old aunt Ellen
at her rosaries. Joe and Larry never home, in ambushes.
Tans marched me off day in day out for questioning.
Richard sailed off for the shilling one fine day to France,

“Survived, took flight with others like autumn swallows
wrote with Frank from New York soup kitchens for their share.

And we'd nothing to send them, your seven brothers born,
the Economic War well on, and good men selling out,
a greater human wreckage than even in twenty-one,
'Rivers of Blood' that forever divided Joe and me."

I could see then why the two'd never touch on politics
when Joe motored down from Gneevebane Hill with our cousins.
Talk of cattle, crops, gales, floods, anything but parties.
Joe, reluctant storyteller, jeering the Free State pension
proud IRA till his sons begged, "We could use the few bob,"
and the barren fifties fallowed to the sixties, seventies, our times.

Rabbits bred and burrowed round our old tree cairn
where I declaimed Wordsworth in my speech-stoppage teens,
round the lone flowering whitethorn where the stillborn
were buried in the peaty hollow. The esker stones
grew round it picked by our generations at tillage
as year by year we hoed drills on the stony slopes.

Oblivious to Bells

We had waited all that March day to hear the bell on the radio
my mother and I, to hear St. Patrick's Bell on his feastday,
the very bell the saint's fingers tinkled as he walked Ireland
or, maybe, his bell had a lovely gongey sound to it like the one

the boy servers whacked in Coralstown, three times for the
Consecration
three times for the Agnus Dei as grown men beat their breasts
before Massgoers rushed the Sunday altar rails;
and we had our icy chores, too, well done in time

turf in, eggs gathered, hens in, gates closed, cows watered,
hay fed to calves, and little on our brains but Patrick's bell
just found in Armagh, how it would sound, supper things
all put away and the battered radio tuned in to Athlone.

And He oblivious with his Western by the open turf fire.
If the house itself caved in, He wouldn't move, she said.
But we were all faithful eyes looking for the bell on the wireless,
the seconds ticked away, waiting like two Jobs for the climax,

one more bony documentary on Brit Patrick and the Irish;
then it came, more whimpered like the decrepit clappers it was,
a toyless joyless thing, not even in it the metallic glimmer
of a soul and we laughed ourselves sick till the faithless tears

flowed and He wondered why we were on a roll around
the kitchen filling the hot water bottles for the night,
another skinner. We gave Him blackcurrant in a cup,
left him on the prairies to rake the morning embers.

The Death of Loogey

We've grown too obsessed by far with fields and gardens
what year our two crab apples octobered in profusion
what year our lone beautiful copper beech was felled,
or the news was this gap dug open, that one sown with quicks.

I remember Loogey climbing in to us through Peter's gap.
I stood petrified midfield. Magpies cackled in a bramley apple.
Our pony trap would soon fall apart too beyond the pippins;
one shaft broke, then the other, the step, even a child's runnels
the reins made

I loved in the wood. You're all too engrained in my affections:
the four river fields, Coyne's, our mountainfield whitethorn,
moínín where dancers once celebrated Grattan's Parliament;
the fields our father converted into one, fields he divided.

Tomorrow we'll repoplar the corn loft for other uses,
grow up. No mother will come, oil lamp in one hand,
rescue us with the other hand from the striding ogre,
"Loogey will get you," poor Loogey crying after us.

Tramps

They were always on the dusty summer roads,
an incessant stream, loners, never in twos,
as if they were hugging some deep secret
they didn't want other people to know of.

They'd call at the kitchen door mostly off-meal
or after-meal times (when the men had left)
wondering if there was a sup on the pot
or a bite of bread. Looking out the window, at the table,
suss sheds for a doss.

Mostly oldish males in flight from their past
(old tall big-breasted Loogey was an exception),
they knew the short-cuts from parish to parish,
said little. You never asked what ailed them.

Sometimes the word travelled after them, so-and-so
was once a doctor in Roscommon, another a de-frocked priest,
someone had lost his farm one night in a poker game;
their families and communities had spat them out.

It was not in their nature to beg like the travellers
so they would lift their caps as if in deference,
in hope. I once sawed a whole pan-loaf for one
till our hazel eyes met over first names.

Something wrapped for them; a little pep, then, in their step,
their stained windy greatcoats filling out like Suibhne's wings,
they hit the road to put down at some other house miles away,
where they might expect the same, and no questions asked.

Death in the Family

After supper, they'd bury you
sorrowing one to the other for you never bothered sheep.

All the late sunlit afternoon you lay, my brothers' collie
by the garden hedge, but out on the south-facing riverfield;
your white teeth bared in little ivories for your tongue.
Glossy bluebottles circled your open almond eyes.

It must have been late August or so for sweet pippins
up in the old tall apple trees ripened red and unseen
the orchard side of the hedge with the bitter crab.
Your bushy tail was rigid. Your thin legs, too.

Corn was on the noisy mind of reaper and binder;
the gold barley bearded me like an older brother.
Oats and wheat glowed in the Assumption sun.

And I who loved to raise up my two arms
cross them round your ruff neck, rub your slender nose
that tapered,
touch the black-tipped ears that looked forward
hurried past you in the hot sun. Your bluebottles lit on me
and I was so afraid in my heart of the dead.

All Souls

We're calendered to November and its falling stars.
Yesterday the clocks were set, wound toward an old torpor.
Our heavens flicker with a listless incandescence, if a mite
sharper,
and the lighthouse beacon, at tea, into the earlier dark

swivels across green seaboard hills that do not need it.
October's disappearing with many a deciduous beech
flogged after frost, with flecks of amber on the wood,
while the elderly
remember offerings, the month of the holy souls.

Bridie, only last Sunday, at the back of Peter's joinery,
we stared long into the sinking sun and watched spirits
of the blessed
slip in hundreds past our hurt streaming eyes, ascend
from neighbouring fields

that will change names. At our backs, your father's new
workshop silent as the grave gave no sound:
no planes, no mallets, no chisels, saws, sliderules, tradesmanship.
We were spared wars in the fifties
so let's be thankful, not dismiss our nightly galaxies,
our cousinhood like leaves.

Old Style Country Funeral

The casual mourners lean on black railings each side of the graveyard
gates.

The black birettaed sun glares by, thumbs his late showery texts.
Men, mid-week Sunday spruced at this eleven-o'clock hour
discuss death, the recent sales, future cattle-market prospects.

Sorrow here jigs about, hands in pockets. Feet in a puddle,
jokers, unconsciously almost, drag their loud thinking curses
across a jarred blue heaven which stumbles like a hangover
among the clouds. Women pass, cringe, zip up their purses.

In a far corner of the graveyard, the digger's chiselled out a neat
mortise from the black earth, covered up the once dainty bones
of grandmothers, or grandfathers, aunts who are widespread.
The gravedigger's conscientious as hell, fingers white stones.

Within the little country chapel, there are the tokens of mourning.
The coffin floats on a high pedestal at the altar rails amid three

crotchety, venerable, dull as ash, yellow-boned ancient candle holders which, set down in triangular, prow to a faraway sea.

Between family, relatives and attendance proper, a chasm forms. The bell tolls. At intervals. Back seats tremble. Mêlée. The pious are roughed and manhandled into the wall. Arms pinion arms. The seat- chasm looms more obvious now, if not so ominous.

Acolytes in white and black canter out with thurible, holy water. Between bright elided Latin pipings, their eyes travel the cross of the aisle, down to the intent funeral cavalry at the back of the church, cap, coin offerings in their tight fists, the ceremonial dross.

Last Amen. The charged aisle is gut-thick as men first file by. The parish priest sits, reads his breviary, takes note, reading, projects his vacant stare the length of his dwindling aisle. Envelopes thrown on the offering table muffle the silver's weeping.

Black ties, gloves, diamonds on sleeves stand in for grief. Bereaved survey the many neighbouring faces wending past, rafter names like almanacs, ascertaining bye and bye the absent, whose funerals they'll not be found dead attending.

I, too, walker from the Graves shoulders down, pass by. Never met the coffined man. I feel his own snatch at my breath. Suddenly I'm with MacNeice upon his Acheron ferry watching all the dead dying, paying for their death.

Out in the graveyard, the crow-spired and glare-filled wet sunlight blooms. One man can't wait, hurries home to grub mangolds. Worked to the bone. They stay inside, pray for us all, the old maids, Mary and Nan, theirs the headscarved, warm, rosaried indifference of stone.

But the hearse driver's demure, purr-happy-eyed as a kitten, no need to slam the glass-eyed boot, wait a bit, proceed; his work done save only if need be to trolley the coffin, or sons, male cousins shoulder it for the last godspeed,

lever deep down into the midland clay one more good christian after the final prayers and clay thrown down on the name plate. Two clanging shovels rend the accidental heavens assuring us of resurrection, while mourners are already making for the white-glossed pearly gates.

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As it Was in the Beginning

I heard my father cheering in heaven
a primal scream, like Conor Mortimer's
electrifying the Plains to the Ox Mountains
when Mayo made the All Ireland in 2004.
But this was flat midland in an old orchard
whose rampant burdocks brazened shoulder high
defiant to topper and even back tractor wheels.
I took scythe, breasting hooks to the wilderness
felling nettles, hemlock and the looping briar
made good over days the neglect of fifty years.

I raked the weed-matted ground, left it walkable,
barrowed the rank heaps to a compost spot
so chanced the mower out at full throttle
leaving the turf-shed end with the new plums
all the way to the young gold hornet crab
(Luke McNamee felled the old crab tree
when I was a boy),
and it was just as I had the first swathe cut
the hair on my nape tingled with his voice,
I heard his roar let rip with a thousand roars
in the stadium of wild midland communion.
He grabbed his felt hat, shook it in the air
on a Croke Park Sunday when the Jobber shone,
Jim Casserly, a forgotten dozen more, Jim Walsh,
when Westmeath hurlers scored the third goal
against a Wexford side with the Rackards;
Bobby our perishing rock in their defence
that would prevail to the MacCarthy Cup.

Why did the orchard mean so much to him,
to leave me weak-kneed and my ears tingling,
perhaps all the birdsong dawns he spent there
till tillage, bog or markets drew him away
when not a weed offended the apple trees?
Perhaps these rare tall blemishless apples,
boughs so fruitful and centurial two broke
in 2004, or their avenue, between varieties
of Lambourne, Bramley, Beauty of Bath –
the avenue between the thirty-seven trees
excavated once again, shingled, fit for
rambling down?

Maybe the saints need space and reclamation
chance to wander in their loved earthly spaces;
apples whitening an avenue mostly for the robins
blackbirds, thrushes to feed on through to March;
cheered with food to sing up solo or in chorus
when blossoms canopy the apple trees in May
and you have to stop, stop at the back door,
stop to listen and admire?

Westmeath Lake, Still Life

adolescents dropping
from the wet springboard shatter
on crystal waters

anti-cyclone sky –
riplets make for the shoreline
July is anchoring

above the silver lake
swallows up in the white cirrus
pirouetting

lacquer of alder
lakewalks the petalled senses
sit down with me now

willywagtails
hopping from curt stone to stone
antidote to dreams

fishermen in boats
vitreous hands flick the fish
threshing scaly lightning

spumesmack the clinker
dying out of their amnion
shiver spasms of light

keelward keelward they go
slapped on competitive scales
boats at the jetty

Owel could be any lough
save maurauding Turgesius
lies here locally

see them on the lakebed
King Malachy encrusted all over
with the collar of gold

back to the present
wild yarrow mimics a single flower
for anyone who looks

the sky
curves more round primrosed hulls
that time of day

lagooned in the west
the sun on a sun-crimsoned ocean
lingers on the diveboard

wavelets at the shore
are lapping the bright pebbles
reefed by drainage

Óisíns on Tractors

who'll never get down to close a paddock gate,
it's not for them, the shitty meniality
of it, they would grow old of an instant.
Feet on mere clay, they'll none of it

betrothed to output in lit-up fields at night;
their chosen cab temperature is memorised,
standard "set and forget." They glide away,
sit back, enjoy the ride, their bums on seats

heated for those cold winter mornings
round Tír na nÓg. The Dyna – Vt life.
Infinite speed, too, from "super creep."

Who knows what's on their mind, linnet,
organics, or the latest decoupling news,
riparian zones to be farm stockproofed?

Mere mortals below them, we look to cereals
John's disease control, listen out for bells.

Near Tyrrellspass

I walk the gravelled arteries
of the Split Hills
and the Long Hill Esker;
all 5k, with scarce grass
thinning like a scalp
festuca altissima.
Touch in my passing
ash, hawthorn, oak, an Irish whitebeam;
finger primrose
kneel to bluebells
bittercress
cardamine impatiens
the only place
in Ireland.

Pungency, and its babies,
with narrow leaves
appear, then disappear
among the esker stones.

On the old and active faces of hillsides
yellow-wort and carline thistle
carlina vulgaris
beam in midland weathers.
Millennia like children
hear the polar torrents cease
watch the arctic ice retreat
till the gravels layered like the couples over there
settle into hills.

All that celtic entourage with kings
righting their broaches
across warring centuries
on their speeding chariots
sweeps across the esker;
here years ago Tyrrell and his men
sabotaged the British.

The land shrugs them off for pity's sake
like night mists, like recurrent nightmares
wakes to a pristine lake with yellow gorse
blackthorn blooms, a marsh with slender sedge;
greet a ranger or two like protective Gabriels,
slim students like botanicals on its soulcape.

Not many walking all over it, like heralds
where it's hazelled on the knolls.

Boy amongst Sparrows

In the draft plans for REPS 3, there was a paid measure proposed to install birdcages in farmyards.

He remembers the long garden ditch never brested for shelter,
hedge a good twelve feet high and the chirping sparrows
nesting every few dense feet there, the impenetrable, whitethorned
eloquence of their packed choruses of a late May afternoon
sustained into haymaking, corn, past chaffy haggards.

Standing among the last gold haystacks for the spring
he recalls Tony's hay benchknife that carved halfmoons
out of them and a white-beamed sun over wintry boughs
on a hurley Sunday his cousin Michael did not come:
a boy, as a boy, overcome with tears for this scene

though they were the days of family, of grain farms,
of oats tall in the stem lodged by a rogue shower
at the end of August when the first gale blew,
when crows and pigeons glided down in flocks
and we children were dispersed to scatter them.

Each midland house with its own tilled ripe cornfields
if goldstubbled, small by today's hedgeless hectares,
grain scattered freely in yards of rhode island red and sparrow,
grain fed to pigs and calves and ground in a barn where the new
electric grinder spread a fine white flour dust even out the door.

Contesting victual troughs with turkeys, ducks and geese
the sparrows have disappeared with the irregular grainfields
that fed them well. Their nests no longer impregnate our hedges.
Fledglings nested in the down of March feathers in a warmth
more homely than the mud rooms of blackbird and thrush.

Untameable, domestic, close and yet distant, these noisy birds
held assemblage over him, as a child in the yard, up in the great elm,
on the ridges of sheds and on the wrought iron gates into fields.
Their cheeky skulls are long fallen into nettles, mosses of the dyke,
covered in the ground like our various fathers and mothers

or our freckled cousins let loose in the back meadow
where sparrows of the air rose up for them in flocks,

sparrows, who battled with wyandottes for the chlorinda,
sparrows no strangers then in blue changeable skies.

The Wild Geese

It was a yearly happening
to rush to the door for if you were in the house,
that high-pitched honking in the sky

passing over. The geese flew mostly sideways
from the north west south south-east
across November trees gone bare.

A promise of snow for us in their grown-up plaints
but they flew on high like greyer than graceful swans
in their long necks a virility of ice-ridden times.

Look at them, look at them, we pointed, their wings like the arms of ballet dancers
grown dancers' wings in the now musicless heavens, but we heard them for an instant,
eavesdroppers on the whispering winds, on their skies to the wet sloblands.
No nuisance then to cattle or sheep-intensive acres, much less the correctness
of nitrogen swards: to peck and peck long intervals within ease of flight again
and the sea. We kept a minute's silence for the first birds as they passed over
while at school History caned our arms and legs in short pants with dates old
finger-gnarled Mammy Burke said were important as she sat back breathless
in her chair by the fire.

Neighbour met neighbour, stopped on the road,
Did youse see the wild geese flying over,
their legs crooked over the bars of bikes

looking up too late to the empty heavens.

As kids, we wished them like old kindred back
till they were specks lost on the sun's horizon.

Picking Damsels

I see you still high up stretching to each fruited twig
a rising October moon east of our damson tree

a nip, then, in the freshening east wind from Murtagh's
you shirt-sleeved up the branches after the tartiest

your fingers nimble as talons
closing on the velvet harvest

gathering the last of the damsons
the indigo sky at your back.

Balanced on a hook
from a trusty bough

the galvanized pail filled,
or nearly so, with tangy fruit

goodly-sized and wild;

*

half a century ago

we were tempted each autumn
by that swarthy twilit ripeness

on branches you could depend on
to gather your knees round;

you reached out to whet your tongue
spit the stone out from each damson.

A pale and placid midland moon
rose higher with a blackbird cry.

With ease of limb
you lay horizontal on the boughs you loved

lowered the full bucket
to a boy in corduroy.

In Memoriam

for Tony Ennis, d. 19 November 2001

Outside in the yard
the tall elm's rustling
and the moon's milky light
falls nearly the length

of our patchwork quilt
on this warm August night,
has all the time in the world
for an elfful of dry leaves,

spills in the open grill
of our dairy extension,
lights up our iron bed
the trunk at our feet.

I hear the mice
fritter the deeds of grandparents,
I see the bleached well reins
tossed in our window.

I feel its knot end
moist as it always is
sinking with clarity
into the depths.

Soon you'll cycle
from Farrell's in Cuinera
lie down at my side
my brother breathing,

my brother sleeping.

Making Hay in Cuinera

for Harry Whelehan

The taut cattle-rope was slung over a maple branch for a Montana
lawman,
sheriff, who stood up for rights, parameters of some old law
enshrined:
your comic's centre pages froze in my fingers that swallow-
twittering
day; side by side with you in the clover-withering sun my heart
sickened.

Comic-book lynching! You won't remember the wink, the
expedient
nod of the ranchers, the murderous onlookers. Up the sheriff
went;
he, who expected little quarter anyway from the howling coyotes,
or the lesser deputies warming to the mob with the cattle men.

Molly wound up for us a depth-cold glittering pail, we played,
heard her singing busy as falling rose petals arching the well,
trebles and quibbles of her cutlery along the kitchen table,
an accidental tuning or two on the rims of glass tumblers,
dinner laid out on the bare-board table for all at one sharp,
when in the gate, parking their forks at the pier, came the hay
makers striding with Billy Loran, Tony and Paddy Farrell.

You gave me my first comic as meadows were tethered into
rows for the making
as the buckrake somersaulted over a Julyful of white clover
and a doomed lawman was strung out over in Montana.

Another Private Idaho

What we know best in ourselves are the eyes of cattle
lowing to their slaughter. True, your whippoorwill

cornfields still abound. A few grey transitory
bales of straw speak the parable of your home
unpainted, a windmill with all windows broken,
wheatfields where no family bread is eaten.

Here is collapse in time
the kind construction that once went into timber.

I'm not so afraid now of one more empty house
how it comes cascading from the sky
within our little potato state.

No, I'm not so scared anymore
of ribs and rafters in its wake.

You crashed . Since you left though
our lives are more bereft in Idaho.

Slates Still Holding

During the hurricane on Christmas Eve
the electricity poles down, no nth
re-run of MASH, no oil lamp flickers
nothing but the fire to throw out light
and heat.

Sycamores I felled and chopped
two Junes past, well seasoned,
nurture flames in the grate.

Next county in Cork they're strapped
to ladders tying down slateless rafters
with tarpaulin.

Here the blue slates still hold good,
no beeches come crashing in on us
as we cower for the rogue gust.

No stars in the sky either but the myths
of reindeer, Bethlehem, and an old man
bundled across the world still hold.
The youngest sleeps. I take out presents
from black attic bags, gifts bought months ago.
A torn beech branch screeches in my ears
across the dormer window and the slates.
Nicholas is on a windy wing tonight.

From WLR
we hear the roads are blocked;
we're told not to dare out.
At John Gough's house
falling ivied trees
crash in an ash grove where the crows built.

Tomorrow a long haul to the local chapel
to hear of this storm as God's retribution
if at all, for most routes are crossed with trees.
Perhaps the high boreen by Pat Dobbyn's?
Stone mason second to none, his house
looks south across the foam-capped ocean.
Living by himself, beaten black and blue
tied up for a few coins, of old Waterford
gentility his worst days are yet to dawn.

At Richard Barron's
a huge dale tree is snapped in two;
its toy top misses tractors
tosses airborne across fields.

The signs are ominous; lightning jags,
the cry of branches just about holding.
Birds are torn from hedges and trees,
little talons were not meant for this;
against all my grown-up kids' sound advice
I toss three more logs on the blazing fire.
Sparks dart at us across the heartstone
and up and out into the crazy elements.

Custom has it I'm the last to leave the fire,

feast a little on what's left out for Nicholas

sycamore flames dancing in an empty room.

.....

Abyss of the Birds

During Hitler's War, held in Concentration as a soldier,
Messiaen, when he played piano for *Quatuor pour la Fin
du Temps*,

lit up the eyes of prisoners like stars in a frosty January
French, Polish and Belgian soldiers in their thousands
crowding round him and his players for the première.
A froggy joke at best to the listening Stalag guards.

Messiaen'd spent the previous April and May dawns
in his mouldy bunk moulding in his mouth the mouldy
crusts in that place of starvation, not even a snail round,
waiting for the first bird calls to jot them down as given.
He could not walk freely, wander the woodlands beyond
the barbed wire of the perimeter to animate the chorus,

that addled him a lot. Master of composition, he wrote on
but how in hell to play the piece; the best he could muster
was a past-it cello with three strings, one clarinetist lucky
with a clarinet; the old key-sticking piano Messiaen'd play
himself(he'd wheedled a fiddle from the smoky guardroom).
Grecian, Indian and Western Classical, with the ad-lib birds,

Quartet would be deliciously off-centre in its first performance.
Playing with the birds gave him four of the seven movements.
Thereafter, snatches of St. John's *Apocalypse* held in secret,
the violin solo for his Jesus would be gentle and expansive.
Swastikas with their alsations sniffed at the bars on the page:
What? Plainchant here? Messiaen's white lie, "it's about
doves."

Laughing, they left the madman with his ear cocked for the birds
across barbed wire.

In our times, too, the birds fall down hardly noticed in the world.
"After the first cold snap with winter frosts you'll find them
littering the forest floor," Patrick Comerford from the Irish
Wild Life Service confides in farmers at a REPS lecture.
"Goldcrests with frozen feathers lighting up the leaves."

The most diminutive of Irish birds, their wingbars gone pale
with underparts of gold darting through the mixed woodlands
not content till they perch on the treetops of deciduous beech;
their music will be seen and heard and hidden, that's their will,
falling too when the stars are at their most piercing brilliance
and not a sound from them across the universe, and so light,
not even the displacement of an autumn leaf upon the earth.

Górecki at the Piano

As he sat at the piano, spoke to us in chords
with pellucid lucid eyes about his *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*

he recalled how in '45 as a Polish boy,
with other boys, he ran into Auschwitz when the Nazis left,

there were so many bones they just kicked them round the place
sometimes a callow skull or two they kicked one to the other as in soccer

as one boy will kick a football to another boy
and, then, Górecki, he turned away to choke in chords.

And on that video, as she stood to sing, Zofia Kilanowicz, son-howling
Queen of Heaven, to words written on the white-washed Gestapo walls

of Zakopane, in misery and hope, by Helena, "Mamo, don't cry,"
one saw *Nakbah* in Palestine, three generations in rubble, the same mothers

howling below the same windows with all light blotted out, as Apache
helicopters shadowed Ilan Pappé crying in the darkening wilderness.

Waiting for Van Gogh to Finish

From daybreak his two manic fists painted the wheeling crows,
the caws of crows, over yesterday's hailstone-battered wheat.
Lightning storms. Deluges. Gales. These pass for weather now.
The sun nails him and his flaming hair out mid-way in our wheat.

Awed in the shade of his frenzy, we grudge him one more day
over his easel and palette. Crossing close to him on the cart, I
stopped, looked over his stooped shoulders. Tubes like a masturbate
on the canvas, but his eyes into mine swung sharp as scythes.

So I got down. Let the cleg-bitten horse go feed a bit on the corn.
Offered him, "God bless the work!" Mug and more of buttermilk,
but he was too far snared in his art, nor took the drink I held;
knew he was wasting time as the heavens split and crashed.

Snoozing under a rippling poplar after we'd eaten, drunk, pissed,
we heard the shot but thought it just one more rip of thunder.
Pi rre it was saw him stagger like a drunk out of the corn.
Like madmen, we cut, bound, stoked and stacked his acre
in an hour.

The heavens themselves held off till we had just about done. Rain over,
Pi rre then went down to Gachet's with a canvas the artist had
forgotten.

The Night They Played Old Petyr Down

On the evening they play your No.6, O yes, that score
for the umpteenth, and the first time, on Irish tour,
I cannot attend the concert because of a domestic
chore.

There is a junior soccer league in heady progress.
Fatherly, choleric and resigned, I ferry boys to and fro.
The match time is sacrosanct over in Kilmac.

I drive past the I.T. dome, note its packed car park,
hear in my ears the epiphanic, your last days desolate,
see your orchestral April cars hearsed in like sardines,

aficionados of the heady waltz of joy and youth
which washed over me first time, too, all of thirty
summers ago in an empty Wilton common room,

my first student LP from a philharmonic Mercier sale.
I tasted the manic allegro, knew of your bliss and loss
though I'd no idea of the circumstances of the music.

Myself alone with the record player and you playing
over and over as leaves fell outside one Hallow'een.
So this is what in the end it all comes down to, Petyr,

whether to drink the choleric cup in a city of cholera
where even the mongrels in the street close in on you,
or wait. All I can do is raise a bottle of Tipperary

sparkling to your memory, hear the muted strings
foretell your final scherzo and the great despair
that is *Le Pathetique* as I clap hopeless hands

for my son, Jonathan, his ten Crusader mates.
You found so much to clap to fevered in music
despite all and what's new. Again, all alone,

my standing ovations. By now, Pronsías Ó Dúinn
will have taken his last bows with leader and players,
packed his baton. Patrons chatter and disperse.

By the pitch, I clap on. Clap, as twilight fades,
the wides, the goals, the last penalty takes.

Zabriskie

No, we were never at Zabriskie Point in '69
neither made love in the coves of gypsum
nor got its white dust all over our nakedness;
neither did the great canyons answer us.

Our eyes saw America and her bared Zabriskie
soul
in your painted monoplane in the cloudless sky
flying above new cities of neo-aztec temples
as bullets tore to shreds your rainbow wings.

And while we were never ever remotely near Zabriskie
we did steal flight with you on occasion, looked
police gorgons in the eye, and yet did not blink,
slept amid desert cacti like erections on horizons.

At Zabriskie, a thousand couples still mate across
the violent years
before her breasts were formed, her tear ducts,
or her tears.

Lepers' Passage at Cashel

My wrists
with their stumps
wave down to Sister Assumpta
in the nave.

At the antiphon to the service
I grow as soft as boiled rice.
Help me, Lamb-Boy, to rejoice.
Assumpta cajoled me into Mass.

In my stone cleft I hear confiteors.
While I've my own grainy masses
red tissues in flames, my face
has neither tear ducts nor tears.

Kyrie, the celebrant
in his gay chasuble chants,
his voice is like a curlew's
and interminable.

Kyrie, he repeats
Christe eleison, eleison;
the fatter choirs respond
like cliff gannets in the sun.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo
catches me unawares;
I share my obligation
with roof-nesting stares.

He epistles me,
lances his gospel in my side;
flesh credos from my thighs
in a private jeremiad.

At the bread and wine
I bite on one more screech
recalling daffodils
kissing my toeless feet.

I lift my heart
sursum as directed
wait for more wastage
as expected.

At the consecration
of his body and blood
I could almost believe
in a powerless god.

They rise for the *Pater Noster*
and I worry about my backbone –
will it hold for long? –rest my head
on coldness of limestone.

Agnus Dei, Agnus Dei -
I met you in the pastures,
the bleating of your voice
endures in my ears.

From the communion rails
none dares walk up to me.
I have a robin who picks
dead morsels from me.

She must feed her family,
all her beak-open young.
Anything goes it seems
as final hymns are sung.

Why does she still look up at me?
Yes, my nose, lips, eyes, forehead
all fall away. My body can't hold.
Sensation's all but dead.

Time to scamper down and away
before the wholesome crowd mills
at the doors, wave to Assumpta,
then back to my cave in the hills.

No speech in me anymore, no fight,
no testes anymore; O Love, be calm
at least today brings sunlight
southwind like a balm.

Gloss on Daniél ua Líathaiti

Eleven hundred and forty years have passed, Daniél,
since you felt her lily hand unnerve a private citadel:
a noble lady on her knees beside you in confession
ignoring your immortal dread and with nothing on

her mind but you. Humans, both dust now. And the lusty scribe
thrusting gutward into you, with rusted sword, his intended jibe.
Did he smile, that fellow religious, with no known signature
edifying the tight-lipped at table with your near misadventure?

“Líathaiti,” abbot, chastened. “Grey one.” “Puck goat.” Bowed,
Doubtless like any of the strapping monks strong, well-endowed.

Daniél, spied on, with the woman, were you two both overheard
arguing(as you blessed her) by the hidden excited cloister bard?

Model to your flock, so wrote the bard. But you walked the acorn
groves all day, heard your Blackwater mills as they threshed corn.

Gloss, or two, on Genesis

Chatter at the Gates: the Dung gate, the Fish Gate, the Sheep Gate;
horses pour in like a stallion and mare river at the Horse Gate;
the sentry's sultry high up on his lonely prison tower.

Murmuring of bees in dove-nesting Hinnom and on Olives,
it's pleasant walking down the honeysuckled stairs from David's
to where the bright Fountain Gate is reflecting on its name;

the temple is under repairs; Hazael is victorious in Gath
(cousin Seth writes a ballad), Elisha's dead, the tribes are at it north
and south;
incentives are approved on line for agriculture.

Yes, Yes, everything as per normal, streets spic and span,
foreskins in a sack are a long time cremated; the idols
of Edom are broken as they should be, their priests beheaded.

Chanaanites chirp with sparrows in the new Jerusalem.
Your seasoned scribe, I've all midmorning to muse,
been tinkering since the dawnchorus with Genesis,

stuck on the It-is-not-good-for-man-to-be-alone bit.
These seven days Sarah is madly estranged from me.
Our three kids run about wild in the Promised Land.

Dogs and cats copulate on the cobbled streets, in the pastures
rams with their sheep, stallions on their mares, priests indoors
with their wives, - O increase and multiply, - bulls with their heifers
all the way to Jericho.

And the myth's killing me already, this story is divine,
I've got to revise the plot to Egypt yet, and out of it,
choreograph the Red Sea(that spectacle will endure),

you know the trumpet score for Miriam, then across the desert
all the wars for sand, the manna bread and the stupid quails
descending in flocks to have their necks wrung for food.

Though what happened the kids of Edom sticks a bit still in my throat
I'll sauce our battles for everlasting peace with trusty moral interludes, -
that should help the latter stick, -thus we'll long survive adversity.

My main worry, I'll be frank, is no wife to fuck with.
Mongrels stretch themselves in a snoozy shady corner;
rams with their sheep; bulls with their heifers; stallions etc.

God, if I'm lucky, so help me, affection from a stray dog
who comes to lick the fingers that hold the streaming quill
balancing alternative ends to Genesis, and what the hell.

Downtown Johannesburg

“Jump! Jump!” the whites
give or take two thousand
chant on, not a bit fussy
where Amos will land:

the young black African
is splayed along the parapet
of a sixth-floor balcony,
a pricey park-view flat.

Amos Gaexella, it is he,
swivels his thin neck
gazelle eyes for our photo
gazes down at the crowd’s beck

and call, jeers. Skinhead
naked to the waist, he’s wound
his jumper round his throat,
backstreet vagabond.

Sam Bloomberg says, “A real
afternoon’s entertainment!”
Head of Suicide Prevention,
Sam for a while does his stint

talking Amos out of jumping.
Pleads with the boy. Is he all there?
Two hours later, Gaxella’s
snapped by a photographer

against a blur of Sunday cars
vehicles double parked.
Bets of Sunday strollers
change hands on a black.

Amos, Amos, Amos,
vertigo of white concrete,
jubilation of grinning faces
beneath your tender feet.

The Lost Voices of Goldsmiths

We bring up the precious
at a price, beat out the few ounces
given us. We stumble on pure form,
too few times find properties
that don't tarnish or corrode.
Beautiful and elaborate as dry empty
chalices, glad of friendship in this oxide,
we craft our emotions with hammered
tenets, give all our days to working
this element, useless for weapons.

Old molars of gold, we destruct in the bone,
our skin more flaked, wrinkled by noon.

We are fingers, excited. We are melted
down. We are children. We are ductile.
We are malleable.
We are for taking on altars
and in showers.

Yesterday we found our lyrics
pincerred from the jaws of the dead.

Today the heat and the boiling fervour
are getting to us.
Let the old gods forgive us
whose atomic number is 79
whose melting point is 1, 063
whose boiling point is 2, 966c
whose valence is 1, 3.

We are melting down
our mythic cries.

The moulds for tomorrow
no one has decided.

.....

In the Fields of Haiku

the poet so busy
workshopping poems the whole country
can't write his own

dawdling to primary
in Kit Costello's old sandpit
valerian blooms

sits on Newman's pier
the black Persian for my return
purr purr purr purr purr

by the old tank walls
hailstones piled in a corner
afternoon in May

where the old pony trap
choked for decades in the nettles
new grass is mown

the angelus bell
tolls from Coralstown to our whitethorn
where stillbirths lie

friesian from Coyne's
your long teats squirting the white dust
close to milking

the old crane in Coyne's
hanging with Tom's pot and kettles
robbed from the fireplace

overnight QC in a bowl
Superquinn peaches gone mouldy
midsummer closeness

Cork 2005
swans down from Sherman Crawford
traffic cones in the Lee

two mating sparrows
nest in a bush before the drop
Niagara Falls

All Saints all the gales
three tits atop the poplar tree
last leaves hanging on

"Rocky Mountain High"
eagles and skylarks in John's voice
dropping like a stone

September illness
leaves of the American corn
never so glossy

names in a pocket
an old jacket donned again
last years's interviews

news of your first job
your boyhood tractor's in the weeds
with no steering wheel

husbandry again
on the panes of the glasshouse
summer thunder clouds

potatoes flowering
beehum in an empty June hive
first loganberry

by the Royal Canal
children's laughter summer voices
at their backs Mountjoy

shelter from the shower
a hare comes rests at my feet
signpost in Earlie's

up the sycamore
red scalp where my curls shone
Zaccheus! Come down!

where the cattle scratch
all along the barbed wire fence
ringworm waits for me

encroaching deafness
cavern din in my ears all day
can still hear the pines 48

best hive dead with leaves
bees that fed us such sweetness
and you miles distant

apricot blossoms
scent the white frost-paned glasshouse
our love to the test

stiff bent arthritic
leans across the pharmacy counter
durex feather lite

mother all I've left
ointment for your leg ulcer
Scherezon F

Tony ill in Slieveroe
visiting your house in March
brown holly on window sills.

decorations Irish shades
banshee shrieking off the walls
paint her over quick

sawn up for the flames
dead elm with no roots for years
heat in the old boy still

relieving myself
at the back of the beehive
the barren chamber

walking the predawn
water purling in the stream
late October now

as the years go by
many leaves falling in the wind
anniversaries

bare ruined rookeries
crows falling dead in Russia
humans blight the earth

this time avian flue
pack a few more broilers in
profit the henshit

beak dipping feather
fluffing at the hose for the sweet corn
goldcrests in late May

giant pizzas from Gino's
kids round a funeral table
who's next from you lot

.....

As We Roved Out on a Moose Morning

We left the moose in a bloody heap on the mangled road, drove on.
Hoisted for the meat factory, her long legs are manacled with chains;
those thin legs, for all their length, are delicate as a ballet dancer's.

She'd spent her days digesting cellulose, mooning over grown calves
that had forgotten her, braved the hurricanes, long-winded snows;
our impact a mild titanic thud down in her fermentation chambers.

Aloft, her tilted antlered head has one glazed eye still open on us;
she looks across us and across at her late antler graip-tined world,
who was born a while to joy a bit in forest-matings and oblivion.

Her coat's costumed, warm, as everyday as moss on the Barrens.
She wades into our sleep, into icy forest-edged pond after pond,
feeds on the drowned green aquatics there we'd long forgotten,

then onto dry land, feasts on a panacea of blueberries,
grasses, bark of shrubs and juicy herbs in season till
it's time to be solitary, almost lichen-morose like us,

tramping snow after fresh snow on snow in the moose yard.
She grinds her cheek teeth all the time; they've worn away;
they're gone too, her upper incisors, canines for the tundra.

Sex, to her, has become a sunlit intermezzo
taking him in on a hot-nooned October day
when beauty is in the deciduous for leaf-fall.

Though stiff-legged, with a shuffle like the ageing,
she can cover ground as fast as you can. Olympian,
trotting, never running. Age teaches you that.

Where is there to run to anyway? She's quite shy,
but unpredictable, wages peace. Stays put, familiar;
tempers coming and going like irate gears of cars.

So, when her eighteen hundred pounds hit us at dawn
the dewlap on her, like a knell, still tolling from her throat,
the impact was encyclopaedic for her, like an iceberg.

See her:

Her muzzle in first light inflating to pity, pendulous,
her deep tongue leaving us glossy all over if we care;
she's glossing over still her stillborn calf by a pond,

wanders onto the highway with things on her mind,
her dead rumen rumbling on awhile in her gashed corpse,
her great jawbone still turning the wheels of our four
wheel drives.

.....

Words with Simon

after *Luke 7: 36 - 50*

“... ..You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with
kisses ever since I came in...”(var. “ever since she came in”)...

The Jerusalem Bible

1

I walked your new site, Simon, three years ago
dug with a pick the foundations for this house,
wrestled the cornerstone into its place for you.

Simon, I sweated blood and tears. I slaved for you,
poured ox-blood for the walls, the screed of floors.
I drew your ceiling-joists out of my own ribs

hammered laths in place that nailed the felt,
spat the bright nails out of my own thought.
Spittle on my fingers, I shone your windows,

crafted water pots and wine jars from my clay,
bent at your side as we furnished the alcoves,
made five cedar chairs, made your cedar table.

Simon, I saw you whisper to your wife, now, as I walked
into this house.

You are in control as ever. You are courteous.

2

Simon, on the parables I gave you I spent nights, dawns, days.
So, was I not worth a hug? Some tenderness? Embrace?

All right, I know I reach beyond myself. Jealous,
I wander room to room, tramp your entire house
corner you in the cedar diningroom, which is spacious.

Your eyes kiss up to your partner. “He needs help, that one!”

Yes, what's human in me will soon be crossed hands, mould
and bone.
Can I expect to see you at my resurrection?

Can't see you at my death. You have your temple chores.
There is a desert in speech even with Pharisees we adore.
I wanted our every word to dovetail like wood. No more,

for if my feet are wet, you did not wet them with your tears,
if there are strands of hair on my legs, they are not yours,
and the relief in my instep, you did not put it there, Simon.

How Beautiful the Feet

1

The seven bones of the tarsus,
arches of the foot
formed by the tarsals and metatarsals

(the latter to give you strength and leverage
Love, in full beautiful stride),

each bone I adore
and its sister-bone
in conjunction.

Heels, the digits
and the arches
the constrained

bones at rest or
touching the dusty earth
in partnership.

Again, the tarsals
and the metatarsals.
The phalanges.

How beautiful.

2

Not all perfection, though, the flat foot
depressed about his rigid arches, the muscle
spasm: so acutely painful and tender his left foot.
The teenager with the clawfoot, his poor toes like a bird's,
all his weight taken by the heel.
Not to mention the merchant with the hammer toe,
his fifth toe, Jesus, a sight to see deformed;
the prick who turned violent
when I queried the verrucas on his sole
(the one who roared like a lion had tickles round the ankle).

3

How beautiful are the feet of one and all,
the heels with their callouses, the crooked
toes, the arches, the constrained bones,
the tarsals, the metatarsals in our stride.

How we survived the fungals, I'll never know,
bunions and corns of all shapes and seasons.

One last Chardonnay

The strains of Thomas Tallis fill and fuse the air
explode in Latin words he set to renaissance music:
“Nunc habique spem en alium.....” on Lyric
FM drive-time. “Never have I hoped in anyone
but you...”

and myth and truth join first-time hands and kiss
crossing a field where verities flower like wheat
say, over in the County Wexford, the bread basket
of Ireland. The July sunset’s another chardonnay.
I raise my glass to you with one more chardonnay,

for asphyxiated you died for me, your whipped lips blue.
Spittle had dried on your nakedness in the temporary
grave space hewn for the Arimathean who’d need it;
bones washed a year later, as Mediteranean custom
dictates, Mary of Magdala’s later, dead child or two
till the last uprising when soldiers torched her home.
Your city was torn down stone by stone. Rome
spared the niched jar with the tell-tale initials
till a JCB for one more high-rise in Jerusalem

laid your family bare. Come, jizz up our edification
for those sadly churchd around. You’re scattered
worldwide by a war-time child, yours, naked in love.
With you burning in his gut, teenager Stephen died
Jarman’s *Sebastiane* is raised up for target practice,
arrow after arrow; Spain’s Teresa burns with you;
Juan de la Cruz’s *herida* too. Your fingers reach
out to loosen the coiffured grey of Dame Julien,
the same god-man cooling off on a wall in Limerick

City for a good woman out with you. Incarnate
in our faces, eyes, voices. Shanghai to Jimmy Reid’s
in Cuinera. I see you in goldcrests, the wild geese,
the eyes of sparrows, in valerian in a June wind,
Superquinn’s Teresa Graham baking her bread
when the east wind’s in denial down the Folly;
teenagers dancing tomorrow to a Spraoi beat
when fire works illuminate the August Suir.
I reach to one more croissant, truly one last
chardonnay.

.....

The Salt Crests Come with Amber

Yes through dry and ever hollied
dunes, pale granite sands I have known
the salt crests come with amber. Nights
I never slept, naked, stretching
at birdlight. I spent my days
striding up and down the garden
up the peaks and down dark
folleyed glens; cascading frenzy
poured out of me in happy gulps.

All I could do was grope for pages, my orchard
spirit shaking words.

I still laugh. I sigh, heave
of living. I wander fiery
now that I possess platform to speak,
stumble with incoherence,
can't form words.
Dumbest of men
laugh at my plight.

My lines add no nectar to combs.
With you, I could put the run on malady,
undress my cloudy brow, focus
on something practical.
I pray I will love
with the feint touch
of the butterfly

my heart still beats for, stands
apart. I stall in the season of confessed
and fallow earth. I'll fold my decline away
before the night arrives so that the stars
may all the brighter candle blank pages
after twilight. I sense I'll be made luminous
in my weakness where the ground's slippery
as a childhood rockpool.

I hope to die as I lived out my best work
loved, and giving love, and, at the extreme,
railing that love was not celebrated.
To each his scaffold. Losing the head,
what about it?

Thomas?

What about it?

In liabilities
I'll be raised.

Do not addle me
with unctions at my going.

Love, that sees me come, makes hasty
fires of the hassled brambles,
clears a path for me.

The Occasional Gossip of Limestone

They were incapable:
the pelton wheel,
the Frances turbine,
the Deriaz turbine,
the Keplen and the propeller.

Love,
they were incapable
of taking us.

The engineers have long given up and departed
with their cheques and degrees and religions.
Kilowatts hiss in their wake.

Who will now determine
the frequencies of hertz
the rushlit houses, the boom towns of mushrooms
crafts and Christmas
candles?

Our valleys fed hydros,
chimneystacks of algae
gables of crustacean.

We were once into high voltage
across any distance, finger to finger
falling from skies and white peaks.

We were made.

A valley between hills
for the taking.

Notes on Poems

- p. 9 The title of the poem is taken from an orchestral work by the Irish composer John F. Larchet(1884 – 1967). He is credited with developing a school of Irish composers. *Caoineadh na hÓige* is part of the repertoire of the Junior School Orchestra of Waterford Institute of Technology conducted by Deirdre Scanlon.
- p. 23 REPS: Rural Environment Protection Scheme funded by the EU and the Irish Exchequer.
- p. 28 Harry Whelehan was Irish Attorney General for just a short time. He was forced to quit his job over the controversial X case.
- p. 32 Abyss of the Birds. The title of the third movement from Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*.
- p. 34 Henryk Mikolaj Górecki, Polish Composer; his most famous work to date is his third symphony, *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.
Ilan Pappé is a persecuted Israeli historian. *Nakbah* means catastrophe in the context of the forced exodus of 700,000 Palestinians in 1948.
- p. 41 Daniél ua Líathaiti, abbot of Lismore, reputedly spoke the verses of his poem “Sell not Heaven for Sin” when a woman at confession was soliciting him. “[His] name has been formed from *liath* ‘grey’, as spoken Connacht *pocaide* ‘a he-goat’(older *buccaiti*...) NOTES p.176 *Early Irish Lyrics Eighth to Twelfth Century* ed. with translation, notes and glossary by Gerard Murphy Oxford 1977.
- p. 58 The “persona” of the poem is Erasmus, renaissance philosopher, who reputedly wrote his classic *In Praise of Folly* in one week while in the genial company of St. Thomas Moore and his first wife.



This book is a sequel to the author's *Near St. Mullins (2002)* with its extensive bird imagery of the Irish Mad Sweeney (Suibne Geilt). In this collection, the little goldcrest is central to the varied inspiration of the poems where the bird motif acts as a bonding force. In a world where the cruel intersects continually with the aetherial, the poems are mediated through the musical expressions of composers Messiaen and Górecki and further modulated into Irish, European and Middle Eastern historical contexts.

The poems celebrate homely rural epiphanies of the author's early childhood, and the child's eye, where the good, the bad and the daring in life are seen in microcosm. The poems in *Goldcrest Falling* are written in freer rhythms and more varied structures than poems in earlier books. They explore musical tapestries of personal and social suffering amid some of the "snarled myths" of our times and diminutive acts of gentleness and love.

Whether they are reminiscences of childhood or evocations of the history-imbued Irish landscape, the poems in *Goldcrest Falling* are, above all, acts of excited language. John Ennis stirs up and releases the appetites and pulses accumulated in words. It's not surprising that music and birds weave through so many of his poems.

John Steffler
Canadian novelist and poet.

With an eye for the tiniest demises and triumphs, John Ennis deftly harvests details from his youth, skillfully distilling memory into myth. Throughout *Goldcrest Falling*, Ennis effortlessly illustrates a well-travelled landscape of scythes and songbirds, orchards and orchestras, where "myth and truth join first-time hands and kiss." Like the damsons in "Boy Amongst Sparrows," these poems are "goodly-sized and wild"; this book is a freshly-plucked bucketful of delicacies.

Matthew Hollett is a young Canadian artist and poet.



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