

## CULMORE FANTASIA

*“Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born.”*

Matthew Arnold

### 1 – SETTING OUT

This morning, stepping out, I traversed Culmore Point  
The river here runs straight through, day and night it courses, no messing  
The eastern hills, shouldering a bloody sun  
Someone has hung there a giant canvas  
A sky bristle-brushed, crimson streaked  
Perhaps some ancient night-time lover’s trace  
Ghost of lipstick-smudged, skin-on-skin scuffed kisses  
Tangerine touched  
In the west, a startlingly blue sky

Twice now I have watched as Clippers, spray-tailed  
Flagged and charged, raced between these frontiers  
Sparklings trailing in each boat’s darkening lea  
In memory, colours and rippling water mesmeric  
Mirrored, hue-and-dye tinted, refracted, reflecting

The air is all but drained of summer colour  
Only absences remain  
It’s a pity, the curlew is not – long gone –  
This place lacks bee-sounds, abruptly  
A bird screams, then another – others follow close  
I feel need for the buzz of bees, droning, droning  
There’s need to be, to be, coaxed to dream

**COME AWAY, COME AWAY WITH ME**

*The wind murmurs among trees  
Ashen-lipped, the black Foyle waters  
The bright-white tern rises higher and wider  
It calls out, urgently*

**COME AWAY, COME AWAY WITH ME**

*Sunlight falls across my path  
In my mind’s eye, as bright  
As yeast, rising to my heart’s beating  
My rising hopes, castles in air*

**COME AWAY, COME AWAY WITH ME**

**II – CROSSING THE LINE**

In the face of rising winds, the Foyle flourishes  
Its fishing boats bump their way across its corrugations  
The Point thrusts between out-stretched thighs  
Sun, wind and sudden showers give life to such as this  
Of old wrongs, locked memories  
The key, the name of its key lost...  
Past and future times redundant as odd socks  
One gate to the east, another to the west  
I hesitate, lacking compass or compass-skill  
Over the troubled lip of the Foyle, the Atlantic waits  
Its belly slack, hungry for lack of sustenance

**NOT A MAN TO BE SEEN**

*I overstep the earth's brink. Suddenly, falling, falling to the centre of the earth, falling through the innocence of silence, down through the murky failing, faded day, past shafts of light, through clouds of yolky protoplasm – swirling, down, down to where the dead recline*

A maelstrom, a mayhem  
Shifts me on my footing  
Carries me to my being's crux  
To that anvil on which the sun and the soft moon convene  
Where all things meet and meld, where all things become one  
Under the hammer's blow

**NOT A WOMAN TO BE SEEN**

*Vague shadows of battleships, dredgers and fishing boats, longboats moving under cover of darkness with muffled serif strokes adorn with fancy this watery hyphen. Confusion reigns here where men call from craft to craft, only to find good intentions thwarted by the curse of Babel*

Here, a bronze horn; there, presences, once men, some cased in armour, others clad but scantily so in rags; then the many, naked as the day they were born

*Rising out of our imaginations, striving to reclaim what was lost in the cross-currents of water and time, dim things emerge, rising and sinking, as if they are part of nature itself, courted, enticed by cleaved, clitoral waters*

The Point ends here: at the land's cleavage  
Where land and sky are one  
Where light obscures. Buried  
Beneath such a blizzard

With stars, falling, tumbling  
Here air turns fire, for there  
Where light was and darkness reigns, light itself  
Seems sucked westwards, drawn down behind dark hills  
Sinking behind purple hills

***NOT A GIRL TO BE SEEN***

I linger on the park's brow, casting  
About for some word  
None fits, each word a mere post-it –  
Already peeling, as all old enchantments do

I make my way across the spongy sward  
Crossing over our green-crowned rubbish heap  
With its underfill of waste  
My eye is drawn offshore by a movement  
Following the eternal push and pull, the coming and the going  
I see a man upright on a raft  
Straddle-legged, a shovel in his hand  
I observe him closely – he is digging  
(His wellington boots, I see, stuffed with torn, wet newsprint)  
His shovel over-spilling water; how he bobs, feet attached  
As if glued – as if nailed – to his ill-anchored, bobbing  
Stick of wood. As he excavates each hole, it fills, instantly  
“What are ye doing?” I call out, guessing well enough  
My tongue as spongy as the ground where I stand  
In answer, he shouts, ‘Digging a grave’  
‘Whose?’ I whisper  
‘Time’s!’ he roars, ‘This is Time’s Pit!’  
His bellowing causes the deep waters to shudder.  
Each splashy, heavy diamond-shedding shovel-full  
Reveals for a moment this lough’s rich history –  
Columcille, he of the grey eye – island bound  
Lundy, hurrying past, fleeing north to Scotland  
The Mountjoy and the Phoenix, followed close-on  
By the Dartmouth, each intent on breaking the boom

***NOT A BOY TO BE SEEN***

Waves insist, swelling against the stone-faced bank, against the ships’ hulls. They lift and let fall mantles of dirty-white foam. A woman and a man, a man and wife (they resist looking at one another) he stares down at his feet, his eyes fixed on the deck rising and falling beneath his boots. His fingers walk the side-planks, counting, without arriving at any reckoning. She looks out, over the deck railings, over the water, out to the land she is leaving. She turns away. She looks, not to remember, not even for remembrance’s sake: to her, the shore line,

the rising small fields – these are already lost; her mind must pirouette with her spirit to America's imagined dancing nights.

She sings, her voice low, a lament:

*If I had the power the storms for to rise  
I would blow the wind high and I'd darken the skies  
I would blow the wind higher and salt seas to roar  
For the day that my darling sailed away from Culmore*

## ***NOT A CHILD TO BE SEEN***

### **III – RETURNING**

Unaware, I have re-crossed the line, with them –  
Through this mizzle of rain – this smog – these  
Flags of many nations, weaving, proclaiming  
Their tested faith, that this man and woman travelled  
With hope  
Sheltered under nets of prayer and birdsong  
Wood pigeons, a thrush, blackbirds, crows clattered  
Memory tells us, the peewit and the curlew  
Bedsheets of seagulls, rising and falling  
Ballooning on these gusting, rising  
winds

Passing boats cause waves to make for the shore  
Thinking twice about it, they turn and run  
At the lough's edges, forgotten where time stops  
Water-foam, age-yellowed, frog-spawn-blemished  
By sleight of some hand, now is never, ever  
What is, becomes what was, thoughts, memories  
Push and pull, ebb and flow, they come, they go  
I find myself on the brae above the wetlands  
Day and night are stitched together by the sounds of feeding birds  
The once damp, soft wind, turns harsh  
Turns brown, turns black, drives forwards, backwards, feckless  
The gun barrel necked heron, spear bill waiting  
Waits feet deep, patiently in mud  
Children are playing tag, falling, rising, shrieking  
Scents of mown grass hang on the air  
A dog runs past, others follow  
A few women tittle-tattle, one's hand touches another's hand, confidently  
An old man trundles past, sack-shaped and heavy on a creaking bike  
I pause for breath

## **HOPE AND SORROW**

*My mind is anchored in the mud and sand that rests on bedrock that lies beneath this. Rising out of the debris of old bed springs, soiled foam mattress, bottles. The history of a town, a child's treasure trove, stuff stomped, blanketed beneath sods, resting within layers of darkness. Here, seeping water and rock and mud and life join west and east and north and south*

*The land's arms, to left and right, bedecked with flags and smoke from numerous bonfires; unyielding in their stiff encirclement of that **grey-blue-black** surging malleable element, the inky depths, the matter that so artfully contrives to escape their clayey, clasping intent*

A rainbow spans the Foyle  
Floating in the evening's gloaming  
In the sky and on the water  
Here it places gifts, two pots filled with peace.

## **SORROW AND HOPE**

I return by the big corner  
Past the restored house  
Lights in its windows  
Its door wide open