

goldfilanket

## **MOMENTS IN TIME**

A Prose Poem

*(The story of our human journey)*



Sam Burnside

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**By**

**Sam Burnside**

First performed in St Canice's Parish Church, Eglinton

2020

**Resilience**

**Selections from  
MOMENTS IN TIME**

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?? 2021

Introduction by	Michael Poynor,
Reveille, Awakening,	William Sayers
Sung Prologue	Garvin Crawford,
Cast:	Three/four members of Foyle U3A Play Reading
	Group
Epilogue	Sam Burnside

)

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*(From off-stage, reveille, a horn or bugle sounds an awakening.)*

**Prologue,**

*(A poem or a song, to be read and / or sung)*

**A NEW BEGINNING**

I am, I am, I am, I am, I am  
Life throb of soil and seed  
I am, I am, I am, I am, I am  
Here, that which I am fell, here,

That which I am took root, here  
The beat, beat of two hearts  
The drumbeat of our hearts  
Fist and foot clenching, unclenching

I am, I am, I am, I am, I am  
The kick, the shawl, the caul, the call  
The cut cord, the fresh clean breath of air  
The mudlark, the woodlark, the sly-lark

Witihin the borderlands of dusk and dawn  
I am, I am, I am, I am, I am  
Miraculously born, through twilight  
Into moonlight, into sunlight

The ground is broken  
The harvest shall come  
Exalt, exalt, exalt, exalt, exalt  
This new, this new, this new birth

**ALCHEMY OF FIRE AND FLAME**

*Would ye get awa frae that wundy!* she bustles, scolds.

*Yes, Grandma.*

Yet, he remains where he is as his Grandmother hurries about the kitchen preparing the midday meal, as she and her mothers have done, since the dawn of time , working for the

menfolk who soon will hurry in from the fields, drawn, as he is, by the smell of boiled cabbage and fried bacon, by the scent of stewed apples.

*Was it yesterday / I was sent out?  
To the orchard / where apples hang  
At eye level, / at finger touch,  
Dew damp, and so  
Temptingly low  
Uninvited, saliva flows  
Sweetly tempting*

*Ah, the magic of heating and cooling; the alchemy of cookery,* he remembers, looking out across the farmyard, over the falling fields, over the magnificent mundanity of cow pats and wilting thistle tops and sagging dockens their green too turning black and blacked nettle tops, out past the bit of a woods that remains having avoided the saw and out over the wintery acres that run down to the land's edge and then on out over the Sea of Moyle. Moyle and Toil! Toil! he thinks. So much toil! And for what? Rock broken and shifted. Walls built. Always, the hand to the plough! The mud-caked boots. Always, the call of the plough!

*Would you make yourself useful and get them bits o' auld wallpaper down from the top of the press and back them schoolbooks.*

Out of the corner of his eye he catches a glimpse of what he takes to be an ancient old scarecrow; but no, it is in the shape of an ancient old human- a man, but more, it is his grandfather – sitting still and stiff at a table in the dimness of the corner. His black shadow is half hidden among grey shadows, all suddenly set shimmering by the stirring curtain and the drifting light. Abruptly, the figure straightens and employing the back of his hand he sends the dish that has been set and now sits before him spinning across the table. Again, using the back of his hand he rattles the redundant spoon to the floor.

*I'm scunnered! Take that awa!*

And then  
*What are you skellying at!* He gulders, girning and turning his darkening face to the wall.

*Nothing. Nothing.*

Turning and looking to his Grandma the boy speaks  
*Aye. Right ye' be.*

Cloaked in obedience, and in respect to her years, he moves hurriedly, reaching up to the shelf; he fetches down, then spreads out and cuts and shapes, the thick, stiff paper he finds hoarded away there; marking straight edges, first with his eye then against the length of a ruler, taking pride in bending and pressing it just so, finding satisfaction in not needing the precious sticky tape that others might utilize to keep it in its place.

The times-tables are out of sight, obscured behind trusses of roses and trailing green stuff; he cocks an eye at these coverings of learning, considers the nature of this hiding away of knowledge, this keeping of understanding under cover. He envisages ancient wisdoms, contained in old libraries of vellum, folios of lambskin, within cut and dried coverings, woolly-side placed out, obscuring, guarding dangerous magical signs and symbols, knowledge, obscuring those dissent darting thoughts, keeping safe the precious secrets of mankind's speculations.

## **PROGENY**

Beneath the weight of a colossal encumbrance of pelts, the old serpent stirs, in the blanketed darkness the lecherous sway of a smouldering affection sparks, wakens, his hand finds and cups and holds her breasts.

They sink swimming into eiderdown-shrouded secrecy, eyes shut in their twin darkness's, the closeness of her body gives comfort to him and his embrace to her; in this manner they set out on this, each one's very own celestial journey.

And so, it was - and so it is - and so shall it be:

These two

The match that lights the fire aneath the anvil

The fist that wields the hammer

The conscience of the race

Forged, as one, united.

## **HUMAN NATURE**

Looking with blind eyes, while in the darkness of his head the thoughts thrive and multiply, randomly tumbling about: *I remember holding the receiver loosely in my hand, away from my ear, listening to her voice and hearing the vowels and consonants dance together; hypnotic they seemed to me as they danced together syncopated is the word; the voice rose up, so thinly at its shrill top, as if rooted in a place a long, long, long way away.*

Without dwelling more on the matter, he shrugs and places the receiver on its cradle, before raising his face to receive the window's dribbling of fading light:

*I remember, that was the day the world turned brown.*

## **HEDGES<sup>1</sup>**

His eyes follow the weans as they jump and skip across the yard hurrying towards a rough patch of concrete that someone laid down years before, there in front of the milking shed door. They squat, huddle, hunker down, point, deep in discussion - or perhaps in argument. Someone produces a handful of broken chalk pieces and they begin to draw a mesh of regular lines that form rectangular and square shapes. Their laughter fills the yard, spreading joy as tolling bells spread good news, or perhaps bad. One, a hand over her eyes, tosses a pebble already held in readiness; it lands on the concrete; miraculously so, it drops and she wonders in her doubting, hopeful mind, is it pre-ordained as it rises and falls, arriving by chance or fate or luck, a luck token thrown by a blind man into the darkness, the silent dark that surrounds him; but here it is now exposed, lying contained within chalky barriers.

A hop and skip and there,  
The game is afoot.

The children's laughter dies away. They depart. Darkness is falling, throwing down a blanket of silence as cold moonlight worms its path across the yard's uneven surface, slithering over cobble stones.

He turns away, sensing the dream-like barrier, fearing the silent scream.

## **THE ARCHITECTURE OF WATER**

*There is an architecture to a waterfall, and to the liquid held in a sonnet, also; such a thought is given birth deep in his mind. A thought is conceived, wandering about in such a way as, perhaps, can be perceived in the style adopted by flocks of geese, flying in from Greenland; or, in rainbows coming and going. Also, in constellations of stars; ah, most certainly so in stars and planets and suns and in comets.*

Order and disorder mated, reign. Days and nights come and go; south-west winds ebb and flow; winds blow across falling waterfalls as they tumble their fill of water down the Glens; the wind changes jerkily to the north-east, it arches its back, folding and unfolding, jitter-bugging with nature, becoming one with water falls and sheets of water, dressing and undressing its chiffon of many hues and tints, lilted and splashing as it tip toes here and



there, hoarse for a second as it roars its thunderous roar, its trebling trickle of notes, its unending stream of majestic pronouncements, unceasing.

Meantime, the earth turns - while adorned in worldly dress the hedged fields shimmer, in moonlight soaked, and heavy as a scorned lover's frozen heart.

## **STARGAZER**

A star gazer is he –he is one who sits dreaming under a cloudless sky. Waiting for darkness, is he. Waiting to see what is.

When the time is right, he will tilt his telescope; in the blink of an eye, in the amount of time it takes light to travel from there to here he too travels from here to there - but faster, for by the power of imagination and magic and singularity he moves through time and through space.

It takes his son mere moments to grasp a fact, to apply his slide rule, to calculate, to measure and weigh the nature of this universe; he is a mere millisecond older now, yet he has encompassed – he has seen, (he thinks) the truth – he truly believes he has seen the root of it.

There his father sits, clutching within the cavity that houses and protects his brain a sudden cognisance, a quick awareness of how everything is, the dark-bright birth of distant stars, the smudges of dust that gives credence he now believes to their distant births. His son sees the same start, their future deaths. Like some gigantic jigsaw, all calculations fit – they fold up so neatly and click together so neatly – a chimera moves, deep inside the bone that shelters his brain.

As Gods might, father and son look upon all creation and perceive in its filigree of form and content so much that is goodly different that they rub their fingertips one against another and formulate schemes and make plans.

## **THE HEAT OF THE SUN**

Turning his back on the stove, an image followed by the thought of fire rise up from the dark, hot pit of his mind. He thinks about the great benefits bestowed upon humankind by that long-dead, faceless finder of the first spark, the flame, the burn, embers red, the enduring glow.

Mulling on this thought – his hands clasped behind his back as if to grasp and carry the heat with him, as if fearful he might lose it – he stops and gazes out and up at flickers of light, at

the clouds stacked between him and heaven: flat, layered and smooth; heaped up and puffy, like cauliflower; high up and wispy; and there the familiar old rain-bearing clouds. He daydreams, alive to fancying the creatures whose shapes the clouds assume as they hurry along while he gazes in wonderment up at these distant banks<sup>2</sup> in the sky and down at their fast, fleeting shadows racing across the tipsy grasses on the hillsides.

### **THE COLOUR OF THE SUN**

Stepping outside he cannot see the invisible wind, but he sees the evidence of how the face of the grass willows report the wind's presence and how the grass and the wind dance together and how the trees sway in perfect rhythm to the cosmos he feels on his face and somehow he intuits the wind's true being for what it is and the sun's warmth for the joy it brings.

He remains by the open door for what might have been an eternity or perhaps it was for a few seconds only; he stares long at the meadow grass, at where the young grass was, all satin and glimmer under an evening's frost – the sheen of it. For is it rain? Or is it angel's tears? It may well be both. He will not decide.

He considers the world's edges, its curves, its dents and indents, the little plains and the small hills that make such a field a garden; what is it that makes it what it is, he wonders, and what is it really, he wonders again, his mind through-other with conjecture.

The molten sun; the burning coal; that tree bending in a wind, or is it a more, a storm, a hurricane? A light crisp brown leaf is tossed through the night air; and there, dew-heavy or frost or tear-heavy, gleaming in starlight, there among the meadow grass it dances and falls.

Can all this be merely the remnants of a dream that has a being only in his sleeping mind?

### **TIME'S PIT<sup>3</sup>**

He is shaving in freezing water, standing naked and goose-bumped and pimples in front of the frost-touched attic window; bleary-eyed, he peers out through a frozen, skein-like web of cobwebs and dust, rainbow tinted by the outside sun that lies low in the sky. The landscape is all light and long shadows. The earth is a stone calendar that spins and never stops, its stone markers set in pits.<sup>4</sup> His pilgrim of a mind wanders. Time is a pit. The calendar says the year is 695. *Icy Sruth na Maoile* is a street of marbled glass, narrow and hard. Frozen snow lies on the hills of the Mull of Kintyre. Horses and carts with blanket-wrapped working men leading make their way over the North Channel. Courting couples dander hither and thither. Some, afraid of falling over, some excited and all a-tremble.

Whatever. They walk arm-in-arm.

## **FIRST WINDOW**

Somewhere else, far beyond this, there is something he cannot quite grasp, strain as he will its firefly flickers and flutters elude him.

Then. It is this and then it is once again. Moses climbs up, up Mount Nebo; he stops to gaze on the Promised Land. Somewhere. The Four Masters sit on the summit of Trostan Hill, under bombardments of stars they sit, as time passes they make marks on sheets of vallum while children play skipping games on the ice that lies still, still upon the seas between the Glens and the Highlands.

## **SECOND WINDOW**

Another time, feet firmly planted on the floor a man peers through the horizontal-slatted window, viewing the heaped layers of world-upon-world that lie out there. He raises his hands and with his forefingers he delicately fingers two slats apart - wider and wider they part; through the haze of glass with its film of slaked dust he sees the cartoon outline of the orchard, the hazy, bubbling cloudy gardens of heaven and earth, the sky-sea colour of Moyle, and beyond all this, the oh-so faintly luminous Children of Lir, three pale weightless bodies, a trio of bloodless rising and falling bodies, bobbing up and down, bobbing on the darkly wallowing waters of the great Sheuch.

As he turns his head and out of the corner of his eye he glimpses – it is so slight a thing he doubts its reality. He questions – he wonders – nevertheless, if he sensed it, or did he see it – with his mortal eyes - perhaps yes – perhaps no - a silent shift, the kind of faint movement men make in their sleep – did it exist – a movement spotted dimly through a rip in a piece of fabric, a shimmer in satin - for just a split second – but then the tear in the fabric is repaired – what is on the other side is no longer extant.

The slats in the Plantation window coverings have created black shadow-bars that slant across the brow and cheeks and nose and chin of his face and shadowy ropes that lie across the pale skin on the backs of the hands that rest on the windowsill.

The sudden cloaking of sunlight together with the sudden crash of thunder and the sudden flash of lightening – these things appear to happen all at once, the suddenness of their clashing and thrashing threaten to rip his world asunder.

He feels himself being moved, pulled (pulled not pushed, he notes and he notes too his own calmness) as he is pulled forwards, pulled as if by gravity (but can that be?), up onto his toes he rises, forced by a terrible strength that is alive he knows (knows somehow) throughout the universe; he watches his hands, he observes their independent movement as they are taken

further and further from him till they meet with the resistance of the windowsill, as if in supplication to the mundanity of the empty quietly cobbled cassie, the hayshed its tin roof rusting, the field, the sky, the greyness of it all, the grey pelting rain pushed and pulled, taken up and hurled by the motion, the lure of unseen oceanic tides of distant solar winds.

As if to acknowledge the drama that lurks around and about, waiting to be played out before his watery eyes, and as the muddy, misty, storm-curtain sways, seemingly to resist all alien intentions. The dark hedge and its portal, the gate, the invisible slap, all that is there – he is sure if it - but now the hedge darkens, it wobbles a little as the dark shadow descends, a disturbance, across his field of vision. The book is closed. The gate has gone.

I may let you see it with your mind's eye, but you will not cross over, you shall not breach the barrier of the dividing wall<sup>5</sup>

Now the dark hedge has receded and is no longer a hedge of thorn and trimmed ash but an impenetrable barrier that merges into the blackness of night. Its lack of light - or his lack of vision - obscures an unknown time and a hidden place.

## **SLEEP**

We exist in an out-of-time dream that resides inside sleep. In our dream, a wall opens, as two barn doors might. A plain, a savannah rises up or out. It stretches away from a distant horizon. Or horizons. Its population is of beings that are dew-formed, or perhaps - they may be formed of eiderdown, they are certainly not of flesh and blood. They swim, rising, not in ones or in twos, but as a murmuration of starlings might move, effortlessly driven, weaving effortlessly and mightily and fluently.

Ungovernable and uncontrollable, a chaos of clouds descends from a blue sky that is not blue, locks of wispy hair, streaming, forming kaleidoscopes of silky men and women and children in all shapes and sizes; in all hues and some of no hue; cloud-people spider-woven from the gossamer threads of ideas.

He can only wonder, is this the past or the future – or is this the ever-present present? Can one, he wonders, hold on to memories? How to circumvent an illusion? Or, how to circumvent the illusion of an illusion. Therein lies the question...

.. and yet, it is as if such illusions (that is, illusions of memories of such illusions) is all he has. And yet ... and yet ...he remembers the earth newly-turned by the plough that day and wet by fresh rain just fallen smelling so good and the rain on his face feeling so alive on his living skin and the rain on his tongue is so sweet in his mouth...

## **THE SEXTON**

It is just after daybreak when he comes striding up the lane:

Once again, he strides up the lane, hurriedly and awkwardly scratching his backside as he steps out.

The daffodils are half asleep, at this hour, slumbering in the grassy verge, in the shelter of the hedge.

It is bitterly cold.

A light shining from one of the widows catches his eye and his lazy, quick boot drives against a heap of leaf mould that lies half-hidden, half-on, half-off the grass verge and his foot sends it tumbling, damp leaf to damp leaf, clotted.

The sexton halts, listens and sniffs:

The air is heavy with sounds of the bell of time with the briny smell of the sea's surge, With the smell of newly turned earth and the rising odour of crushed mushroom and dead leaf.

He steps onwards. He has his work in hand.

## **FROM THIS DEEP SLEEP, ARISE**

The sexton knows his job. His voice he must use itself knows the message he must impart and his ears he rehearses the instructions he must take, the words he must articulate for others, as a man of the boards might. He knows bodies are refractions; and, as translucent as albumen is and there, suspended deep within each luminous downy carriage, hung, or implanted, is slung in an intangible silken harness, a tiny little hard thing, cell-like, hard and dense and as immutable as a diamond is or a nut, or a seed, carried, no, cradled (yet mirror-like cradling) and as the other man in the room observes these entities float or swim, he becomes aware how they give voice and how two voices mingle: he realises he cannot hear their music, but he knows it is all harmony; this song of souls. The kettle that sits on the stove bursts into its own song and he turns, poised to attend but then compelled to turn again to the window, to its silence, and to the now empty yard and the newly budding hedge and the fields that lie inert and pregnant beyond.

## **UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

Digging down into the earth in order to create a post hole for a new gate, his spade sinks through loam, then through gravelly, sandy soil before jarring in his hand as he encounters rock. He stops and puts hand to his back, easing his lumbar muscles, by chance his stretching arm, his hand extended, touches the electric fence his son has installed to replace a grubbed-out hedge. *A dangerous thing, progress* he thinks as he responds jerkily to the sting and then

feels and tests by force of his grip if he can thole the tiny shocks pulsating through the wire, thinking as he does so, *I should have worn the waders, the rubber would surely stop it, thinking progress and education, dangerous stuff*, thinking strange, how *one thing leads to another*.

### **CROSSING THE CASSIE<sup>6</sup>**

On this day of his life he walks or rather, he shuffles; left foot first and that foot followed by a right foot – as across the cobble-stoned yard he makes his agedly-ponderous way, occasionally pausing mid-step to look – head moving slowly from side-to-side - to rage - at how the grass has spread right across the yard – and not a hand put out to stop it!

He thinks how silent the world has become: he halts now; he lingers; he rubs the back of his hand across the stubble on his chin: this yard, noisy then, this is where he spent so many long years, years so soon gone, remembering quite suddenly how he played here as a child - with his sisters, the squeals of their thin voices reverberating now in the shell of his head; echoes; memories somehow alive in his head, hints of the laughter and with them a cacophony of sound - the noise of seagulls complaining, cuckoos calling, pigeons lamenting among the trees, the seesawing sounds of corncrakes carrying on air from the distant Glen, the joy, ah the joy, of weans at play.

And silences! - such as this silence; and the stillness, such as this stillness and the reflections of stars on rain puddles, the furred reflection of a full moon trapped on the ice-bound pond.

The semi-skimmed ghost of a smile emerges and flits across his face as he remembers the end-of day-warmth in the air, the air thick with midges, swarms of clegs rising and falling about the rumps of cows coming in for the milking.

In passing, he stoops to grab hastily at a tall weed, but it is rooted in the tight space between cobbles and its roots resist his pull and the plant slips from between his fingers. As he straightens his eye catches a shudder of light at an upstairs window. Somehow familiar, it is, he thinks: it reminds of his father? Yet, it cannot be. Is it perhaps his son? Is it mere fancy! Or, the thought strikes him, is it a vision of his own self?

Abruptly he is anxious to move, feeling the sudden chill that is carried on the rising wind. He shifts a little but delays. He finds he lacks the volition to move; he continues to peer upward, but the window is a blank sheet of dark glass.

### **GOLDFISH MELT IN THE STACK YARD'S POND 1**

Beauty, as if a mere afterthought of some dilettante artist, skidding on the surface of time, slips away, trembling, as a butterfly's wing trembles, while being blown hither and thither.

Beauty, to hide demurely, as truth might hide reservedly, within the pages of a book, until its leaves are blown apart and all is revealed.

Between two trees white sheets and grey combs and well-worn Long Johns blow on – and he fears for a moment, almost off – the sagging clothesline, one after another they blow and flap on the wind. He passes close by and their smell cleaves to the air and thence to his nose. Their fresh smell cleaves to the wind and linger in the air he breaths and he feels good.

## **IN ANOTHER WORLD**

The man's steps lead towards – or are they blocked by - a stout stone wall. He spots and makes his way through an arched gateway. He finds himself in another world.

Weeds and wildflowers grow in perfect circles created when they colonized the ground where for decades corn stacks were built. A pond has formed where the millwheel once stood. Balor's<sup>7</sup> evil eye, some say, gleams maliciously here. and this may well be so. A hollow, a well, a pit containing the progenitor's seed as a harvest gift for men for within the walled enclosure old ghosts drift maliciously. Here where Druids once made their magic weeds and wildflowers grow in perfect circles.

## **GOLDFISH MELT IN THE STACK YARD'S POND 2**

The stackyard's year, season by season reveals what till now lay beneath  
That indentation where two millstones<sup>8</sup> stood: a dewpond now  
That raddled stone wall, each pebble ivy-bound to each  
Here, where pressed ice sheets<sup>9</sup> lay now lies where thistles, docks, buttercups and grasses grow.

Insects and songbirds appear, with moons and suns overhead, they shiver and disappear through cracks in time.

A boy carries, in both hands and on tiptoe, a fishbowl, with such care, with such attention. He tips - he slides, so gently - the golden fish into the water and hunkers down at the water's edge, absorbing the flash, its journey. Something changes; is it time that passes?

A weak sun sits in the sky; something catches a boy's attention (something, an indentation on the planet's face) perhaps it is an eye; he turns towards the pond. It holds a sheet of clear, pure water, still and motionless; nothing else is to be seen. Wait! Nothing, bar that blush

there on the surface, a fading blur; a faint rainbow tracery of gold and orange; a flush that slides away, slanted there at the corner of his field of perception, even as he sees it it is gone, gone even as time comes and goes, gone even as distance shrinks.

He looks about the place, he does not seek a destination in time but peers through space. He employs not a microscope but a telescope.

## **BEFORE COVID, FOUR MEN IN A BAR**

He rides his bike to the end of the lane. He dismounts long enough to open the rusted iron gate. He rests his weight on a pedal, secures his balance and mounts the machine and rides slowly down the road. He is riding into the west, facing into the evening; he and the sun together cast a long shadow that trails behind. The bike's front wheel is buckled, and each rotation sends small vibrations up along the frame and into the handlebars and into his wrists and hands and just perceptibly they travel onwards till they reach his elbows.

With each turn of the crankshaft the noise of metal turning and rubbing, of metal scoring against metal, calls out a thin scratching (or perhaps it is a crunching call ) a sound that emanates from the region where the machinery converts the reciprocating exertion of the man's legs into a rotational motion that drives the chain which in turn drives the rear wheel.

He ignores what he regards as mere irritations. The road begins to slope a bit. He freewheels; He whistles, sotto voce, for he is without thought and is content with the prospect the lies before him. Slowly, but purposefully, he labours along happily enough until he reaches the public house where he leans his machine against the gable wall before stepping over the threshold and entering into the evening gloom, into the mingling odours of beer and burning turf and tobacco that fills the masonry-walled, stone-slabbed floor in this temple of humankind.

He sits down and leans against the boarded bar counter, its ancient varnish black and shiny in the half light, rubbed into a life of its own by generations of countless trouser legs and rough coats and sharp elbows; he indicates his order; waiting, there, a shadow half hidden among shadows he becomes witness:

**First man** (*looking deeply into his pint of dark Guinness*)

Black holes! Space is full of these black holes! It's a fact!

**Second man**



Ah! So I'm led to believe. Sure, why shouldn't it be? And when we're on it, why should time travel one way; like, why should it just go forwards? Why not backwards, or sideways. Ye've heard of yer man ... is it Einstein is his name?

**First man**

Aye, it is and I have. But listen to me. You mention Time. In any I said in any age Dammit, will ye listen to me! Time can take on any metrical shape it wishes! Can't it! Answer me that! (*Downing his pint*) Einstein!

**Second man**

You are so right, that means that high-energy particles can only be detected coming "down" from space. Or is it up?

**First man**

Did you know, Low-energy, subatomic neutrinos with a mass close to zero can pass completely through Earth, but ...

**Second man**

...Yes, I know. And remember, ghostly particles can travel anywhere, at any time – day or night...

**First man** (shifting conversationally in his seat and leaning closer)

Will you have another. Just the one, mind you, just one for the road?

**Second man**

Aye, I might ...

**MEMORY**

He blows on the mirror revealing this one thing that stays with him: the enduring knowledge that this thing – is it a thought? A memory? A thing, a person? – it is a permeance that is always altering, growing and receding. Now fading, growing bigger and stronger, then frail and shrunken till it emerges icon-like in and out of that frogspawn, porridge-like mass that is memory.

He recognises it - the person, he thinks, but cannot be sure – this face he sees on the other side of the steamed glass, fuzzed brush and razor in hand. Is this me, he wonders.

For, as abruptly as it arrived the memory is gone - leaving only a trace, a distant smear – a memory of a memory.

## **FARMER**

At one time a farmer looks up and sees smoke rise towards the blue sky

Yesterday the dogs were catching rats in their crazed escape from under the demolished stacks of corn. Last night young men moved about the piles of chaff with branches of lighted whin, torching the skirts of the rubbish with unquenchable fire. . Occasionally a flurry of wind catches it, and tosses it sideways, black and blue and grey but just as quickly the column reasserts itself, straightens up and thrives.

Before that it was the flail, the threshing floor, the separation of grain and chaff, before that the plough's coulter slicing through earth. Seeds spread, and before that the flattening of the threshing floor, flat stones taken from the seashore and placed with care up here; after that, the flail, the threshing, the bagging and carting from here to the barn, from outside to inside.

*It's all about separation*, he thinks, considering the matter, rubbing his forehead. The soil, the slabbed stone, the grain separated from the chaff as day is separated from night, the fire that alters elements and the smoke that rises from earth to the air, fragile yet resilient.

*And yet. And yet. And yet*, he thinks, *all things are as one.*

## **FISHERMAN**

The river Dun flows, and so

Half aware of what may be there but is not to be seen

Afloat on trilling water and reflected clouds,

The fisherman stands straddled on this frail bob of a footing

His line is slack, the boat wobbles like a cork, rising and falling

He spits, his spital landing on flowing water - he watches it dance away

He moves a booted foot, for comfort's sake shifting his weight,

Patience is all, and belief is all, belief

In what the dark water, the glary bottom might let on,

If he has faith enough to wait without asking.

## **WHERE HOPE IS LOCATED**

Many, many, many years ago our ancestors would gather together at certain times of the year to collectively hunt for food. The terrain was wild at that time and now and then one hunter might get separated and become lost, for without the communal wisdom of their collective

knowledge of trails and tracks and without the sense of where home lay, without that wisp of old knowledge, the lost one became as a mere firefly, blown hither and thither on the wind.

On learning of the loss of such a one the others would congregate tightly together to begin a search. This was not a challenging task, involving as it did an amount of scouting around seeking his or her tracks in soft ground or in virgin snow or among wet leaves. Once discovered, any sign could be followed easily, even up into and through the air (for our ancestors were indeed skilled hunters).

If they found him or her well and good, but sometimes such tracks led to a hole in the sky. If this proved to be the case, they immediately gave up the search and retraced their steps for they knew their friend had gone beyond this and would not be seen until they might meet again in a more beautiful and safer garden.<sup>10</sup>

## **TRANSITION**

New Year's Eve encounters New Year's Day,  
The water-jump of Hogmanay  
Bridges the galloping years,  
The mid-place to where today and tomorrow move,  
Here moon and earth touch, feel.  
Here, the pond. Here, the big wheel.  
Here, where water and air meet, where thin ice melts.  
After droughts, floods  
All is water and light and radiance.  
The iris of Balor's eye: the moon's face floats here; moonlight touches,  
Brushes, nuzzles, strokes every part touched,  
Maker of many enchantments.  
Holiest of grounds.

## **THE MIDDEN OF MEMORY**

He steps over the granite step on the byre door's cusp and immediately finds himself engulfed by a shaft of bright, crisp morning light. He is brought to a halt there, midway between the internal gloom of the shed and the outdoor brightness and squints across at the grassy dyke that bounds this corner of the yard, his attention caught by the vibrant spread of yellow trumpets, of ranked yellow trumpets - and yellow bells, now piously silent in sunshine. *It is that time of year?*, he wonders, *again!*  
The yellowness makes him feel, what? *Alive!* Smiling, he acknowledges the impact.

*Life* – he half-mouths, half whispers the word. He feels an intoxication of joy and a great happiness surging, encompassing his being, even to his feet as they too respond to the mute call of the daffodil patch.

He moves forward, then stops and leans for a moment on his stick and looks past the corner of the plastic slurry tank, gazes on what he knows to be his history, a place, he thinks, always ripe for engagement in personal archaeology.

This, he recalls, is where his grandfather told him how he remembered his own grandfather speaking of this place and its meanings and uses, timetabling its growth. And now, he thinks, he habitually passes on his own catalogue of memories to his own grandchildren, of how there below the yellow and green dyke is the place where the handy shit hole happened to happen, without planning, until it became the dung pit, and then how its name changed to become the dunghill, and later still the manure heap, and then the brown midden, rising daily in height, piled with steaming brown dung and yellow straw embellished with nettles and thistles and dandelions, hiding around the boundary until finally the arrival of this obnoxiously slithery-slurry container. *Such is progress*, he thinks giving the green plastic a thump with his stick.

But still he lingers; in his mind's eye he turns leaf after leaf of memory each recorded conversations, joined in or more likely overheard, of stories and fragments of folklore told and retold, uncovering the layered memories of event and place, navigating much flagged speculations, engaging in the amateur history of this his ancestral ground.

## **GLEENER**

After the menfolk had ploughed and planted and waited and watched and made and finally saved the harvest it was then that the woman of the house, together with any sojourner who might be passing, would come to the field.

By its bounding hedges, at the field's edges where yesterday she gleaned<sup>11</sup> today she is here bent double, in the name of drudgery shared, liting a little over her work, yesterday the garnering of grain and today the gathering of kindling.

## **THE SHOOTING PARTY**

### **(A Prose Poem)**

The digging out is finished: two spades rest on the grass.

The fox's rear end is exposed. One man is bent over the still rump. He is attempting to gain control of its tail, to straighten it, to make it an implement of leverage in this battle of man versus brute.

The others watch and wait. A couple chat sotto voce as they wait. The boy looks and grows still as he watches, waiting. His chest is tight.

Straining, the man succeeds in grasping the tail, succeeds in pulling the fox's body partly out of the hole, its hind legs peddle wildly in the air.

The man stops pulling, allowing the fox to stay there, in limbo, caught, fastened between life and death, balanced, half in half out. The man breathes deeply, resting. He looks up and catches the boy's eye. The dreamer is the boy and yet he is not. He sees it all and is seen. The man's voice, take this and whirl it round and round, for speed. Then throw it down the field. When the men are ready! Mind! Wait till I give you the word!

The men have instinctively – or perhaps by an old memory of former times, buried - formed a straight line, shotguns raised, all eyes forward. The boy now finds himself, his fists about the fox's tail; attached in this so tangible way, knees well bent, dragging the animal out of darkness and into the world's bright light; slowly, he feels its weight, the hard ball of it, its muscles and sinews cramped, tight, then the animal's sudden mad squirm. Its instinct for freedom is so real to it and to him, its vigour speeding through his hands and arms and into his chest; the boy feels the fox's weight, he senses its hard substance, he knows all of this now and with such immediacy the intimacy of this life that pulses in his clenched fists.

Nevertheless, ah, there is always a nevertheless - the men's shouts roar out and the boy stirs, awakens; he rises as from a dream; he moves, he rises on his toes, pirouettes like an athlete, his momentum carried by and mindlessly married to the weight of the animal's body, one, two, three times he turns and with each turn his stony heart hardens while in his mind he rehearses exactly when and where he will ungrasp the thrashing body, throwing it out there under the mouths of the guns.

He senses the men urging him on. The fox running of the fox. The parade of eyes and gunights aligned and fingers tensed on triggers.

He sees it. He is the fox. He wills it run! run! and heaves with all his might. In a moment, he instinctively releases his grip and there it is, a speeding flash of colour.

A blur. It is a red or a brown, a reddish brown blur, that seems to fly; it flies, drops, freezes for a moment then, it flees off, not straight but at a slant, holding tight and low to the grass.

The boy thinks he hears a distant heartbeat – is it the fox's? Perhaps it is his own heartbeat that he hears, for the thump, thump that lives inside his chest coincides with the thunder that rolls about his head.

Snow is falling, thick and fast; the chambers of his heart fill; a clinging coldness silences his heart's beatings.

His hands remain held out, stretched out, as in a blessing. He smells the aroma of fox on his uplifted hands. His tongue protrudes between his teeth. He tastes the arid taste of emptied cartridges and smells the smell of blood as in this moment two things die.

## **BEYOND THE HORIZON**

She has crossed the yard  
And stands now at the path's end  
Here where the midden  
And the raddled yard meet  
Slop-pail in hand  
She dreams in images that mock  
At her head and at her feet,  
The fragrance of clover  
The smell of the sea

## **THE FRACTURE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH**

He sleeps. He dreams: He dreams of two gardens. A barrier between. A hedge. Streaming in their droves they seek to break through. Some of those who approach fail, rushing or hesitant, without the necessary key or password or code, uncertain in their attempt, they are caught in the thorns and briars and are denied a crossing to another place, another time, an altered being.

Many there are who are turned back, each one together with his or her cradled soul, for this moment in time the new garden is denied. Many there are who cross over, groping their way.

## **A SCIENCE OF SCIENCE?**

A television monitor stands against one wall, the stealthy normality of its accompanying multi-functional box of controls creates automated technological connections across unseen boundaries. This is how the young speak. Multi-indexed menus offer streamed pathways through a chaos of signals. Watchers; listeners; recorders, predictors, live here. Scientists climb on one another's shoulders, numbing one another's skulls with hobnailed boots of hypotheses; electronic journals voraciously feed of articles, reports, papers. News – breaking news or old news, false news, truth or lies... who can tell...

## **A MEDITATION ON WATER**

Water is where it all began. Well, after the bang. Water and slime and time. And then all else followed.

"...Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole [promised] land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." (12

The great wheels of Hope and Despair turn and turn again. Beneath us, the Almond trees are blooming.<sup>13</sup> We are riding high above the earth, high and alone on this great wave of time and tide. We squint to see beyond the reach of our understanding. Our knees are braced; gravity pulls; yet we maintain our balance on the juddering boards of despair, our eyes averted.

In this manner we travel, shackled to uncertainty and tied to hope.

## **THE MUSTARD SEED**

He wakes, as from a dream.

It must be the bright middle of the longest day – for he has come from the deepest black part of the longest night.

He touches the top of his head, exploratively, and is reassured; he has returned to the tramp of boots on the cobbles outside and to the smell of bacon and cabbage cooking.

He gazes about the room: the old man is slumped in his chair; a woman bustles about the kitchen; footsteps sound on the wooden stair treads, accompanied by the sound of a baby's whinging cry and a woman's voice like a pigeon's softly soothingly murmuringly caressing. He remembers falling through something, a gateway, a slap, a doorway in a great hedge, a fissure, a rip in the curtain that screened the other. He had entered – had fallen into - a black hole. And now he is returned. He had been sucked up and now he is spat out.

In some unknowable place, at a time long forgotten, a greatness miraculously the size of a mustard seed exploded, and the clam of space was prized open and light emerged and just now crashed through this window, its arrival hurting the crockery and shimmering the delph on the dresser.

An old man is slumbering; a young woman enters the room, she is cradling a child; another woman carries plates to the table, calling out over her shoulder, *Can ye not quieten that child! That noise would waken the dead!* She inclines her head warningly towards the old man.

The door opens and the gabble of men fall silent; dunchers are slid off heads; heavy-footed, the men enter, their shadows swaying, scurrying before them; a hob-nailed boot strikes stone and sparks skid upwards off the flagstone floor. From his seat in the corner, a living spark catches his attention; it burns brightly, aching incarnate for a moment, for a trice, brighter than all the light in the sunlit room.

## LINEAGE

### i.

She empties a shovelful of coal and turf into the stove. Embers and old ash shift, rise and settle. A lump of lard placed there, sizzles in the pan.

The young man sits to one side of the kitchen table. A grease gun lies proud of his knees. He is poring over an open book with diagrams of the linkage system on his new grey tractor. Little dots signify the location of the network of grease nipples he must lubricate, little arrows point the way.

The woman is their guardian of a shared morality and it is as such that she pauses for a moment, a faraway look shadowing her eye; she is resting her hand on the bible he has carelessly misplaced and left there on the table in his hurried search for his manual.

Another, older man, the collie at his heel, rests his spade against the gable wall and peers in through the kitchen window, anxious to get on, but waiting to follow what steps he must take.

### ii.

He leans against the windowsill; moments flow into aeons  
His back is toil-stiffened, his mind is a study in darkness  
Clouds of memories rise up, jumbled, floating,  
An alloy of picture, people, place; lightly  
He turns them over in the foothills of his consciousness  
A dream story... a silent film...  
An old sow grubs for worms under the apple trees  
Coming home from school, the scholars, excitedly  
Run for a dook in the river, the day being hot:  
The water flow catches and bends his legs at the knees, the cold  
The air ruthlessly cold and bright, fingers frozen  
The pain, potatoes sharp as granite chippings.  
Black shoes polished; white shirt ironed; Sunday lies waiting, the book opened.



Memories, sentences, images, torn apart; an old chair, re-quilted

In the kitchen a woman is at work, bent over a wash tub, her arms buried up to the elbows in suds A man too bends over his book of instructions that lies open on the table.

Three children lie side by side on their bed. Their inhalations and exhalations mark the rises and the falls, the orchestrations, the symphonies and the lullabies that surround their sleep-nested world of dream.

He closes the kitchen door and steps out, crossing over the cassie; he and the dog are so close together and move in companionable silence; occasionally, the dog gambols about his legs, its tail encircling his ankles but he escapes its grasp<sup>14</sup> they climb up the path to the stack yard.

The air here is sharp and clean and for a moment he can taste the smell of the sea carried from far below.

He stands there, beside the single glassy dead eye that is the dew pond, looking up, staring up and out to the beginning of time. He gawks in sudden awe at that great penumbra of stars and suns and planets, of comets and stars and shooting stars, all laid out on the great bed of fathomless darkness, a thing without ending or beginning and as he has perceived the ice on the dewy cabbage leaf, he now perceives the very beginning and the very end.

He feels the fire's conflagrations; its intense energy causing the earth to tremble beneath his feet while the flames and fires of ancient suns fret and spit in frustration above his head. He feels dizzy. He feels giddy. He feels he has embodied - he feels he has been unembodied - by a vastness, freedom, he feels the ground has moved from beneath his feet and he feels the wind on the naked soles of his feet.

He feels, such a soaring of feeling; such ecstasy; he feels as a swollen balloon might feel, having left the shattering, splitting earth to move among stars.

He thinks - this lightness he feels it, he does not think it, he feels it – this spun thistledown - is not his body, exactly – it is something inside his body, no, it is inside him - light – it is not merely the lightness of the joy he feels – but something firmer, something with even more reality - something hard as he knows a diamond is hard, but light, as fast and slippery as an invisible little fish now touched in water, now gone.

The bagpipes gasp hoarsely, taking and giving long wailing breaths, they hesitate and with each hesitation they make he hesitates in sympathy with them and then the music takes off,

flaring out over the Mull of Kintyre, over its corrugations of watery sheughs and dikes, its neuks and knowes<sup>15</sup> .

The music rises and falls, the dance restarts. It will go on and on and for about a trillionth of a second he fathoms the meaning of this cobweb of oneness.

And as the understanding rises and floats in his mind he forgets again; the curtain moves; and he is here, breathing in and out in this wonderland of lightness.

## **EPILOGUE**

The earth is snow-  
White with snowdrops  
Poets, prophets  
Philosophers

Questions, questions  
What is it:  
To be human  
The answer is:

To enchant, and  
To be enchanted.

The child looks up,  
Her face, fornenst  
The horse's face –  
The incantation  
Of these two breaths  
Mingling as one.

The heavens are seeded  
With satellites  
And stars galore  
Such life. Such life.

**SB**

<sup>1</sup> *An agreement reached 24 December, 2020P*

<sup>2</sup> Most of our names for clouds come from Latin and are usually a combination of the following prefixes and suffixes: Stratus/strato = flat/layered and smooth. Cumulus/cumulo = heaped up/puffy, like cauliflower. Cirrus/cirro = high up/wispy. Alto = medium level. Nimbus/Nimbo = rain-bearing cloud.

<sup>3</sup> *Evidence indicates that the first calendar was created by Stone Age people in Britain about 10,000 years ago. The earliest known calendar was a lunar calendar, which tracked the cycles of the moon. According to National Public Radio, the first calendar consisted of 12 pits with large rocks that mimicked the lunar cycles. The creators of the calendar were hunter-gatherers who used the calendar to keep abreast of when certain animals migrated from one area to another or when certain species of fish spawned. Scientists also believe that the calendar makers used their creation to predict events such as eclipses.*

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of Internet Archaeology*, a Mesolithic monument consisting of a series of pits was found near Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Estimated to date from 8,000 B.C.

<sup>5</sup> *Ephesians 2:14*

<sup>6</sup> *Cassie, a paved or well-trodden area in front of a rural house; a farmyard*

<sup>7</sup> Balor is a figure from Irish (and Celtic) mythology, associated with Tory Island. His one fearsome eye had well-developed destructive powers. He has connections with wider harvest myths and with the sun.

<sup>8</sup> *The animal-driven rotary mill was a 4th-century BC Carthaginian invention, with possible origins in Carthaginian Sardinia. Two Carthaginian animal-powered millstones built using red lava from Carthaginian-controlled Mulargia in Sardinia were found in a 375–350 BC shipwreck near Mallorca. Such mills spread to Sicily, arriving in Italy in the 3rd century BC. Northern Ireland has many remnants of linen, corn, spade, saw, paper, flour and woollen mills.*

<sup>9</sup> *ice sheets more than 9,800 thick lay across the landscapes of Ireland.*

<sup>10</sup> *Very loosely based on an Eskimo folk tale*

<sup>11</sup> *Ruth gleaning, Leviticus 19:9-10*

<sup>12</sup> *Deuteronomy 34:1–4.*

<sup>13</sup> *Almond: a native of Syria and Palestine. Its blossoms are of a very pale pink colour, and appear before its leaves. Its Hebrew name signifies "wakeful, hastening," given to it on account of its putting forth its blossoms very early, in February, and sometimes in January. In Eccl, it is referred to as illustrative of the haste with which old age comes. The almond tree bears its blossoms in the midst of winter, on a naked, leafless stem, and these blossoms (reddish or flesh-coloured in the beginning) seem at the time of their fall exactly like white snowflakes. In this way the almond blossom is a very fitting symbol of old age, with its silvery hair and its wintry, dry, barren, unfruitful condition.*

<sup>14</sup> *Dante (serpent encircles his legs and takes him down to hell)*

<sup>15</sup> *Ulster Scots and Northern English, hills and valleys*