

Unpublished Poems

Pastoral and Lyrical *Various and Uncollected Poems*

Know your own bone: gnaw at it., bury it, unearth it, and gnaw at it still. Thoreau

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(Commissioned for Stormont conference)

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Author's Introduction

When I began to assemble these poems into what I hoped might at some point in the future become a coherent volume, I discovered they fell into three distinct groupings: those whose main concern was what might be termed *historical roots*; those arising out of *imaginings* (mine or others) and poems that resulted from my own consciousness of *significant impact* on life. I have not been overly rigorous in categorising the poems, but they mostly fall within one or other of these groupings. (Some have been put elsewhere; the Culmore poems are a case in point.)

PROMETHEUS SAYS GOODBYE

(dedicated to Leslie Nicholl, artist), 28.09.2020

He does be so, a shadow on the sharp blade's edge
Of this civilised world
'I'm going out in style,' the words rise and fall
(hoarse, but softly so, not harsh)
I scarcely see his form yet the cadence of his voice
Rides the waves of the wind.
Grey smoke hangs there
Formlessness against darkness
Swaying to a George Gershwin tune
An Ulsterman in the Baltic
A match flares, safe in a cupped hand
Face to face
Two cigarettes glow
Gleaming on rose gold, his gift for her
A hard redness comes and goes



Associated Painting by Leslie Nicholl, 2020

Given here courtesy of the artist

A GARDEN ON THE FOYLE

If Stones Could Speak

They would speak to us

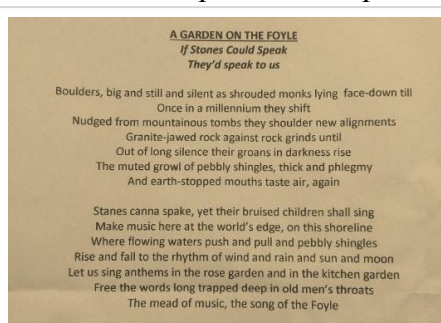
Boulders, big and still and silent as shrouded monks lying face-down till
Once in a millennium they shift
Nudged from mountainous tombs in their turn they shoulder new alignments
Granite-jawed rock against rock grinds until
Out of long silence their groans in darkness rise
The muted growl of pebbly shingles, thick and phlegmy
And earth-stopped mouths taste air, again

Stanes canna spake, yet their bruised children shall sing
Make music here at the world's edge, on this shoreline
Where flowing waters push and pull and pebbly shingles
Rise and fall to the rhythm of cosmic storms the pull of sun and moon
Let us sing anthems in the rose garden and in the kitchen garden
Free those words long trapped deep in old men's throats
The mead of music, the song of the Foyle

Note

Note - Regarding the proposal for a Foyle River/ Eden Garden – this was written to commemorate the new proposed garden initiative on the banks of the Foyle. First published Derry Journal and Londonderry Sentinel (13 March 2020) together with interview with editor of DJ & posted on DJ Facebook

- The Mead of music, song, poetry, ref to Norse mythology
- Stones speak – inscription in the porch of St Columba's Cathedral



[Video: Poet Sam Burnside pens new ode to the Eden Project inspired Foyle River Gardens development in Derry](#)

Acclaimed Derry-based poet Sam Burnside has taken inspiration from the monumental proposals to develop a massive £67m river garden around the Boom Hall and Brook Hall estates.

www.derryjournal.com

FROST ON GRASS

There is frost on the grass
The spade's damp face, a sheen
Beneath the shadow
Of its bowed venerator
Each intercessory deep thrust knee-hefted
Clod-turned, rain-water-and-frost blessed
This seedbed of tea-bag crumbled waste
Each cycle outturns the cool cleansing of soil
Cancerously blessed as cancer blesses
Bird's song falling, leaf on bent leaf dropping
White tipped, sprouting greenly
Another year's fresh bud's thrust

BATTLE'S END

The one place you can be sure of is this place
Rest under this canopy, take off your shoes
Feel the cool grass on the thin skin of your feet, the moss
Soft under your feet-skin; rest a moment
Stretch out your hand and feel this tree trunk's rough-cast crust
Fret the covering on the palm of your hand
Ease the wood's foliage around and about your shoulders
Like a blanket, a light, weightless blanket
Lie back; let your body weight impress the leafy loam
Become a part of it
Accept, you never were part of the race
Or it of you, surrender now
Sensing the wind's wistfully movements among leaves, wandering, wandering.
It is time. The ultimate question is to be asked - whispered - into the silence
And silence is the only answer you will ever get, even after hard prayer
Light fades and darkness falls, soft as twilight flayed, falling snow
Ears fill, the nose fills, and the eyes fill. Soon
Thawed leaf mould will creep between what had been your warm lips
It will rest there, drawn to the mystery of your once-soft now stiff, stilled tongue
You and the earth shall become as one

MORNING OBLATION

There is a fog on the glass, a veneer
That obscures – almost – that oh too-familiar face
Oil-paint armoured, cobwebbed by age and wear
Its netted symmetry marred by – there – the slightest
Of scars, a white line scratched on skin, stretched tight and taut.

Let your breath shrink underneath your flat, damp hand
For rub, scrub, deny as you may, orb will outstare watchful orb
Deny these hungry eyes feasting off one another
Devouring what is there, consuming what is there, fly
Witness to the decay of what was and what is, and what shall be.

WILLIAM THE BOLD

William McKee 1952—2018

An Appreciation

Can you see him there, not a stumble, not one misstep?
Breasting yet another beloved mountain top, before withdrawing,
Leaving us alone, alone in these dark days of the year.

Of all the hills he faced this was his toughest yet,
His longest climb: a destination he had no mind to reach,
Not preaching, not complaining, forward-planning till the end:

Facing head-on what might be found there, beyond the road's bend -
A round table set in a bright, high hall; a coffee-house; a friend.

A WALK BY THE RIVER

In memoriam John Hume 1937-2020

The change of light, that is the first thing, then
The earth's firm bank suddenly becoming other:
Water, the fast and the slow of it,
Rills of light clinging to it, as breath clings, for there
Is life here – even as your life was a life
Of brindled shadows creeling words and light.

BODY ARMOUR

A hedgehog noses blindly,
Without grace he trundles
Grunting through tangled grass

A soldier steps out, smartly
All precision and shine
All boot-spit and polish

The hedgehog bristles, halting
By flashing instinct balling

The soldier is breast-plated by wadded paper
This long held essay of love his hope, his shield

THE SALMON'S LEAP

Muscle and sinew
Hope and faith and belief
The pregnant gap, not
Mere vacancy, not emptiness
Not what is between past and future
Between yesterday and tomorrow
Rather, that boundless eternity
Between past and future
Between yesterday and tomorrow
Between what was and what is to be
Between who you were and who you will be
Between will and shall
Between baby and old duffer
This cell where we live
This now
These cells wherein we be
Between inhalation and exhalation
I will not say live
Perhaps exist will do, perhaps
This balance between strides is better
The lukewarm between frozen and boiling
Nothing that went before and nothing that will come after
Can be of consequence
Except, perhaps, that arc
Caste in the salmon's leap,

NURSE

Working under canvas
Against the cackle of gunfire
She thinks off and on of rainbows
Wiping stuff from her fingers
Looking out, remembering
Soft rain blowing in across distant Ulster fields, their smell
Its washed trees, its mist-nourished hillsides

Catching a reflection, poised, paused there
Her thoughts turn to, linger on, rainbows
Somewhere over the rainbow drifts in her head, as
Sensing the coolness of the white basin
Yearning for the feel of long grass about her ankles
Remembering, nettle stings on bare legs
Remembering eggs, firm and fragile
Remembering their warmth in her hands
Remembering

THE BALLAD OF ROGAN AND MISS ELLIE

*the poor man's sentinel, the farmer's friend, and the gentleman's favourite**

For Karen Girvan and her Irish terriers, February 2019

It snowed during the night; a full moon lofted:
This morning's light is gin-clear and bright
A new day has dawned, silken and slow and soft
Also, sharp and bright and crisp, much frost smitten.

So, off you go for your walk, Ellie and you and the brawler
The three of you – and there! – there! tumble-weeding
Through the branches – a whoosh of colour
A flash of white – a red squirrel, branch to branch, speeding.

Miss Ellie stays at heel, but Rogan sets off at a run
Outraged, hell-for-leather, whooshing lickety-split
Over snowdrifts until he halts abruptly, not done,
Ready for a fight, chest four-square, tail stiff as a stick.

He comes to heel, eventually, reluctantly, skidding on the frosty mat
At your feet. The three of you walk on, companionably
This is not affection decanted, as is a cat's,
It is the mystery of an ancient air-borne empathy:

You are in a fairy-tale as you tramp through a blur of white flakes congregating:
*They are almost human, my dogs – if Miss Ellie here
Had a hand!, she would have it jammed in my pocket
If Rogan had an arm, it would rest about my shoulder, not domineering.*

Here is a mingled sense of menace and hope: another sunrise; another day's dawn.
How they and we share these threads of meaning, from one to another dancing
To-and-fro: the quick fidelity of these dogs; that squirrel dreaming of an acorn.
Rich and rare is this realm of entitlement, here at the rootstock of our understanding.

Notes

*F. M. Jowett writes in *The Irish Terrier*, 'Our Dogs' Publishing Co. Ltd., Manchester, England 1947 – 7th Edition: They are described by an old Irish writer as being the poor man's sentinel, the farmer's friend, and the gentleman's favourite...

Fidelity see William Wordsworth's poem "[Fidelity](#)" which was written after the death of Charles Gough, who fell from Striding Edge, Helvellyn in 1805. His body was found below Red Tarn some months later by a shepherd, his remains still being guarded by his Irish Terrier, Foxy

A note received from Karen Girvan:

David Blake Knox - *The curious history of Irish Dogs* is a lovely book and has two chapters on the [Irish Terrier].

BREATHINGS

(a virus poem)

On the train that morning our noses almost touched, and as I inhaled your distasteful
Exhalations our thighs and noses touched and touched again, bones embarrassingly hardening

I remembered the yard gravel suddenly digging into my knees caps –
(Yet, the pain was nothing – hunched there, intent over the stone step, knife angled

The smell of the hot poker engagement as it burnt out the barrel's pith
The finger-holes errantly placed, with no plan, just hope and a blind faith

The blade sharpened so, I would shape the elder, cut through a duct hole,
With help of neither art or science, and so, nothing came of nothing, until

Serendipity played its part when I blew across the mouth of a mineral bottle
And out of the dark emptiness a cosmic wind fumed its hollow answer

THE BURR AND THE CORONAVIRUS

(a virus poem)

Then, in our days of innocence
Running wild over fields, rambling
In and out of hedgerows
Scented, dock and thistle filled
Our saggy knee-socks
Burr riddled, prickly and sticky
With stuff that never could be
Plucked clean - 'so what' we said turning away
Into days of joy and innocence

Now, invisible crowns -
So many mines of contagion - bobbing among waves
Spit and cough-carried
Through air, on tabletop, handrail, door handle
Easy and louche
Indiscreetly smooching on skin
Brushing lips, caressing eyelids
So darkly dangerous, so beautiful, we whisper, coughing
Washing our hands once then once more, for luck:

Wisps of mist drift across fields on air
Or lie inert on skin and hair

EASTER LETTERS, Three Linked Haiku

The Three Days of Easter, 2020

(a Virus poem 2020)

1.

I planted bulbs, seeds
Earth-bedded, snow-blanketed:
Since, moons have come, gone

2.

Eggs gold, brown, yellow
Hornet's nests by my gate wait:
I cannot step past

3.

Easter Lilies wilt
Beneath banks of black tulips
Green flushes spreading

Note on Context

Haiku: these follow a traditional Japanese form where each poem is (1) created from seventeen syllables contained in three lines (4, 7, 5 syl. per line). (2) Each poem should contain a seasonal reference, thus rooting it in actuality. (3) Each poem manifests its essence through the structural means of expressing itself in two parts (these separated by a 'cutting' / 'dividing' (separating) word or image – thus presenting tension, movement, dramatic life)

A further step in the creative process leads to this form of 'linked haiku', where one verse is connected to another.

The three days of easter are days that begin with the liturgy on the evening of Maundy Thursday.

WHERE KATE BUSH MEETS PHILIP GLASS

(for Dennis Greig, loyal friend of poets)

this is a true story
of celestial spheres
where nothing ever dies
where stuttering voices cross
and re-cross, aeons, echoing-ly,

we, we exist in shackles
(our eyes, our ears, our senses)
yet, our thoughts roam, free
adam-and-even-ing
God's echo, aching-ly

this is a true story:
we are not in an abyss
because there is no abyss
no eyes but intuitions
listen to me and see
strangely beautiful sounds
materialise in forms unknown
the pure being of God
laughing, there in the dark
dancing, there in the light
artists on the edge
palettes of blue and grey
yellow and orange notes
on a spinning globe, alone
above us, beyond us
over the edge
there is no edge
beyond fields of celestial celandine
beyond mere existence
there, where there is
no time, no space

Note: this poem was read by the author at the Linen Hall Library in late 2019, at an event organised to celebrate and honour Dennis Greig's contribution to poetry.

GOODBYE TO DAMPIER

(Kate and Alex, Ben and Aimee, July 2020)

Goodbye stairway to the stars
Goodbye faithful old Red Dog
Goodbye to ice-cream on the beach
It's a wave of the hand, kisses blown,
Tears of despair and tears of hope
Goodbye friends, one and all, goodbye, goodbye

*The wheels on the bus go round and round
Round and round, round and round*

Remember those palm trees on the beach
Remember, the pale moon rising in the sky
The wild, wild wind and the red, red dust
That first barefooted walk, sand and toes cemented
Kate and Alex, clinging
Like limpets on a rock, there on the shoreline of life

*The wheels on the bus go round and round
Round and round, round and round*

Do not forget the weans, those children of Dampier,
Ben aged ten (and a half, or so he says, so serious)
Aimee is eight, a skip and a jump and a wink
Now she is here, now she is there, out the door
Settling already, digging deep her roots
Dampier, Perth, Goodbye, Hello.

*Here we go round the Mulberry bush
The Mulberry Bush, the Mulberry Bush
Here we go round the Mulberry Bush
At the dawning of a bright new day*

Absence

Another long day alone, even
Jenny Wren is not here
Or rather, I feel her presence
Yet I cannot discover her
So grey, so tiny, so doubting is she:
I shall wait for daylight's rending
I shall wait for blackbird's voices
Skittering like diamonds in the dark
Before drawing the curtains of night

Note

Eglinton. Written at the invitation of Eglinton Community Support Group,
October 2020 for their publication in support of St Canice's Church

PRESENT TENSE PERFECT

(For Michael)

14 September 2016, late afternoon

Far off, the fowlers' guns echo.
Above,
Seagulls, all cargo jettisoned, drift
Like corks, riding the curling waves.
Now, suddenly turning away,
As lips do in quick aversion to corrupted wine,
Now white, now grey against the darkening day.
Rotted treetops roll, their torsos straining, strained between earth and

sky,

Bodies, fraught; in desperation, frantic to reconcile the unreconcilable
Troubled, even though this day appears brave and balmy.

14 September 2016, evening

Beyond the caravan park,
Settling into trees, crows
Flap, haggling over twig print, over claw grasp,
Day ends to,
Myriad contentious voices melding into a distant sinking chorus.

14 September 2016, late evening

Above Ballywalter Beach, a full moon hangs low in the sky,
The tide comes in, soft and slow
The air is heavy with lippy salt
A buttery moon hangs full to the east
Under its candlelight
Men's voices carry,
(Gently, calmly)
From Grey Abbey,
Over hedged fields
Across years,
Athwart that great ravine, men call time.

14 September 2016, nightfall

For a moment, the evening sky flares, then its crimson fires die,
The wind huffs and puffs, sighing, at its ending
A few sea birds call out, underneath the day mutters, wearily, rest-
yearningly

Meanwhile, the heavy sea leans its shoulder against the shore,
Hefting rumbling pebbly stones across these cave doors.

A New Beginning

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

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

Over the borders of dusk into light
I am, I am, I am, I am, I am
Miraculously, through twilight
Into moonlight, into sunlight

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

Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun

A Collaborative Performance by An integrated Choir

Look and see - the moon is here
Streets that were wet-black now
Wet-black now
Are rivers and lakes of frozen milk
See now the snow, the snow is falling, falling

***Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand***

Black thunder-clouds sway across the sky, under
Such a canopy of stars, a star for every one of us
A star for every one of us
Look up and see the blue sky, the white clouds
As the cool pale moon sinks, the heat of the sun grows

***Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand***

The new day is wet and wild, it is raining black starlings
Take my hand, step into the drizzle, singing this song
It is raining black starlings
Our breaths echo, echo beneath the world's roof
Like sighs they drift homewards, on the breeze

***Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand***

Shooting stars (scratch the sky) race over our heads.
Take shelter under the rainbow's arching roof, there where
shelter under the rainbow's arching roof
Our words fall to earth where our songs are sown and grown
Where our songs blossom into love, blossom into love

***Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand***

Inside and Out

A far-away butterfly shifts its wings.
Whose fault? A storm rises in the Azores.
Burnt toast grows cold. I must be the cause.
I see veins in that neck swelling, hammering.

Inside his skull the wind dashes, rain splashes

Black clouds gather and lightening flashes.

The furious windmills of his fists lash.

The key turns so fast. My universe, trashed

The door is locked, the window curtains drawn.

They will remain like this, until dawn.

These four walls, the floor, the ceiling, curtains, door.

Disregarded, I am left to bank my days in this drawer.

Two puppets on a single cord, we dangle.

He says, (sweat-drops and tear-drops comingling),

Never again! The last time! Why do I believe

When I know that to believe is to deceive.

Wife Beater

Wife beaters are human, also -

The grave, grey legislator; the sneak thief;

The baker who kneads the bread we eat;

Those arrogant ones who refrain from hammer-and-tong

They whose tongues can flay, laying a thousand lashes.

Yes, they are human too, loving the sun-caressed life,

Beyond blame; yet in the long dark nights

They Captain ships of false promises over seas of turbulent harmony,

At the centre of lightening storms, through troughs of love and hate.

He is not all bad, you say: no, just bad for you.

You wear your long-sleeved shirt, again.

It's about going on, you say, going on and on ...

Remembered love, that half-remembered melody;

In this manner, you harvest your future from a waste of shame.

a table of tenses

[enagh lough seen from the atherton's garden, 10 may 2021]

look, see

across the grass the trees form a portal

and there, framed by branch and leaf, water awaits

i have stood here, those marshy, dark depths unknowable

i looked and i saw

dumb beast stunned, pelt stripped, beater flat

silk-thin skin, powdered in silver, front and back

hung from the heavens on cords of mist and rain

i look, i see

pilgrims crossing from one world to the next

Thwarted by a mirrored door, snibbed, for now

see, as dead leaves on window glass, spirits press

i will look and see

out of the black depths of time and space, night

and day, light and life gate-crash against such a ghost-

and-spirit proofed, such a soul-and-ghost-locked door

sam burnside

a table of tenses

[enagh lough seen from the atherton garden, 10 may 2021]

today

across the grass the trees form a portal
and there, framed by branch and leaf, lies water
i have stood here, its marshy, dark depths unknowable

past day

dumb beast stunned, pelt stripped, beater, beaten
skin, silk-thin, powdered in silver, front and back
hung from the heavens on chains of cloud and rain

more days

pilgrims crossing from one world to the next
thwarted by this door of silver on silver
see, as dead leaves on window glass, they press

days and days

out of the black depths of time and space, night
and day, light and life gate-crash against such ghost-
and-spirit, such soul-and ghost-proofed portals

THE BOG

(in the year that is in it, 2020)

The bog is soft and hard
Ambiguous, seductive
Lichen-faced in greys, browns
Lichen-faced in greens, in olive greys
Its sediment laced with old roots
Wet and warm -
Cool too to the touch
To the ear, birdsong
Such plainsong
Underfoot, shughs of glar,
Half-seen, half buried bridges
Rotted timber or bog oak
How are we to tell?

A Collaborative Performance for An integrated Choir

Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun

Look and see - the moon is here
Streets that were wet-black now
Wet-black now
Are rivers and lakes of frozen milk
See now the snow, the snow is falling, falling

*Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand*

Black thunder-clouds sway across the sky, under
Such a canopy of stars, a star for every one of us
A star for every one of us
Look up and see the blue sky, the white clouds
As the cool pale moon sinks, the heat of the sun grows

Look, See, Starry Sky

*Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand*

The new day is wet and wild, it is raining black starlings
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Our breaths echo, echo beneath the world's roof
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*Look, See, Starry Sky
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Shooting stars (scratch the sky) race over our heads.
Take shelter under the rainbow's arching roof, there where
shelter under the rainbow's arching roof
Our words fall to earth where our songs are sown and grown
Where our songs blossom into love, blossom into love

*Look, See, Starry Sky
Cloudy Moon, Rising Sun
Take my hand*

CULMORE FANTASIA

(the old city dump, now reclaimed, seen as a metaphor for the city)

*"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
Woodpigeons, 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

¹ Adynaton – an example here of hyperbole, exaggeration used in literature to draw attention to a conceit or wild idea