

Some Recent Poems.

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Household deities

The old gods were in those hills long before
We arrived tired and foot weary, and humping
Our painted statues.

They were jealous gods and they loved us
Because they saw our plain worshipping faces
And longed for our praise.

And when we ignored them, like lovers fearful
Of first contact, how they must have roared inwardly
And tore their fingernails on the roots of rocks.

And when we set up grottos in our houses and
Spilled mayflower and rushes before our icons
Their anger darkened the skies.

So that we were afraid to walk out at night
Or during thunderstorms or on low evenings
When the sky dipped to the fields.

And they saw to it that our gods of wood
And alabaster were household deities with little
To do but look down from walls and mantelpieces.

Outside they ruled everywhere, river and lake, hill-dip
And heather and the wind that filled the spaces.
Ours hid in scapulars and never showed their faces.

Columcille in Iona

(Tradition has it that Columcille's brother, Dobhran, was buried alive to placate the spirits before a church could be built in Iona)

They scuttled their currachs as a sign of
Faith spreading inland across rocks like men
Shipwrecked and finding a spot level as an altar,
Columcille Blessed the earth.

They began building with the chapel, for God
Needs shelter and quiet air, where men uprooted
And torn by pagan thorns, can find in his calm
Unction for their gashed souls.

Their vision was wider and sharper than their
Spades battling the flinty ground for small gains.
They took their cue from the sea that honed
The rocks a bit each day.

Coluncille, his palms bursting like stigmata,
Guided the others, the words sucked from his mouth.
Stopping only for the gathering darkness they
Slept in the open like cattle.

One man, digging his own grave slowly, savoured
The sweat on his lips, the loud freedom of
Wave, the wind's fierce embrace and the gulls
Everywhere crying "shame".

Inexorable as a prophecy the earth yielded
To their will, a deep trench the sides
Jagged with flint and still they dug, measuring
Its depth against a man's head.

Deep enough to take a man standing, he went
As easily as labourers turned builders, saying
It is not masonry but a man's strength that
Holds up a lasting place.

Poker with a time lord

He gave me a poor hand at first
Deal, a pair of twos and a mixed
Lot of indifferent middle cards. I
Tried to read his face, the steady
Grey eye, the rosy cheeks and the white
Magician's beard, slender as angora.
His hand that held his hand had
More than a hint of sleight about the
Nimble fingers and the wide, wide sleeve
Could conceal an ace or two up there.

I put down three for I was young and
Good at bluffing He peeled the deck
Practiced without looking and rippled their
Edges on the table rim near where I sat.
He took one only indifferent as a yawn.

Mine were good to build a flush on
What I put down but I held them close
To my heart and, being arrogant, opened
With more than I could afford. He raised,
I raised, he raised, I raised again. He
Saw me kindly, spreading his four aces
Symmetrical as creation on the green
Baize. My pride bit back my tears.

Back in the sawdust of the saloon bar,
Dim with smoke, the oldsters read loss
On my face. They owned that he was a good
Player but said he cheated; dealt from
Different decks, marked cards, or had
A mirror rigged up under the table.

At times though he was soft as honey
Letting some win, because they cried.

A family history

The grandmother calved for the twelfth
Time making o sound like moo, moo.
Outside in the field cows crossed
Themselves in the heat of flies
Sensing how close men get at times
Before the arrogance of tin can and stool.

Father bull, hunchbacked in a shiny
Waistcoat, heard the whimper of his last
Jump sound like an echo and half
Smiled a face of triumph and expectancy.

It's a bull child, said the old midwife,
Blood staining under her black nails
And a newspaper balled like a bladder
In her other hand. Her voice sounded
Like a curse flung down the barrel of the stairs.

Later there was a haemorrhaging, they
Said, a elow eddying of blood thick as
Soft porridge on the floor and staining
Through to the ceiling below where the men
Played cards and watched the dull red
Ring open and blamed it all on God and hid
Their faces behind His mysterious ways.

In the byre the cows, milked, chewed the
Cud like philosophers and, knowing by
The lights that burned in the house all
Night and the two foolish cars that came
And went again, that in the morning a small
Blunt mouth would search their udders like
A calf and like nativity props they would
Cradle him in the Bethlehem of their breaths.

Out on the hunger-cropped moor a bull
Restless reads the breeze with wide nostrils.

Corncrake in Natural History Museum

As last. Exposed without a wisp of cover.
My hand is stopped by glass. You can
Not look now or slant your sawdust
Body through the bending grass leaving
The day turbulent with your were.

Elusive, loud king of the undergrass,
Your single, harsh song raking the
Damp meadows, a swath of sound from
Such a small throat. Armed with imagination
I searched for myths in the tropical
Fields. You fed me on false trails.

A disappointment. Small, brown and plain
Behind the glass. I go to a window.
Below the small cars patrol the naked
Streets soundless. One whispers here.

A crake sticks in my neck. You watch with
Your immortal glass eye. You've caught me.

Filling a form

I got my census form. It concerned
"British subjects and citizens of the Irish
Republic resident at your address". It
Referred to me as The Occupier. Memories

Of struggle, pitchforked peasants. French
Resistance, blitzkreig. Occupier; a
Transitory position while the rightful
Owners regroup. The old paronia returns.

I block capitalised my own name, my wife's,
No space to add native, and my children
Beautifully anglicised. I declared that there
Were no merchant seamen in the family
Soldiers on short leave, vagabonds or people
Of a rootless disposition. I lied there.

There was no space for personal detail
Or explication. Just a short statement
Declaring that all the above was true.

It would probably only have confused a
Computer, coldly chronicling facts and
Anxious simply that each number should at least
Have a surname, without history or historicisms.

Mind wandering

Old Shepard went to Chicago riding
A bronco ship, uncertain as Brendan, across
The uneven moorlands of sighing ocean.

Chicago met him like thunder. Trains and
Trams roared into the terminus of his brain.
Cars glided between the sheer cliffs of houses
And ladies wore furs and tight-fitting hats.

His debts paid off he returned, pale as
A cleric, strange among the small hedges
And pencilled fields reclaimed with green dollars.
The rain mellowed his suit and unpolished
His shoes. He opened horses' mouths again and
Felt for lumps in the udders of skittish cattle.

In the silence of turf-cutting it all came
Back. The high banks were skyscrapers,
Their windows darkened and the doors ready to burst.
The peat he wheeled out in a Model-T.

A country Icarus

Old Shepard needed a coat that kept the rain
Out. The gods of the townland sitting on their
Small height mocked him in this way. Take some

Sacks, they said, shape them into a coat and paint
It thickly with pitch. Then, not a drop of water
Will reach your shirt or leg-tops for that matter.

He did just that and the rain that fell rebounded
Like hailstones from his back and the tops of
His legs were dry, or only slightly damp.

He liked that coat walking black against the snow
In winter and safe when the wind whipped the deluge
Of spring cruelly across those unsheltered hills.

He wore it with pride into summer until one day,
So the legend went, when the remorseless sun paid
Its yearly visit to the fields, his coat melted and
Fell in dribbles about him like a great black halo.

Long after it was believed the story was kept
Jealously, because they believed they invented it.
A waxen coat, a field in Leitrim, a man called Shepard.