



# *Gog and Magog*



Ciaran O'Driscoll





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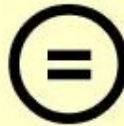
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While taking my severely injured wife out to the riverbank by the side of the hill of Nakahiro-machi, I was horrified, indeed, at the sight of a stark naked man standing in the rain with his eyeball in his palm. He looked to be in great pain, but there was nothing that I could do for him.

*Unforgettable Fire*, by survivors of Hiroshima

Anger is better than sadness.

St Thomas Aquinas





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## **HELIOGRAPHY**

It's out of the question that we don't  
pull ourselves together now chaps  
for various Muslim and Hindu reasons  
also reasons of State, various  
longterm goals but above all  
because of the task in hand, namely  
fixing this blowup length of track.  
To which purpose, it almost seems, rebels  
have been deployed in the country round -  
those flashes of light up on the hills  
are not chance reflections, it's called  
heliography. I thought that would  
be able to concentrate your minds.  
Well it's all together then chaps  
for the Empire and the young prince  
in the carriage happily absorbed  
collapsing houses of cards.

## **A VIGIL**

No images emerge from the country  
beyond the roadblocks.

Under the stars, the cosmic wheels,  
no images emerge.

I watch you toss your body backwards, forwards,  
and work your jaws as if trying  
to gnash your teeth at the air  
silently, and finally

like a small coarse fish splashing the surface  
you say, 'They've finished the post-mortem.'  
Your tone of voice is defiance  
with sadness in its tail

like a prisoner's who forebodes  
a harsh sentence, a peerless jury.  
You speak replacing your head  
in the nosebag of oblivion.

Everything is normal on all roads  
leading to the interior  
under the conniving stars.  
Everything is normal.

## ANATOMY OF THE COPPER MAN

*(copperwork figure in a pub, Co Galway)*

The entry wound is under the right elbow - here.  
And as you can see  
the neck of the fiddle has struck the heart. In fact  
almost the whole fiddle has entered the body.  
Only the head and feet remain intact.

Each arm, each leg, is fifteen fragments;  
the trunk an archipelago, a jigsaw  
presided over by the moonstruck face.

A relic of *geansai* adheres to the neck;  
lapels of a vanished coat. A straw hat  
crowns this extraordinary apparition.  
It fidgets forward in fine copper boots,  
its own backbone for walking stick.

A king of shreds and patches, gentlemen,  
held together by no thread of consequence.  
Note how the fixed grin belies  
the fact that the night sky floats through the wounds.

## CLOSE COMBAT

Before knowing it, we had rounded  
a corner on to the hackneyed  
carpet of falling corollae,  
the rhododendron ambush!

And lighter than the tree's  
sporadic light bombardment  
your lips began falling  
on me, all over me,

and my protective hands  
were soothing each place on you  
the mauve petals mildly grazed,  
places also out of their range.

Later, by the lake, we sat  
rehearsing separate ways that led  
up to that classic contact,  
when straight out of *Dr Zhivago*

the cherry trees went scattering  
another hoary old chestnut  
of blossoms, and I knew  
I had sustained a hit.

## **AUBADE**

*(for Shena)*

Hear the woman  
at the upstairs window  
saying goodbye  
with the voice of parting

Turn your apologetic  
figure once to sketch  
a smile's  
embarrassed lineaments

Take with you down  
hilly sidestreets  
the room where she  
is visited by cold sunlight

## ICE AGE

Now practise ongoing  
strategies for November:  
stay with evening courses  
on art, car maintenance,  
or teach the flatmate chess.

There's knitting, the old reliable;  
exploratory lists  
of presents, invitations;  
the milking of commonplaces;  
long milkings of silence.

Finish the outsize jigsaw.  
Play the parakeet's tape.  
Oil the bicycle. Read  
over again the twice-read  
tales of Sherlock Holmes

and keep the coalbox filled.  
Now ice has sealed the dead  
anatomy of politics,  
the cheers from hustings gel  
in monopolies of frost.

## IN THE SEAFOOD RESTAURANT

These are hard times  
to be pronouncing the word 'shellfish',  
but I do pronounce it, softly,  
more to myself than to the waiter  
who would like something more specific.

I could tell him  
of Sunday afternoons in London  
between pub-opening times,

the scranrel notes  
of a badly-played tin whistle  
in Underground stations,

a blind man fumbling  
his piano accordeon  
through the doors of curry-houses,

how time wears on, and wears down  
all but the most liberated  
of liberation theologians;

or say that I have given up  
masturbating, and with the proceeds  
of the sublimated energy,  
bought a sea-green Mercedes.

Instead, I place the word 'shellfish'  
in the begging bowl  
of his doleful countenance,  
nothing more specific:

some of my best friends are mussels.

## MAN WITH MACAW

This man with a multicoloured bird on his shoulder  
often got on the Underground at Burnt Oak.  
The multicoloured bird dropped feathers  
that schoolchildren grabbed, but mostly  
sat mute and trusting on the man's shoulder -  
just a little apprehensive, you'd know it  
from watching the not-quite-still claws.  
Not so much as a squawk from this  
serene and multicoloured bird  
on the shoulder of a serene-looking  
man who wore shabby clothes. They seemed  
to lend serenity to one another.  
Often he smiled back at smiles,  
talked in a matter-of-fact way about  
moulting and birdseed, and civilly answered questions.  
Always for me his arrival in the carriage  
was like the first time I ever saw him,  
unobtrusive but slightly wonderful -  
Man with Macaw, serene  
man and multicoloured bird, children  
watching for the fall of a dazzling feather.  
Often, because the tube went no further,  
we got off at Colindale and waited  
for the next one to take us to Burnt Oak:  
so ordinary it seemed then, a man  
standing on the platform with a macaw on his shoulder,  
that stern faces softened and dry tongues  
found a couple of friendly words.



## THE TREE OUTSIDE MY WINDOW

There are many mansions in  
the tree outside my window.

James Joyce is there, reciting  
the sequel to *Finnegans Wake*  
to oysters eating fillets of the rich  
in its seafood restaurant,

and there's the repentant pope  
nodding in total agreement  
with the Marxist theologians  
of its leafy constellations.

And the cringing olive-eyed  
mongrel from down the lane  
takes the evening paper  
from his former master's mouth,

while the children of Peru  
throw away their begging bowls  
and screaming with delight  
climb to the topmost branches.

O the fine ales the beautiful dead  
drink in the tree outside my window!

Green is its darkness and its silver  
in the breeze is starlight.

## AN EXILE

The girl from Cavan who  
was reading Seneca now  
dreams at the window. Blown  
leaves and soothing rain,

a shy intelligent girl.  
On Friday evening she'll  
read no more, embrace  
the comfort of her race

in a Dalston pub, her home  
from home. Later, at some  
convenient excuse,  
let an old anger blaze.

Upon the table lie  
Seneca's open play  
and *Cooking in a Bedsit*.  
Where will she next eat?

## **THE RAIN GOD**

Tonight, the rain god has decreed,  
there will be nothing only rain.  
Already leaves are deeper green  
in the foreground, surfaces have darkened,

and beyond that last solid gable  
there's a grey evening, vague about  
the presence of a city,

lights and rumours of lights  
pulsate faintly from  
uncharted overlapping wards.

Sound isn't everything  
in the rain god's midnight kingdom,  
the favoured eyes are those  
of people under streetlights.

## **JOSEPH**

I see seven golden ears of wheat  
dancing on the side of a baker's van  
before a bus-impatient queue  
who raise umbrellas into rain.

There's no bus coming. I hijacked  
the one due half an hour ago,  
and motoring to Egypt now  
through time and story, I'll bring back

the boy who lost his fancy coat  
but not his economic flair,  
the dreamer who provided bread,  
to be my corn-interpreter.

## CONQUEST

The rain's authority  
is now unquestioned  
in this kingdom of paddock and stables  
where a horse's muzzle  
dips like an aardvark's snout  
over a half-door, and inside  
horse-darkness moves in the still  
depths of darkness itself.

And the rain's writ runs  
on lawn and driveway:  
ribbed and rusting spearheads  
carpet under the chestnuts  
and are found everywhere  
around the house. Eaves-gutters choke  
where they fought it out on the slates.

No need any more for the big  
guns of the wind, the mines of frost:  
all's pacified now in the steamy  
provinces beyond the gates;  
and I notice in fading light  
a diminished military presence,  
relaxed raindrops falling  
as of customary right.

I can stand with impunity  
a little longer and admire  
how over the garden wall  
a kind of life continues  
in the stockade of a long-  
abandoned fig-tree:  
its few organic pennants,  
faded and motionless  
on the extremities  
of unprofitable pales,  
detach with the slightest pressure,

like the obovate flesh  
of small green fruits in families  
along the dykes of air,  
bleeding a little milk.

## ANIMA

The shades are light here,  
the surfaces smooth;  
cool bright skies have found  
substance to furnish pleasure. Curtains  
are placed judiciously  
and room leads into room  
by delighting the eye before  
haunches are lifted from deep armchairs.  
She sails  
through french windows,  
the scarcely recognized female  
of my dreams. Her lips are parted  
by words I am not meant  
to understand or hear, sensible  
as breasts under a loosefitting dress.

## THE UNCOMPLETED PARK

Someone who dumped a mattress over the wall  
provided me with a soft landing  
in what a gate crested with flourishes  
of iron penmanship, its middle dangling  
a heavy chain and lock  
like well-hung genitals, defined as park  
and my eye defined as uncompleted.

Saplings were trained to posts  
by wire in shoes of rubber hose,  
but paving stones were told apart by moss.  
There was no seat, sculpture or fountain yet,  
only a wild grass tame enough to let  
the wild carrot's occasional crown and stalk  
stand out and indicate the depth of space.

Between the entrance and the bank  
of the old railway, I collected leaves  
to take home and identify in a book,  
and now I know it was the wind  
switching a poplar from green to silver  
brought to my notice the uncompleted park  
on the city's penny-pinched long finger.



## WINTER LANDSCAPE

*(for Tony O'Malley)*

Farmer to used car dealer  
my brother's son converted:  
dismantler, assembler  
of plausible hybrids.

And late into the night  
we heard his power tools:  
steel-cutter, welding torch,  
varieties of drills.

At all hours, heavy trucks  
scored the vibrating lane,  
inch by abrasive inch.  
One night a roof caved in,

at which my neighbour shrugged  
and bought three neighbours out.  
The accumulating years  
saw land and buildings rot.

● \* \* \*

•

Visit it any time  
you like. Winter is best,  
when snow has disappeared  
from the low ground, but frost

cripples mid-afternoon.  
Turn left at the third pothole  
on the pacified boreen,  
where a ghost sheepdog still

waits for a schoolgirl's ghost.  
Carry an umbrella:  
plaster may fall, or slates,  
as you stand in turn before

what were seven windows  
in five houses, and now  
are seven studies of rust  
against a ridge of snow.

## **THE IRISH GIANT**

*(in the John Hunter Museum, London)*

'Twas bribery betrayed this hunted  
one to Hunter; circumvented  
the young Irish giant's planned  
escape to sea-burial.  
Body and soul had not a proper  
parting before the Hand  
of Science in a copper  
boiled the flesh from the frame.

And now O'Brien for all time  
continues to make appearances.  
The height which earned his bread  
bills him with such additional  
attractions: twins that share one head,  
cyclopean foetuses.

## GOG AND MAGOG

Some say Magog started it all  
by shouting his name in a quarry.

But it was a long time ago,  
a shout and a shout's echo  
from so far back, the origins  
have been distorted again and again.

For example, it's said that one  
was a gymnast, but had a son  
who was born plated with armour;  
or that when one devoured  
a book, the other excreted tomes.

The names *may* signify the same;  
but whether it took one, or two,  
to begin, there are thousands now,  
and one is as bad as another.

Here and there, mainly together,  
the names crop up  
in scriptures and on the lips  
of travellers ill-met  
outside everyday's gate.

A hairdresser lived long enough to tell us  
of several very hairy creatures,

and a dead postman caught in a crossfire  
cycling round a street corner  
spoke of two men  
with identical weapons  
who stood over his body

and traded greetings curtly.

## WEST

There's a lemon ghost  
of sunlight in my trails  
of cloud, today I am  
the suave eye-cheater  
with yellows greens and browns

so finely modulated  
you came for pleasure. I  
am pliable, collapsing  
neatly on to your bookish  
frame of reference,

the eye nevertheless  
is drawn into my depths  
from small cromwellian fields  
and scattered ice-age boulders.  
Even as rain tightens

Over my curved rim  
I am beckoning you  
to endless bog. My charm  
is at odds with all known  
technologies of survival,

your feet on the tarred lane  
taking you back from the edge  
of fabled treachery.  
Listen to the wind now,  
my howling inwardness.

## **FOREST TRAILS**

Although I've not left my chair,  
I've travelled much tonight,  
always returning to my tense  
body, pen-hand by the desk-light

poised on paper. Unlike a child's  
who ventures a little and comes back  
for reassurance, my comings  
and goings down the forest tracks

have been to seek a reassurance  
that isn't here. And while they try  
my love's patience, while she wants to say  
'Find your reassurance in me',

she doesn't, in case I stumble on  
a trail leading to something bigger  
than the cramped times we live in,  
and we could increase there together.

## HOGAN AND THE THISTLE

### *1. Hogan's Monologue*

Despite time's ravages, Hogan my friend  
insists on diagnosing the world's ills,  
and I say to him, 'A fine day in the end  
of January's too rare - before night falls

let's take a walk.' As for the diagnosis,  
it's never quite the same, it cannot sit,  
or even progress with grace like the houses  
outside my window on the sloping street.

I track their honest gables capped with plain  
chimneys, until they disappear in trees.  
The river valley's colours, contours drain  
to random lights, a dull suggestiveness.

In the first house, there's a drawing of curtains;  
a bedroom light shines in the first but one.  
Hogan drones on with Hegel, Marx and Keynes.  
People are doing things they've always done.

## *2. Hogan's Regimen*

Hogan, in the tundra of the unemployed,  
gets up to stay alive, and guarantees  
a nightfall dream-bottle to thirsty pride.  
Walks into town, delves for appearances'  
maintenance in his overdraft. Returned,  
jogs once or twice round the Atlantic Pond.  
A strong wind drives the waves straight past him. Dogs  
ignore him, bark at gulls like rubber ducks.

He takes a shower, cursing obscurely  
in the thrill of cold water. Sits to write:  
'I have dallied with the shadow of delight's  
shadow in parked cars.' Through the open window  
some unfamiliar hymenopteron flies,  
crash-lands on his carpet. Fails to rise.



### 3. *The Spider Plant*

If Hogan only listened, I'd tell him  
about the spider plant. How its long blades  
are white highways with sloping grass margins,  
unfinished bridges leading to the abyss

in every direction. And when it trails  
a few dividing shoots, more bridges rise  
*from the abyss itself* - miraculously,  
a dozen spider plants grow in mid-air.

Some runner plant I can't identify  
has sunk a root in this pot. Otherwise,  
I'd hold it right in front of Hogan's face.  
He has lost contact with such mysteries.

*4. Hogan and the Thistle*

Hogan reclines in the dim  
memory or corner  
of a crowded pub, savours

his pint and his distinctness:  
as the pineapple-textured  
hourglass-waisted thistle-bud

displays its purple tuft  
above the green clamour  
of nettles grass and brambles

green green till everything  
is green: Hogan erupts  
in a purple tuft of song.

*5. Murder has come a long way since Attila*

That life itself may be included in  
the Higher Order, its essential phantom  
shimmers inside this window, a vapour  
distilling to unheard significance.  
The lighting pools in ceiling corners, soft  
on plants, on bookshelves and on varnished wood.  
Behold, upon the desk, the instruments  
of emasculation: typewriter, headed paper,  
a pen for signature, and now the Hand  
appears on the side-support of an armchair,  
wearing a wineglass. 'And did you have  
a busy day, my dear?' 'Yes, but I wished  
it had been metrically more regular.'  
Time is slow here, there are  
hungry generations to tread down,  
a matter of routine correspondence.  
Meanwhile, pentameters illustrative  
of the approved trend will accumulate  
with trickling increment of salary.

The man outside the window won't enter,  
won't even put his envelope  
in the letter box for fear of being heard.  
He settles down for a midnight siesta  
beside a pickaxe in the flowerbed, left  
by workmen doing a job with paving stones.

*6. Literary Criticism*

What today passes as verse is the debris  
from an exhausted mine.  
In the largely unpublished corpus  
of Hogan, there's a few good lines

that I am privileged to hear him bellow  
as I pass daily under the walls  
of the Institution: chunks of soul  
evinced with the aid of batons.

## BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

*(with apologies to Count Dracula and Sweeney Todd)*

The old man in the armchair by the fire  
has no reflection in the mirror.

Leaving 'The Economist' aside, he smiles:  
his canines have grown longer, sharper.

As usual, he talks of fishing, shooting,  
scotch malts, and such appropriated  
trivia as clan and tartan.

His floors are sown with trapdoors  
(‘Regrettably,’ he concedes).  
He owns a chain of bakeries  
famous for delectable meat pies.  
Each time she visits him, he has  
a new set of servants.

He is a connoisseur  
of anything she cares to mention;  
expansive, with his arms  
casting no shadows in the firelight

which fades as he proudly traces  
ancestry to Attila. But he deplores  
the Hun’s lack of refinement: ‘Mere  
spilling of blood. So  
messy, so irrational...’

The impeccably wistful voice  
draws her irresistibly closer.

Stooping to sweet embraces, she sees  
headlines in the light of his red eyes:  
‘Laird Takes Top Bakery Award’;  
‘World Shortage of Garlic’.

## **BARBIE'S MOVED**

Of course Barbara Dickinson's moved -  
did you think she'd stay?  
She lives in Eye now.  
Did you really think she'd stay

after that evening the blind fell off your window  
and Mary Sutton looked in and seen  
you reddening her bare arse with a cane?  
Did you really think she'd stay

after that, you old lecher you?  
You ought to be ashamed of yourself!  
Though I must say it gave us down  
at the soap factory many a laugh -

you rotten old bum-fetishist!  
Mind you keep your hands off  
our June's bottom long as you're here.  
Lord but it gave us many a good laugh

down at the soap factory. Yes, Barbie's moved all right:  
did you really think she'd stay?  
She lives in Eye now, and I hope  
it's far enough away!

## FREUD ON FORGETTING A NAME

I was being driven from Ragusa  
to a place in Herzegovina  
by a man who turned out to be a vet.  
It was the last day of Christmas  
and we were discussing  
the Turks of that region - the great  
confidence they have in doctors  
and how resigned they are to fate

What we omitted to mention  
(being strangers) was that the Turks  
of Bosnia and Herzegovina  
place a higher value on sex  
than they do on anything else.  
Indeed they esteem it rather more  
than the people of Orvieto  
esteem 'The Four last Things'

which I had mentioned to him earlier  
and found to my embarrassment  
I couldn't remember the name  
of the painter; but by the time  
we were driving up to the farmhouse  
he visited *en route*,  
I knew Botticelli was half-right.  
Where then was Boltraffio coming from?

Something I wanted to forget  
lurked in the name of the second painter:  
Trafoi, a hamlet in the Tyrol  
where a few weeks before  
I received news of a suicide,  
a man I took much trouble over  
although the sexual disorder  
that vexed him was incurable.

And something I wanted to remember  
had refused remembrance because  
of a similar stray connection  
with death and sexuality:  
'Herr' was how Turks would address me  
and one said 'Herr, life has no value  
if *that* comes to an end.' From 'Herr'  
I went to 'Signor', then to Signorelli.

At this stage, since the vet  
invited me to accompany  
him, we walked down a muddy lane  
to the gate of a small field  
where an old horse with sunken  
hindquarters and spavined hocks  
was quietly cropping grass.  
It was the Feast of the Epiphany.



## THE POST-HOUSEKEEPING HOUSEKEEPER

Peering over the edge of your poem,  
young man, I see it is a fine deep well.  
And you might be the fittest to go down  
first, and inspect them rusty iron rungs  
that may have loosened in the stonework, and  
make sure 'tis as dry as you say it is,  
for I think you'll be coming after me,  
young and all as you are, in a few years.  
A fine reward it is, the Lord save us,  
for an old woman to go down into  
and spend the rest of eternity there.  
Is it *economizing* that he's at,  
for all he ever gave me? Well, I hope  
his young mistress will serve him equally  
with saddles of mutton and onion sauce,  
and the patient loyalty of a cur,  
washing and scrubbing and ironing till  
she collapses at all hours of the night.  
I'll descend to the bottom, dry or wet,  
of this poem or well or what-you-call-it;  
and maybe now and then, when I look up,  
I'll see my title blurring at the top  
under the bright circle of the sky,  
or it might be the dark blob of a face,  
his honour coming to cajole me back.  
But he's too late for *plámás* now: the crack  
of doom itself won't shift me from this place.

## **GREAT AUKS**

The great auk is an extinct bird  
that keeps on laying eggs;  
and the more eggs it lays,  
the more extinct it becomes.

The eggs, as soon as they are laid,  
are put in glass cases in museums,  
where egg-reviewers look at them and say:  
'This is the best egg yet  
from this particular great auk,  
we look forward to the next.'

All the eggs of all the extinct great auks  
in the world are exactly the same shape and size,  
pages upon pages of them,  
and if you placed them end to end,  
they would circle the globe many times,  
and there's more coming.

It's not easy to become a great auk:  
you must first become extinct  
so that the quality of extinction  
can be transmitted to the eggs you lay.

Great auks don't speak to other birds,  
and since they can't fly  
they have founded a Great Auk Society  
to declare flying unfashionable,

and all other birds that wish to become great auks  
must consent to have their wings clipped  
by the Great Auk Society,  
and meditate, night and day,  
on the virtue of great-aukness.

Eventually, they'll lay  
eggs of the correct shape and size,  
scarcely noticing in the process  
that they have become extinct.

## **RAILWAY PORTERS IN VICTORIAN FICTION**

The hero or narrator has got off  
at some country station in fine weather.  
Preferring to walk, he must ask directions  
and leave his luggage for the squire's car.  
The obliging porter will be garrulous  
even after receiving his tip:  
the irritable M.R. James denotes  
his coda with a few etceteras.  
If it's a traveller with a bicycle,  
the porter will pronounce it 'bysticle';  
but we must leave him scratching under his cap  
as the ticking chain fades out of his earshot,  
for the cyclist has weightier matters  
to hand - being haunted by a Tudor ghost  
or falling in love with an unhappy  
young woman, whom a scheming foster parent  
keeps in confinement for her legacy.

## FROM A JOURNAL

As far as possible, I try to live  
a monkish life, and find that poetry  
comes readily enough when a cold bath  
has chastened certain wild propensities.

But always on late Thursday afternoons,  
I wash my hair and take a warm one.  
As I lie in it for an hour or more,  
and darkening undercoats of shadow tone

the window behind me, I hear my dark  
secrets, deciphered by the filling cistern  
in the clearest syllables of water –  
scarcely a language I understand.

## **VITEBSK, SOMETIME IN 1941**

It was my wedding day:  
I remember the neck of a beer bottle  
sticking out of my coat pocket,  
and someone joking, 'You're armed well.'

And we thought it was a joke  
until the major's wife came in.  
We saw that she was crying,  
and believed it then.

In Belarus, we have a good  
memory for things like that:  
not far from here, a village was burned  
with everyone in it,

and there's a copper bell  
on the site of every house  
that tinkles in the wind,  
reminding us.

## A TALL STORY

The children were scared when the radio  
crackled and finally died,  
so I told them it was nothing more  
than a bad cold, and went outside

to watch for fireworks along the sky's edge,  
hoping they'd go to sleep -  
and almost tripped on something smooth and round  
that was lying on the doorstep.

When I carried it in from the darkness  
to the study, it looked like  
a cast I saw in a museum once  
of the egg of the great auk.

In fact, it *was* an egg. I made an omlette,  
and we were able to survive  
for two more days, stringing it out.  
On the third day, help arrived:

a chap in uniform, driving a jeep,  
came to the door with provisions.  
Hearing the story of the egg, he laughed  
and told a less likely one.

## FIRST COLLECTION

How Margaret waters the plants  
under the tap should be included,  
running her fingers through the leaves  
so that each one gets its share  
of the sprinkling her other hand makes  
with a motioning gesture  
of some fussily competent teacher  
ushering children into a station.

I do it grudgingly, dole  
water out of a pint glass  
into the compost; but she  
creates showers for the housebound  
with all the difference between  
intuition and the instruction manual,  
lifting them carefully then  
like children out of the bath.

All afternoon, it seems,  
while I sit unable to read,  
wondering whether my first collection  
in the hands of some far-off  
publisher's anonymous reader  
will open out or remain pressed  
flowers between the pages  
of one typescript among thousands,

in the short winter light,  
moving from window to sink  
and from sink to window,  
a Tibetan girl  
conducting a herd of yaks  
in single file down a steep path  
to a Trans-himalayan oasis,  
Margaret waters the plants.



## LAUNCHING

The winter sun, shining through the windows  
of the warehouse dusted for the occasion,  
enhanced green wineglasses, flower-printed kimonos  
and the coloured drapes that covered books  
the publishers had remaindered there.

It was not a large heart that beat  
in the author's breast but one curiously constrained  
as was evident to the more discerning,  
who actually read the handsome volume

and wanted to run away from what they were reading:  
something most inappropriate, to do with death,  
and each poem getting into it deeper,  
like a queue of deranged faces  
in a contest to pose for *The Scream*,

faces that floated like autumn leaves  
in the limbo of the author's memory,  
gratefully acknowledging their first appearances  
in summer magazines, though the revised versions  
in the collection were scarcely recognizable.

## **DOGBARK**

A dog barks  
in the afternoon  
that threatens rain  
and passes slowly.

The dog barks  
with self-restraint,  
thinking 'I could stop now  
or give them a dozen more.'

Then he falls silent  
and the rain comes down  
steadily: the moment  
of dogbark has passed.

I think he has retired  
to his kennel, disgruntled,  
disgusted he hasn't set  
the whole street barking.

Perhaps he'll try again  
later; meanwhile  
as the afternoon acquires  
a further assurance

and the light is holding  
with March tenacity,  
I record his dogbark  
for posterity.

## THE TRAVELLER

This is the country of conversations,  
of marram grassland rolling and slowly ascending  
over long distances to end and begin  
again in the gentle drops of bluffs or ledges.  
Houses are bluffs, designed  
in scalene triangles whose longest sides  
are rooflines lifting from the earth  
to apexes where roofwings, poised for flight,  
dovetail with perpendiculars fronts  
of glass you may look through on moonlit nights  
and see how all these modest elevations,  
man-made or natural, seem to be  
crests of the land's sure tidal movement  
towards and beyond the horizon. The grass  
whispers its conversations over the dark mounds,  
but what goes on inside the lighted ones,  
while surely pleasant, is not substantial.  
I know from having been a guest in some,  
where I felt like an agent of justice,  
unfitted for the part, who couldn't bring himself  
to get round to the point of his visit,  
a missing child, a body's whereabouts.  
And just when I'd begin to feel at home  
in the firm seating and the soft lighting,  
among smooth surfaces sensing the dark  
green taciturnity of breadfruit plants,  
just when they'd begin serving the liqueurs,  
when the ceremony of hospitality  
was seeming to lose its arduousness,  
and I was about to phone my guest-house  
and book an extra night, it's then they'd tell me  
that I *must* visit the people further on,  
who were interestingly different - so they said.

## ROADS

*(for Margaret)*

Where is the road to Wigan Pier  
which I set out upon last May  
with labour's bread, with heart of fire,  
with factories that mounted higher  
on each side in the dawning day,  
and at my side this child so dear?

The dew rang out where grass grows sweet  
from fertiliser tractors spread,  
and cattle grazed where buses run  
transporting manpower by the ton  
to where the complex has been laid;  
and this child climbs on tired feet.

I walked the road to Wigan Pier  
where factories send up their smoke  
and metal gleams in hardening light.  
White-coated teams came into sight  
in glass-built plants; and then I spoke  
to spur my child whose blood is dear.

'All energy the task demands  
is gladly given, freely spent,  
since it is bread in the freshening breeze  
to feed on what the warm heart sees  
the little share of each, when blent,  
can make to build what love commands.'

Where is the road to Wigan Pier  
which I have tramped on all my days,  
inspired by Larkin, Connolly?  
This road leads downwards, to the sea;  
and at the pier my boat delays.  
But there remains a child so dear.

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