

*On the Island*

I

The track down to the estuary zig-zagged  
Between spurs and outcrops of old red sandstone.  
Some kind of St John's Wort lived on the verges  
Along with thistles, which the bees preferred.

At low tide the bladderwracks lay flat out  
Like a colony of sunbathing seals  
On the ever wet rocks, but come high water  
They were showing off their nymphaean hair,

Which caught in our blades as we rowed across,  
Half-seas-over, to the camp on the island.  
The landing-place was buttery with mud—  
Roux spilt twice daily on a kitchen floor—

Which led to many unamusing incidents  
On the irregular steps. From the ridge  
One could, when sober, make out other islands  
With Anglicized names and five-star hotels,

Whose patrons, while not positively wicked,  
Enjoyed having a large slice of the cake.  
But their bracken, like ours, was full of ticks,  
Which burrowed into the midriff and itched.

That, at three in the morning, was a comfort.  
Not long after dawn a fishing boat, drab,  
With a matchboarded wheel-house up forrad,  
Would wake me with the throbbing of its motor,

Rounding the point and setting sail for Crete,  
Fate, not to be spoken to, at the helm.

In fact they were going for flatfish, followed  
Of course by the usual gang of gulls

And getting back after the flood set in.  
Sometimes I'd wave, and once I thought a pipe  
Was raised in acknowledgement, though the face  
Stayed hidden behind the salt-frosted glass.

The jetty where they moored was out of sight  
And the crew never showed up at Winnie's pub,  
So the mystery of real life going on  
While we wasted our portion remained unsolved.

There were days when the crowd from the Majestic  
Would descend from Olympus and go whizzing past  
With outboard motors, faces turned away—  
No doubt thinking we looked rather unsavoury.

Their cries from downstream, mostly corybantic,  
Suggested a party among the rushes,  
With high voices—reminders of the parrot house—  
Wafting across the monkey island moat.

Our companions the voles paid no attention,  
Squatting near the water to wash their faces,  
But I sat and smoked among the gorse bushes  
In my usual state of discontent.

## II

Having each other, the pair who were with me  
Seemed not to know whose eyes the sun was shining from;  
I was on my own, with notebook and hangover,  
Watching the future emerge from the rain.

Once a dredger tied up across the water,  
Its grab rattled up and down for a week  
Dragging out the earth's entrails, to deposit them  
Abruptly in the barge tethered alongside.

And not a man to be seen, just machinery  
Marking the hours with its torturer's gestures,  
And everything looking the same, no spasms  
As the roads to salvation were reshaped.

But down below, the bloody-minded currents  
Soon went back to their childhood ways  
And were crossing themselves and genuflecting  
And invoking the holy name in crises.

Before that, though, the deepened shipping channel  
Made life easier for the coastal traffic,  
The little tanker with heating oil and petrol  
That chugged past us every other Tuesday

And the freighter from Par with kaolin  
For a pottery where the clay is forced  
To adopt configuratons of piety.  
Their bows cleft the silty water like crocodiles

Homing in on a wounded buffalo  
That struggled despairingly miles upstream—  
Not evil, simply enactors of programmes  
That make the phenomenal world exciting.

### III

This island is not much more than a rock.  
I can scramble from one end to the other  
In the time my friends take to love and honour  
Their reflections shivering in a puddle.

From time to time a turnstone may show up  
To forage among the barnacled boulders,  
Where later the incoming tide will run  
As the reaches fill up with foreign salt,

But the thought of a diet of periwinkles  
Is enough to send me back to the mainland  
And survival among vocation-seekers  
When the leaves are falling in Stephen's Green.

All along, over the cambered horizon,  
Marine monsters are travelling across  
The sea's surface on their sinuous bellies,  
Exhaling puffs of superheated steam,

And in the four corners the heads of small  
Decapitated boys are blowing gales  
Suited to the canvas of any navigator.  
They are carrying Theseus on his way

To put an end to the poor deformed creature  
Pent up inside Minos's stinking labyrinth,  
Dreaded and loathed, what should have been aborted.  
That done the boys and girls can set off home

And after Naxos sing without inhibition.  
The fishing boat seems to carry a sail,  
But the sea glitters and against the light  
I can't be sure whether it's black or white.

## *Iris*

The brown-eyed women wave expressive hands  
In front of their huge curvilinear busts,  
Reliving feelings felt in crises past.

It's Minerva, the Blue-eyed Maid, who sees  
An ice-floe floating south, a polar bear  
Hollow-sided and carried towards Cancer.