

## GOLDEN NEWIES



*Dennis O'Driscoll*

1972 was the year of Coppola's *The Godfather*. It was also the year in which Penguin published an enlarged edition of their influential *Contemporary American Poetry* anthology, edited by Donald Hall. Just as *The Godfather* enjoys repeated TV showings, so the poets in Hall's anthology—figures like Lowell, Wilbur, Rich, Plath, Ashbery, Hecht and Ginsberg—continue to represent (along with Bishop and Berryman) contemporary American poetry in the minds of many Irish readers. There is also a sense in which we could be said to acquire some of our modern American poetry indirectly, like folic acid from Marmite or antibiotics from pork chops. According to this scenario, Pound is absorbed through Kinsella, Rich through Boland, Williams through Montague; the echo of a Ginsberg howl through Durcan, a twang of Lowell plangency through Heaney.

In Ireland, contemporary American poetry is the news that is always late news, crossing the Atlantic at the speed of a currach or kayak. Indeed, poetry discoveries remain quaintly dependent on personal encounters. If readers in Ireland know the work of the less obvious American writers—if they admire Albert Goldbarth for his exuberant inventiveness or have at last caught up with the fast-talking Mark Halliday or have begun to track down the quicksilver collections of the deadpan Billy Collins—the likelihood is that their interest will have been sparked by an accidental personal encounter (meeting the poet or chancing on a festival reading) rather than a calculated literary encounter (scouring periodical or bookshop).

Without a personal dimension to fuel their interest, readers may simply miss out on the work indefinitely. Louise Glück, published (albeit intermittently) on this side of the Atlantic for the past thirty years, is still treated as a new arrival. What hope, then, of an early Irish welcome for the work of those American poets who have yet to be enlisted by publishers like Faber or Carcanet—poets who have neither read on the Cúirt platform nor cultivated local literary contacts while negotiating Ireland in a left-hand drive camper van? Poets like Donald Platt, say, whose work in *The Southern Review* brought me screeching to a halt while I reached for a pen with which to jot down his name. Or Gregory Djanikian, a *Poetry*

contributor, who can wring memorable verse out of immigrant malapropisms; another unfamiliar name to check out.

Irish Studies Programs in America increasingly influence the terms on which Irish poetry is read—maybe even written—at home. It would provide a healthy (and ironic) corrective, broadening the horizons of Irish readers and writers alike, if we were to keep abreast of the best American poetry of the present, discovering those very poets whom the Irish Studies specialists miss in their rush to “foreground” all things Hibernian. Incredible though it may seem in the Internet age, contemporary American poets have yet to be read and experienced in Ireland as our contemporaries. Time surely for the Donald Hall equivalent of *The Godfather Part III*...

## WHAT I HEARD THERE



*Eamon Grennan*

The very first contact with American poetry that I remember happened in secondary school, with the Cistercian monks of Roscrea. Among the first poems I had to read there, or get off by heart, were two by American poets. One was “Barbara Fritchie.” The heroine’s patriotic bravura made an unforgettable picture, and it had a good thumping rhythm to match: “Shoot if you must this old grey head/ But spare your country’s flag”, she said. Fine sentiments, and well expressed. The nerves were struck and responded. The picture it made stayed with me, the simple rhythmic equivalent of a cartoon.

But the first poem that made an impression that was at once sensuous and in some way intellectual—that made me think sensuously, made me turn the picture of the poem into a thing of thought that passed beyond the sheer pre-cognitive pleasure of rhythm—was also an American poem, although its Americanness was in no way the point. It was a poem, however, that made me have a conscious feeling for the way words could evoke something, something in the actual world. That, in fact, was the subject of Longfellow’s “Chaucer”, a conjuring by the American poet (he had written, we knew, the more patently American *Hiawatha*) of the way the palpable world of fields and trees and the crowing cock, of farmland,