

The Sighted World

Eamon Grennan, *Still Life with Waterfall*. Gallery, £7.95 (pbk)

This is Grennan's fifth collection to date, and it confirms his position as a poet who is preoccupied with the natural world. Whether he writes out of his native Ireland or of America—where he lives and works much of the time—Grennan's poetry gravitates towards rural settings, constantly alert to the interplay between landscapes and weather, as well as exhibiting a keen eye for animal life. Thus the opening piece, "At Work", describes a marsh hawk

patrolling

possibility—soaring, sliding down almost to ground level,
twisting suddenly at something in the marsh hay or dune grass,
their autumnal colours snagging his eye
where he finds the slightest aberration, any stir
that isn't the winds, and abruptly plunges on it.

Clearly Grennan's bird of prey also reads as a metaphor of the poet at work, introducing a creative self-commentary that hovers over many of the poems in *Still Life with Waterfall*.

In Grennan's own words, one of his primary tasks as a poet is to pursue the music of things, and it is therefore not surprising that he expresses his debt to Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoting his *Journals* in "Vespers, 4". "With Skeleton and Shoes" considers "how things [are] inhabited" and speaks of "the word made flesh", before engaging in a Hopkinsian sprung music: "at dusk/ a breathing field of cows: body language of mother and child—/ muzzle nuzzling neckflap; quick bright flesh-flash of tonguelick." Similarly, the clipped, staccato lines in "Vespers, 2" read as an attempt to evoke the instress or quidditas of the poems' subject:

Untutored,
a young chaffinch simply sits—almost

invisible on gravel—taking the world in
that is all over. Blink of an eye.
The world. Again. Blink
of an eye. The ash tree
wearing its jerkin of moss.

Such passages also echo the poetic techniques found in Les Murray's sequence, *Translations from the Natural World* (1992). However, unlike both Hopkins and Murray, whose poetry of embodiment should be seen in the light of their wish to celebrate God's presence in all creation, Grennan's evocations of nature are not driven by a religious agenda. As he points out in "Agnostic Smoke": "Nothing but blues of space waiting/ my agnostic praise":

it's only the eye just looking,
as a tree might look, intending nothing beyond
being there, breaking daylight into little brilliant bits
to become itself in every instant: barked, branched, alive
with leaf-light: countless its ways of being, being like that.

Furthermore, what distinguishes Grennan's poetic universe is that it is as much riddled by absences as it is inhabited by presences. In "Cold Morning", a faint light is "inventing things", while revealing the lingering tell-tale signs of "how hard the night had to be". Similarly, in "Grid" a deer is observed scrambling to a safe distance, where it stands "solid in shadow//...waiting to vanish", while a bird is heard "singing in its grid/ of anxious moments", but remains invisible to the eye. Several other poems draw imaginary strength from various painters. "Why?" thus addresses Pierre Bonnard's notion of creating "a painting round an empty space", and "Silence" elaborates on the idea of space and absence:

For what hasn't been done,
there is this void, a space filled with mourning

in silence, the way an animal or a bird—not knowing
what it is—will fill a space its own size and outline

in the daily world, and be every moment all that.
"Soul", as we say, may be something like it, a space

that has shaped itself to the shape of what's gone
and not returning.

In this way the living world is seen as having an afterlife in the mind of the observer, which accounts for Grennan's recurrent fascination with natural breakdown and decay. "Drying, things get lighter,/ dreaming flight", he notes in "Wind Chimes", and in "Shepherd to the Wind" a sheep skeleton in a stream becomes the "sounding-board/ of some ancient many-stringed instrument".

It is this cross-fertilisation of the real and the imagined that nourishes Grennan's poetic vision, pulling the reader into a twilight zone of consciousness that is already evoked in the book's epigraph, where Grennan quotes Wallace Stevens's "The Dove in Spring": "There is this bubbling before the sun,/ This howling at one's ear, too far/ For daylight and too near for sleep." Throughout the collection, the acutely observed natural world opens up to an emotional response, projecting the human condition. In "Enough", the quick glimpse of a fox brings consolation:

easier in my mind now, having seen his real presence
ignite like that—the beautiful slow burn of it

as he steps from my sight into his own tangle of shadows—
and not having to content myself with the marks only

of his absence: the smell of him, his neat prints filling with sand.

Elsewhere, as in "Wind Chimes", Grennan attends to a general sense of melancholy and longing that conditions our way of perceiving the world:

Tomorrow, too, will be
the verb "to miss". How it
prizes between skin
and skeleton, swims
quick rivulets of blood,
figuring even the way
fingers clutch the pen.

The way in which his own minute observations of the natural world allow for explorations of human consciousness seems repeatedly to take the poet by surprise in this book. And this

brings us back to the level of poetic self-commentary which echoes throughout. Although Grennan admonishes himself not to be “carried away in raptures and arrivals/ but take the pulse of things” in “Grid”, he eventually has to revise his original notion of the poet as being in control of his material, as implied by the book’s opening image of the hawk “soaring possibility” and striking at its prey. Thus, the closing piece returns to the bird-imagery, offering a neat conclusion to what is a carefully composed collection. “Detail” follows a robin chasing a finch, when, out of nowhere, a sparrow hawk “flashes”, “scorching the air from which it simply plucks/ like a ripe fruit the stopped robin, whose two or three/ cheeps of terminal surprise twinkle in the silence”. The poet, realising how he is also prey to the element of surprise, no longer identifies himself with the predator:

I began to understand
how a poem can happen: you have your eye on a small
elusive detail, pursuing its music, when a terrible truth
strikes and your heart cries out, being carried off.