

After Tra-na-rossan

You were still far away. I was only the wind
When I wrote in my woolgathering twentieth
Year about an abstract expanse in Donegal:

“We walked on Tra-na-rossan strand;
the Atlantic winds were wiping the heat
from the August sun and the stretching sand
was cold beneath our naked feet;

our prints were washed and covered by the tide;
and so we walked through all our days
until there was too much to hide;
no wind to cool our open ways,

no passing tide to wash the traces
of transgression from the secret places”.

Then we filled the details in: a lapwing’s
Reedy sigh above the duach, a tortoiseshell
Hilltopping on the cairn, autumn lady’s tresses,
The sandwort-starry path to Carrigskeewaun.

I am looking at you through binoculars
As you open the galvanised æolian gate
In silence and walk away towards the sea.

Stonechat

A flicker on the highest twig, a breast
That kindles the last of the fuchsia flowers
And the October sunset still to come
When we face the Carricknashinnagh shoal
And all the islands in a golden backwash
Where sanderlings scurry, two cormorants
Peeking at me and you over breakers
That interrupt the glow, behind us
A rainbow ascending out of Roonkeel
High above Six Noggins, disappearing
Between Mweelrea's crests, and we return
To the white cottage with its fuchsia hedge
To share for a second time the stonechat's
Flirtatious tail and flinty scolding.

Snow Geese

So far away as to be almost absent
And yet so many of them we can hear
The line of snow geese along the horizon.
Tell me about cranberry fields, the harvest
Floating on flood water, acres of crimson.

I remember a solitary snow goose
Among smudgy cormorants on the Saltees
Decades ago. Today I calculate
Forty thousand snow geese, and pick for you
From the distance individual cranberries.

The Pattern

Thirty-six years, to the day, after our wedding
When a cold figure-revealing wind blew against you
And lifted your veil, I find in its fat envelope
The six-shilling Vogue pattern for your bride's dress,
Complicated instructions for stitching bodice
And skirt, box pleats and hems, tissue-paper outlines,
Semblances of skin which I nervously unfold
And hold up in snow-light, for snow has been falling
On this windless day, and I glimpse your wedding dress
And white shoes outside in the transformed garden
Where the clothesline and every twig have been covered.

The Sett

A friend's betrayal of you brings to mind
His anecdote about neighbours in Donegal
Who poured petrol into a badger's sett, that
Underground intelligence not unlike your own
Curling up among the root systems.

Oh, why

Can the badger not have more than one address
Like the otter its hovers at Cloonaghmanagh
And Claggan and Carrigskeewaun, its holt
A glimmering between us at Dooaghtry?
I safeguard a bubble-rosary under ice.

Aschy

We are both in our sixties now, our bodies
Growing stranger and more vulnerable.
It is time for that tonic called *aschy*,
Shadowy cherry-juice from South Russia.

The Argippaei who are all bald from birth,
Snub-nosed and long-chinned, lap it up
With lipsmacking gusto or mix it with milk
Or make pancakes out of the sediment.

In bitter spells they wrap the trunks with felt
As thick and white as the snowy weather.
A weird sanctity protects you and me
While we stay under our ponticum-tree.

Shadows

I
A flat circle of flat stones, anonymous
Headstones commemorating the burial mound,
The dead suspended in the scenery
At head height roughly, unmoved by the wind:

Just as you and I swimming yesterday
At high tide beyond Allaran Point, now
Would be floundering in mid-air
Between that rock pool and the samphire ridge.

2
Seven hares encircle me and you
(We have counted them playing together)
Not too far from the hermetic snipe,

The otters we haven't seen for years
(Although today we heard one whistling)
Shadows between dragonfly and elver.

Echoes

1

I am describing to you on the phone
Stonechats backlit by an October sunset,
A pair that seems to be flirting in the cold.
I am looking out of the bedroom window.
They fluster along the fuchsia hedge and perch
On bare twigs the wind has stripped for them.

2

As beautiful as bog asphodel in flower
Is bog asphodel in seed. Or nearly.
An echo. Rusty-orange October tones.
This late there are gentians and centaury
And a bumble bee on a thistle head
Suspended, neither feeding nor dying.

3

Forty-two whoopers call, then the echoes
As though there are more swans over the ridge.

Arrival

It is as though David had whitewashed the cottage
And the gateposts in the distance for this moment,
The whooper swans' arrival, with you wide awake
In your white night-dress at the erratic boulder
Counting through binoculars. Oh, what day is it
This October? And how many of them are there?

Robin

A robin is singing from the cottage chimney.
Departure means stepping through the sound-drapes
Of his pessimistic skin-and-bone aubade.
Household chores begin: wiping wet windows
For Venus in greeny solitariness, sky-coin,
Morning's retina; scattering from the wonky
Bucket immaterial ashes over moor grass
Turned suddenly redder at the equinox;
Spreading newspapers by the hearth for blackened
Hailstones. We have slept next to the whoopers'
Nightlong echoing domestic hubbub.
A watery sun-glare is melting them.
His shadow on the lawn betrays the robin.
I would count the swans but it hurts my eyes.

Dipper

Our only dipper on the Owennadornaun
Delayed us, so that we made it and no more
Through the spring tide, wading up to our waists:
Naked from the navel down, did we appear
Harmless to the golden plovers slow to rise
From their feeding on the waterlogged duach?
Then fire-gazing-and-log-and-turf-arranging
Therapy which should have unfrozen lust but
In the dark flood water a darker knot became
Two heron-unsettling-and-lapwing-lifting
Otters, our first for years at Carrigskeewaun,
And we rationed out binocular moments
Behind the curtains of the bedroom window
And watched them as they unfolded out of view.