

*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.