

Oddly enough, getting to know strange places or strange things for the first time—on holiday, say, or at work in different parts of the United States—has not usually excited the poem-writing part of me. Letters and journal entries can record that “present joy”, but generally speaking, the whole thing needs to go down into the clear element of the reservoir before it can be repossessed in a poem. And this is true even if I know at the time that what I am encountering is a subject that already belongs to me.

I often shared the airport bus from San Francisco Airport to Berkeley with young soldiers headed for Vietnam, due to be dropped off *en route* at Treasure Island Military Base. They were haunting presences, pale and frail and still hung over from farewell-parties of the previous night, and I knew as I sat with them that I was on a death-coach: I was my own dream-worker, more animated by the imagined dimension of the moment than by its actuality, but for some reason it took me twenty-five years to come out with it, when I was winging through the flurry of twelve-line poems that would become the “Squarings” sequence in *Seeing Things*. In a court of law I could say it was written quickly, but not in the court of poetry.

## PETER McDONALD



I'm writing from a room at the top of a tall house in Clifton, a suburb of Bristol, the city I've lived in for the last five years. It's raining for the first time in what seems like months, and today I needn't go in to work until the afternoon. At least I don't have to get to the Midlands, as I had to do last week: the news this morning has Birmingham pretty much closed, bombs on the motorways, and traffic chaos. Sure signs, I suppose, of the imminence of next week's General Election, in which I shall vote—this will be the fourth time I've voted for an English M.P., the first occasion being in 1983 when, on the eve of my Final exams, frantic with scholarship and caffeine, I put my cross, as usual, on the losing side. There is coffee brewing now, and music playing on the stereo: my wife, returned from a trip to Nashville, has brought a tape of lately-unearthed early Hank Williams demos, and I spend a half-hour listening to the 1940s, and a voice and a poetry where I feel utterly at home. And in fact I suppose I have felt at home in places like Tennessee which are, strictly speaking, “abroad”, though the whys and wherefores seem to

me both mysterious and basically uninteresting. Thinking about a request to give opinions on living abroad, and not having any such opinions, I have dug out Van Morrison's 1993 *Too Long in Exile* (which might, by the way, be re-titled *Too Much Georgie Fame*), and listen to another voice I feel at home with, as the title track unravels this:

Oh that isolated feeling  
Drives you up against the wall  
'Cos you've been on the mainland baby  
Been on the mainland, comin' on strong

Is he talking to me, or for me? I don't know, but I suspect that Morrison and I share a register of vocabulary where words like "mainland" have a special charge. A lot of people in Northern Ireland don't like that word; many people use it, and I myself think I know what it means. Despite Van's slightly sentimental take on "exile" in the song (neither he nor I are ever likely to be in exile from anywhere we'd want to be), living where you're happy is living at home. As it happens, I don't consider myself to be living abroad, though I might do so if I found myself holed up in Berlin, or Tokyo, or Dublin. Then again, I might love it in those places, and decide that they could be added to the expanding catchment area (where, in my experience, poems happen) that I like to think of as a kind of personal Greater Belfast. In that sense, I was born in Belfast and live there still. I'm sorry that people who talk a lot about "Irishness" find this difficult to understand, but to me it seems perfectly natural; and let me confess now (it's no surprise) that, being from Belfast, I don't think of myself as having, or wanting, a stake in the "Irishness" debate. More pressingly, the collection of tapes is in a mess; something will have to be done, and soon, for we're moving house at the end of next month—to Bath, this time, another suburb of Belfast where (they say) a local pub near the new house is one of Van Morrison's occasional haunts. "Just like George Best, baby?" We'll see.

MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN



Has living abroad affected my work? I find it hard to localise a standpoint from which I can answer such questions: a centre of gravity, a meridian. Being an emigrant means crossing lines, visible and otherwise.