

PATRICK WARNER



As somebody once said, poetry is nothing if not personality. An Irish poem Abroad, then, might be compared to and Irish person abroad. Why so many Irish people are abroad is a question far too tetchy to be tackled here. Suffice it to say that the existence of an Irish diaspora has little or nothing to do with exile, in the political sense, and everything to do with habit. As always, the key is under the mat—though once it's used (as almost everyone finds out) it is very hard to come back. This is true for both established poets and for those whose leaving came at a time when they were not sure what their talents might be, or if they had any. My own perspective arises from the latter case.

So what can an Irish poet, writing in the so-called diaspora expect? At one extreme, he or she might find that confidence and skills earned in one place do not translate to another. It might be a case of lesser buying power, or, worse, it may be that the currency isn't accepted at all. No less devastating than having a joke fall flat, one's poetry might be met with indifference or dismissed on the grounds that it contains such archaic devices as metre and rhyme. Well dammit, you think, they worked to great effect in Killeen's snug or in so-and-so's kitchen. These are strange moments when the world you left behind might appear to have provided an inadequate education. There might be anger. The sense that meaning might be little more than convention, and consequently a long spell when your poems rap, replace blackbirds with bluejays, and white pine with jack-spruce. The whole landscape and menagerie goes flying up your nose, and your head swirls with such possibilities. Or, conversely, there might be retrenchment, a spontaneous decision to pack your bags and leave. A willingness to dismiss an entire world as flippantly as you perceive your own to have been dismissed.

The diaspora, then, is a mental state. It is nothing, or nowhere, an in-between. It is as much suspicion as it is possibility. To live in it is to be preoccupied with the idea of fidelity. How can you write with depth and comprehension about the place where you live when your primary images, metaphors and language still arise from a place you have been away from half your life? How do you speak with any degree of confidence about the culture you still call home when its present incarnation is only an echo of what you remember? And how might this tension be reflected in poetry? Perhaps, this tension produces a poetry which works, successfully or unsuccessfully, to blend images which have no obvious association; perhaps, recognising that immigrants already play a subversive role in the culture, the primary movement of their poetry will be towards harmony and the middle ground.

THE MOSCOW CIRCUS ON ICE GOES HOME



C. L. Dallat

(Clapham Common, 4 October 1993)

So glad you came tonight; it might
have been too late. Come in ! You see
those tent-poles—all that's left of this
bold miracle of rare device.
Do take a chair. I hate to have
this trailerhome, our awnings, props
and dreamings put on ice—I had
so hoped to winter in this green
unpleasant land, to view the sites—
the sects; your graveyards; willow-trees;
the famous omnibus; the home
of England's greatest writer—look
I've bought her Magic Toyshop, Nights
at the Circus, also there, the bound
collected works of William Butler
Jackovich, all's changed, changed
utterly, where motley's worn.
His brother Jack, and little Paul,
and Pozzo too, they knew that in
hard times the hands must be amuthed.
(My father knew all Dickens once;
he often talked of Little Else!)

But no, how can you think that? Should
our lives be a metaphor for yours?

Ah yes, the photograph, I see
you're thinking I'm so veined— oh, not
so long— before I lost my nerve—
that damnd spot in Minsk; an end
to death-defying feet, no more
red tights, red boots, no ash-blond hair-
piece; this is real if not so thick,
a blaze of henna for a clown.

Now that's my working face you see,
that eggshell was my father's once—
You did? But mere Easter games.
(Teach your babushka to blow eggs!)

To us they are like assay-marks—
each one unique and when we die
the patent is destroyed; I broke
these rules to keep my father's. (No
son, you see, to be about
his business!) Too much talk! You came
about the instrument? You've seen
My little card? Such perfect chance!

My father bought it in Kiev—
a passing vaudeville act called "Bechet
and his Talking Saxophone".
Like him I use it in my turn,
I make it laugh and soar with Liszt,
I Pagliacci, Berlioz—
the straight soprano is so droll;
but you must let me hear you play—

You make it weep, ah, like the pipes!—
with mordants, half-turns, plaintive rills;
I wish I was in Carrickfergus,
Only for nights—you laugh! I learned
that from a Portavogie man
on convoys in Murmansk in nine-
teen-forty-four. So you think of
returning too? This brings me back.
What is it worth? I need the hard,
the dollars, sterling. Yes, Lafleur,
so old— but see the lacquer and
the burnished lustre on the keys.

But no! I cannot play tonight.
How could we make light music when
our peoples are at war— What can
I do? I only know I must
go home. Too long a sacrifice
can make a stone. Our days are numbered;
too many summers skating on
thin ice as Michael Collins stalks

the Crown Post Office, Penge, declaiming
Tolstoy; Gorky wastes in Capri—
comes the hour! But soft! I have
a litre of the duty-free
Black Bush! Just wash a cup. We drink
to Russia and to Ireland and you play
The Internationale or Roisín
Dubh. We spend our tragic last—
our first and only—night on fire.

So let me now put on my face—
my father's face before me—tell
you of a circus life, of how
a Little Peter helped Mama
escape Yekaterinburg, how
a Cossack brought her up and taught
to her the high-wire act she passed
to me, the turn I worked until
I broke my neck: of how Papa
played Shakespeare in a fit-up show,
read Leicester once, even doubled
as Gloucester—but so carefully—
around the Baltic states (we loved
his prints of Denmark!) though in time
his whiskered Claudius drew too much
acclaim—that poisoned cup; and though
his mighty Caesar had once scorned
the baser steppes by which he did
ascend, in time he fell to parts
like Cassius of the hungry look;
his white-faced-Auguste Player King
poured vitriol in their ears and ran
the gauntlet of emotions from
A to B—or not to B.
Can you describe the perfect cirque?

The Tsar's Imperial troupe became
the "State"—though little else
had changed—and toured the world until
as acrobats we voted with
our feet and here today we fly
a Russian flag—Alles ist weg!
You must remember this, a kiss

is still—our Casa Blanca is
afame, our Four Courts have been shelled.

So all is lost. Or not, perhaps?
At least for us? More liquor. Stand
by me and play, and touch my heart
with charms to soothe the savage beast
while on my couch I lie and toast
to one sad consummation here
and after, at the gates of dawn,
Ziguener-style we douse the van,
retire, watch the fire engines
roar and clang; we fly, you drive
me to the windswept airfield but
—no long goodbyes, a medium wave
and I've gone you'll find I've left
behind the silver horn, and—too—
beneath it in a buckram pouch,
the clutch of shards of broken shell.