

HORACE'S OAK TREE



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“To love”, writes Eamon Grennan, “the scrubbed exactitudes / and the dimmer thing / that shivers at the brink” (“That Ocean”). What poet could not agree to this as a goal for his art: sensuous detail and abstract mystery, the inward and the outward look? Perhaps only Grennan, though, could have found the emblem for this artistic project in the homework of his ten-year-old daughter, writing of an imagined crab that “lives in a cave dug out of the sand with its tail. It piles some small stones outside the mouth of the cave. During the night the warm air from the cave meets the cold air from outside and condenses. The drops of water fall onto the rocks and in the morning it has something to drink!” Where the warm, small stones of the domestic space—the scrubbed exactitudes—meet the cold outside air of thought—the shivering brink—the crystalline drops of Eamon Grennan’s poems appear, giving pleasure: something to drink!

Those who write on poets from Ireland find an overwhelming need to locate their subject, as if on many graphs at once. What are this poet’s geographical co-ordinates? Political allegiances? Poetic affiliations? Such questions may not easily be put to the work of Grennan, who has lived for thirty years in the United States (he teaches at Vassar). His poems on Irish landscape are clearly written by a man on holiday in his own country. They tend, interestingly, to privilege the scrubbed exactitudes over the dimmer things that shiver at the brink. Grennan ponders a house left unfinished by people who emigrated to America; he consecrates, in a poem after Kavanagh, his native “Place”; in “Stop”, he gets out of the car to examine a dead badger and is so taken by exactitude (the precise look of pelt, teeth and claws) that he dismisses the dimmer things with a laugh: “a solid black and white case of absence.”

It is in the poems from the United States that the shivering brink tends to appear, as in “Martha’s Vineyard in October”, Grennan’s “Sunday Morning”, with its “burnished wings” (“Drowsing in sunshine, she’s on the edge of enlightenment / again, she thinks, but only sleep comes down.”) A poem on splitting wood (“Breaking Points”) owes something

to Kinsella's conceit of the axe-blade splitting open a core of personal history, but here the feel—maples on the driveway, pouring lemonades and opening beers—is American. When Grennan really goes to the brink, “between the silence of almost infinite possibility and that / explosion of things as they are” (“Pause”), he is not on Tully Mountain, but in his Poughkeepsie driveway, hovering between the silence of art and the explosion of the domestic as he waits for the school bus which will bring home Kira, the young author of the desert crab's tale.

Grennan, then, has slipped by the Irish nets, neither striving for Heaney's highbrow nor McCourt's middlebrow. He is best known to American readers of his oft-published pieces in *The New Yorker*. The fit is a good one: to a great extent Grennan is a lyricist of American upper middle-class experience, of those who have driveways, yards and decks; who may also have two grown children from a previous marriage and, in their second, a small child and an adored spouse; whose comfortable life-style privileges reading and reflection; who ponder life's sacred mysteries without the benefit of clergy. As an expat, Grennan willingly trades the anxieties and compulsions of his Irish contemporaries—Heaney, Mahon, Longley—for the easier life of America and the ease of thought and style which that life affords him. Perhaps it is because he can hold such a rarefied mirror up to the familiar realities of American life—he takes nothing for granted—that his poems so often find grateful readers in *The New Yorker*.

It may also be because Grennan is such a good stylist. Although he does not always resist the conversational cliché of domestic speech (the “heart-flipping sight” of a child in danger, the “poor shoulder” of an injured parent), and although one sometimes wearies of the “I do this I do that” style, Grennan more generally does the little things that please. His diction (of a porcupine: “the targe of his arse”; of a couple after dinner: “[the] livid taste in their heart”); his humour (that same porcupine is hunched over “like Lowell reading”); his jaunty, unselfconscious internal rhymes (“Granted the Atlantic”, “exploding globes of rhododendron”); his startling contrasts (his dead mother “become a lump of wooden absence / wearing a flowered nightie”); his simple, unerring attention to physical sensation (“your cool / fingertips indenting my sunburnt neck”)—these small pleasures abound.

To say all this might seem to be damning Grennan with faint praise, as though the accessible lyric of happy domestic experience somehow belonged in a lower category than obscure verse, or than the poetry of sexual distress or political rage. While some of his poems about family members come too close to sentimentality for my taste, many others—particularly his animal poems—have a greatness of their own. Seeing a dog's car-

cass while walking on the beach, he then sees an end of rope around the murdered dog's neck; in the concluding meditation, the speaker, now swimming, sees

behind the body and the barefoot children
how on the bent horizon to the west
a sudden flowering shaft of sunlight
picks out four pale haycocks
saddled in sackcloth
and makes of them a flared quartet
of gospel horses—rearing up,
heading for us.
("Sea Dog")

Here Grennan's conjugation of observed detail, of moral reflection, and of symbolic transformation both shocks and hurts—and still gives pleasure. His colloquy with a bat, trying to escape from the room it flitted into, wonderfully imagines the bat as the twin of anyone who wants to know "how to behave / in a tight corner." "Cows", a magnificent poem, considers both the heaviness ("their couchant / hefty press of rumination") and the lightness of being ("they stepped into mist and silence, the pooling / splash of their hooves a steady progress"), and concludes, as the cows chew their grassblades, by enacting a symbolic transformation of the light to the heavy, the heavy as a good place, "its own / entranced herbivorous pacific grace." The work of the cows, like the work of Kira's desert crab and of her father's poems, is indeed to draw the light into the heavy, to condense the air, to bring what shivers at the brink into warm exactitude.

If some of the family poems seem too facile, Grennan's poems on the death of his mother are the finest in this collection. My vote for the very best is "Night Figure", in which Grennan returns—ominously, in Dantesque tercets—to rainy nights when he was a child and his mother lay awake waiting for the return of a drunk husband. No great treatment of this familiar scene that I know of (Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz", Dove's "Taking in Wash" and, yes, McCourt) matches Grennan's combination of detail and thought. The dead stillness of night, harbouring the possible tragedies of everyone in the house, asleep or awake, finally overcomes the mother as she falls "down the sheer drop of sleep", a sleep concluding with her death. "Outing", in which Grennan imaginatively transports his mother (dying in an Irish nursing home) to his artists' summer colony under Mount Monadnock, triumphs in its union of past and present, of Ireland and America, and—once more—of heavy sensuous detail ("the sag

of your breast / where one button in the pale blue frock's undone") and the lightness of the upper air ("how that big green hill / swims in and out of view as the mist / lifts and settles, and lifts, and settles.")

Eamon Grennan deserves to be better known and more widely read. His beehive—with its honey and wax, its *dulce* and *utile*, its pleasures and lessons—is teeming. There is a page in "Station Island" where Seamus Heaney imaginatively exchanges the fog-bound anxieties of the Irish religious atmosphere within which he grew up (and here he recalls his adolescent sexual initiation) for the sunny, secular and self-confident pleasures of Horace's oak tree, under which one may reasonably may sit, make love and write poetry. That oak tree grows in Eamon Grennan's back yard.