

## LIKE DOLMENS ROUND MY CHILDHOOD, THE OLD PEOPLE

Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people.

Jamie MacCrystal sang to himself,  
A broken song without tune, without words;  
He tipped me a penny every pension day,  
Fed kindly crusts to winter birds.  
When he died his cottage was robbed,  
Mattress and money box torn and searched.  
Only the corpse they didn't disturb.

Maggie Owens was surrounded by animals,  
A mongrel bitch and shivering pups,  
Even in her bedroom a she-goat cried.  
She was a well of gossip defiled,  
Fanged chronicler of a whole countryside:  
Reputed a witch, all I could find  
Was her lonely need to deride.

The Nialls lived along a mountain lane  
Where heather bells bloomed, clumps of foxglove.  
All were blind, with Blind Pension and Wireless,  
Dead eyes serpent-flicked as one entered  
To shelter from a downpour of mountain rain.  
Crickets chirped under the rocking hearthstone  
Until the muddy sun shone out again.

Mary Moore lived in a crumbling gatehouse,  
Famous as Pisa for its leaning gable.  
Bag-apron and boots, she tramped the fields  
Driving lean cattle from a miry stable.  
A by-word for fierceness, she fell asleep  
Over love stories, Red Star and Red Circle,  
Dreamed of gypsy love rites, by firelight sealed.

Wild Billy Eagleson married a Catholic servant girl  
When all his Loyal family passed on:  
We danced round him shouting "To Hell with King Billy,"  
And dodged from the arc of his flailing blackthorn.  
Forsaken by both creeds, he showed little concern  
Until the Orange drums banged past in the summer  
And bowler and sash aggressively shone.

Curate and doctor trudged to attend them,  
Through knee-deep snow, through summer heat,  
From main road to lane to broken path,  
Gulping the mountain air with painful breath.  
Sometimes they were found by neighbours,  
Silent keepers of a smokeless hearth,  
Suddenly cast in the mould of death.

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,  
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,  
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.  
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,  
For years they trespassed on my dreams,  
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,  
I felt their shadows pass

Into that dark permanence of ancient forms.

## A LOST TRADITION

All around, shards of a lost tradition:  
From the Rough Field I went to school  
In the Glen of the Hazels. Close by  
Was the bishopric of the Golden Stone;  
The cairn of Carleton's homesick poem.

Scattered over the hills, tribal-  
And placenames, uncultivated pearls.  
No rock or ruin, dun or dolmen  
But showed memory defying cruelty  
Through an image-encrusted name.

The heathery gap where the Rapparee,  
Shane Barnagh, saw his brother die -  
On a summer's day the dying sun  
Stained its colours to crimson:  
So breaks the heart, Brish-mo-Cree.

The whole landscape a manuscript  
We had lost the skill to read,  
A part of our past disinherited;  
But fumbled, like a blind man,  
Along the fingertips of instinct.

The last Gaelic speaker in the parish  
When I stammered my school Irish  
One Sunday after mass, crinkled  
A rusty litany of praise:  
Tá an Ghaeilge againn arís . . .\*

Tír Eoghain:Land of Owen,  
Province of the O'Niall;  
The ghostly tread of O'Hagan's  
Barefoot gallowglasses marching  
To merge forces in Dun Geanainn

Push southward to Kinsale!  
Loudly the war-cry is swallowed  
In swirls of black rain and fog  
As Ulster's pride, Elizabeth's foemen,  
Founder in a Munster bog.

(\*We have the Irish again.)

## STELE FOR A NORTHERN REPUBLICAN

Once again, with creased forehead  
and trembling hands, my father calls  
me from stifling darkness. . . .  
Little enough I know of your struggle,  
although you come to me more and more,  
free of that heavy body armour  
you tried to dissolve with alcohol,  
a pale face straining in dream light  
like a fish's belly

upward to life.

Hesitantly, I trace your part in  
the holy war to restore our country,  
slipping from home to smoke  
an absentee's mansion, concoct  
ambushes. Games turned serious  
when the cross-fire at Falban  
riddled the tender of policemen,  
one bleeding badly

stretched upon  
the stone flags of our kitchen,  
your sisters moving in a whisper  
of blood and bandages. Strange war  
when the patrol scouted bales  
of fodder, stray timber, tar  
to prepare those sheltering walls  
for reprisal's savage flames  
if he should die!

That night  
you booked into a Strabane hotel.  
'Locals were rarely used for jobs:  
orders of the Dublin organizer,  
shot afterwards, by his own side.'  
A generation later, the only sign  
of your parochial struggle was  
when the plough rooted rusty guns,  
dull bayonets, in some rushy glen  
for us to play with.

Although again  
and again, the dregs of disillusion  
churned in our Northern parents' guts  
to set their children's teeth on edge;  
my mother hobbling to the shed  
to burn the Free State uniforms  
her two brothers had thrown off  
(frugal, she saved the buttons):  
my father, home from the boat at Cobh,



## THE CAGE

My father, the least happy  
man I have known. His face  
retained the pallor  
of those who work underground:  
the lost years in Brooklyn  
listening to a subway  
shudder the earth.

But a traditional Irishman  
who (released from his grille  
in the Clark Street I.R.T.)  
drank neat whiskey until  
he reached the only element  
he felt at home in  
any longer: brute oblivion.

And yet picked himself  
up, most mornings,  
to march down the street  
extending his smile  
to all sides of the good,  
(all-white) neighbourhood  
belled by St Teresa's church.

When he came back  
we walked together  
across fields of Garvaghey  
to see hawthorn on the summer  
hedges, as though  
he had never left;  
a bend of the road

which still sheltered  
primroses. But we  
did not smile in  
the shared complicity  
of a dream, for when  
weary Odysseus returns  
Telemachus should leave.

Often as I descend  
into subway or underground  
I see his bald head behind  
the bars of the small booth;  
the mark of an old car  
accident beating on his  
ghostly forehead.

## A REAL IRISHMAN

On St Patrick's Day, Billy Davidson cried,  
Big and blubbering, by the rock garden.  
The master had ordered him to play outside,  
Snapping, 'You're not a real Irishman,  
You're a Protestant'. I slip out to comfort  
Big Billy, chance an arm around him.  
'What does it matter, your religion –  
Some people still call me the American! –  
What counts most is, you're my friend.'  
Decades later, in a dark pub, after hours,  
A swirl of trouble with two off-duty U.D.R.,  
Suddenly in the background, a rough voice roars:  
'John Montague is my old friend and neighbour;  
Lay a hand on him and you deal with Billy Davidson'.

## COUNTRY MATTERS

### I

They talk of rural innocence but most marriages  
Here (or wherever the great middle-  
Class morality does not prevail) are arranged  
Post factum, products of a warm night,  
A scuffle in a ditch, boredom spiced  
By curiosity, by casual desire –  
That ancient game....

Rarely  
That ancient sweetness.

In school  
Her hair was unstinted as harvest  
Inundating her thin shoulderblades  
Almost to her waist. As she ran  
The boys called and raced after her  
Across the schoolyard, repeating her name  
Like something they meant. Until she stopped:  
Then they dwindled away, in flight  
From a silence.

But after dark  
The farmhands came flocking to her door  
Like vagrant starlings, to sit by the fireside  
Pretending indifference, or hang around outside  
Waiting for a chance to call her away  
Down the slope, into darkness.

Finally,  
Of course, she gave in. Flattered,  
Lacking shrewdness, lacking a language?

### II

By the time she was fourteen she was known  
As a 'good thing'. By the time she was sixteen  
She had to go to England 'to get rid of it'.  
By the time she was eighteen, no one 'decent'  
Or 'self-respecting' would touch her:  
With her tangle of hair and nervously  
Darkened eyes, she looked and spoke like  
'A backstreets whore'.

Condemnation  
Never lacks a language!

### III

She married, eventually, some casual  
Labourer from the same class as herself  
For in the countryside even beauty  
Cannot climb stairs. But my eye  
Still follows an early vision when  
Grace inhabited her slight form;  
Though my hesitant need to praise  
Has had to wait a sanction  
Greater than sour morality's  
To see the light of day:

For lack of courage  
Often equals lack of a language  
And the word of love is  
Hardest to say.