

Twelve Beds for the Dreamer

by

Máighr ad Medbh

A Few Comments

Apart from three – the first, last and ‘Exacting’ – all of these poems tell dreams. I hope they make sense, though you might ask how they could. I would answer that I think dreams, whatever their provenance or purpose, are usually quite sensible. These ones tell stories and I suggest you read them as such.

Having been impressed by the accuracy of astrological natal charts, the original idea was to find out whether the moon’s monthly passage through the zodiacal constellations affected my own oneiric meanderings. Would I dream of conflict when the moon was in Aries, of love when it was in Libra? I recorded my dreams for a period and didn’t elicit any scientific conclusion. My dreams, however, were vivid and memorable. I wrote them as poems and the zodiac became a thematic paradigm, to which I added other poems of the night, bed, home and the internal dwelling-place. The complete sequence is fifty-four poems long and will be published in book form by Arlen House later in 2010. What follows is the text of a poetry performance and includes all the poems founded in dreams. ‘Stonewalled’, a dramatic dialogue based on a dream, might not always be performed because of time constraints.

A word about Uriel, who appears in the poem ‘Plants’. The dream came just as I’ve told it in Part 2 of the poem, but at the time I had no idea that Uriel is connected in astrological lore with Mercury, messenger of the gods. Nor did I know that his element is said to be fire and that he has been represented as the angel who stood at the gates of Eden to expel Adam and Eve. He is, therefore, an icon of judgement and salvation.

The sequence starts with Cancer and ends with Gemini, although the first sign of the zodiac is Aries and the last Pisces. The reason for my arrangement is that it best reflects a period in my life when I had small children and moved from obsession with the family and motherhood (Cancer) to shifting securities and a focus on the mass communication media (Gemini). Coincidentally, or not, a similar progression can be seen in western society over the past forty odd years. We have been shunted from womb to weather, from home to homies, from bed to bedlam. The last poems in the sequence are steeped in the clamorous demands of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ mentality.

Máighréad Medbh

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CANCER

Moonface

You would expect heat,
but her face is luminous, not blazing.
She had scuttled behind the curtain
until the shaft came
that paralyses and displays.

Smile, you're on TV.

Smile, you're pinned in a glass case.

Shine, you're a trophy.

She prefers to sit in the dark,
where she has no face.
It goes without saying
that dark is the prime source
and that it contains answers,
if only it could know itself.
She lies back and lets time flow through her,
turns the breath of her inners to tides,
contemplates her lone importance
and the subtle spread of her feet.

She's a watcher in the dark,
a waiter you can't summon.
No click or yell or thump
will displace her.
And when you don't see her,
how can you tell if she
is mustering her troops?

Falling

Where the land ends in a blind drop
he's gone skittish
patter skip hop scuttle
everything's a breeze
nothing to a dive
might as well be a soft bed
where he somersaults.

He's a rushing creature
swift as any pack-backed beetle
less sense less sense.
Don't you know when there's an end to the track?
Don't you know where to stop?

He doesn't stop.
He's done it this time. Gone too far.
I lie and peer over. Cliffs of Moher.
There he is clutching to a scrawny twig
my round son my small chick
my big-eyed seal pup.

I reach and it's not *Space Jam*.
My arm has only one length no extensions.
I'm not *stretchy man*.
Can it be him I see falling
abseiling without the rope?
Maybe he's made of rubber
often seems he is
and his head of steel.

He has banged it off walls and giggled.

It would be better wouldn't it
to reach for independence
harbour power and panache
not be such a mother
such a like-my-own mother?
I was reared to be a carer.
I clustered my daydreams around that.
Now home is the brooch she never wore
the engagement ring that hardly knew her finger
the dishcloth drying over the fire that never blazed
and herself hooked upon the hearth
abc-ing her legs, trying to suck some solace in.

I like to think I'd fight for my sons
but how far would I risk my neck?
There's the gypsy woman
who crept through the Nazi compound every night
to view her daughter through a chink in the galvanised iron.
She was only two she said.

Any child could be taken.
I've lain in shiver considering that.
Such happenings are only a trick of space.
I might one day
in the time it takes to get my bearings
see my son go bunji-jumping cordless
and be left without a view
desertly lost
sandily dispersed

with an itch in a raw spot
and a hearth that never fully heats.

LEO

Lion's Play

What would I do rising from a sun-dream but make love to you as a lion? You bite into my hair not knowing where it orangeful came from when it had been clipped. It's all over the place now and you can't get away from it. You're getting electric shocks from it. You keep twitching and throwing small convulsions like you can't stay and you can't not.

I like my lion face. It's wide and still pointed. The nose is the best part. It sniffs not petty sniffs like a human nose but sniffs that trawl long distance. I whiff the sprung spring of a man two miles away. Come back to you and your round bouncy skin bags full of juice loosey feeling ready to spill yeah yawn. Lions always yawn I always yawn when I want you. Under the aw-yaw-ning my legs are in a Y and all my lips are opening wide. Come into my jaws my maw. There's a nice prey. I'll throw myself over you coatlike and with great furry hands on your shoulders hold you down. You're mine I have you now you're not going anywhere. I'm coming onto you raking you in perhaps bleeding you but you like it don't you. Plaything happy balls bounce bump smooth leap reach for the main thing the upper echelons top of the food chain nothing eating me now.

Earthling

Christ, but you walk steady on the earth,
shoulders square to it, feet sure as if wild.

Your flesh calls to the planet's
like a peeled apple, a ripe pear,
a lone bear on the mountain.

Eyes screwed up, face gone,
in tears you come crashing hundreds of feet
to a bellowing river where you are lost.
People with knives surround you and there's no protector.
One boy the last hope of the world.
Your body is battle-up, your knees bent,
pulling away from me in this midnight terror.

Mostly you're lion cub, bounding down the hall,
jumping up to lick your father's face,
curling to my lap as if it were yours,
examining what shines, planning the next amazement,
every laugh so fully here it trips the house.

You wear rapid tracksuits, *Action Man* shirts,
baseball caps turned backwards.
You're a cool dude, a Kung Fu fighter.
You can bang your head against a wall
and not be hurt. You won't be run over,
you're stronger than car or truck.

You say you were Chinese last time.
This time you believe in tigers
and anything that's furious.

Your element is fire.

VIRGO

Plants

1. Catherine

My mother is always moving.
Even sitting is a form of work,
where she listens and cultivates,
much as she might prune a laurel
or set another bright flower for the summer.
The rockery in the corner of the yard
is a wilderness turned formal for love of the human race.

Scene One

She's hanging net curtains,
sliding them onto their springy spines,
fold pushing fold, like a worm escaping a bird.
When they're up, two holes gape and the netting sags.

In he comes at her back
– like when he threw the milk,
or crept up and slapped her behind –
and makes to hit her for her sin,
tearing the curtains, wasting money as usual.
He sees me.
Something about me, she used to say,
could calm him down.
Instead of hitting, he slaps two silver disks
on her back and marches out happy,
as if he can always track her now.

Scene Two

He's standing in my present bedroom.

So is she, as if it were theirs.
He's humbler, eyes down,
saying sorry for all the times.
Unlike before, she won't forgive.
She holds her shoulders like epaulettes
and points him to his wrongs,
how he has stolen her life.

Scene Three

I'm dancing in a home-made video,
singing *Bye Bye Miss American Pie*,
and my face is apple-round.
I have survived cancer and hair-loss
to climb a mammoth wooden staircase,
knowing that somewhere above
I have two daughters sleeping
in their outdoor clothes.
Their minder has been careless,
only does what's necessary.

Unlike Catherine, my mother,
who now lies dying down the hall,
past the bathroom with a sunken bath
and deep steps toeing the water.
She would have washed them as she did us,
in a small plastic tub
she'd fill from saucepans and kettles,
or standing in their underwear before the fire,
their feet in balmy basins.
She would have aired pink lawn-cotton nightdresses
on the *Waterford* anthracite contraption,

and eased them on over their unruly, fly-away hair,
which she would then have brushed a hundred times,
scouting for nits.

She might have made soup,
the long fingers of steam tickling their noses,
masking their cheeks with red petals.

If it were cold, she would have had them wear socks,
or put a hot water bottle between the sheets,
just beyond their toes.

In the sickbed her face is white and the hair gossamers around it,
as if she will now become someone else.

2. Uriel

So it was you took my mother's ring,
pretending to be friendly, but cuckoo,
saying you were a neighbour.

You and your wife stayed too long,
moved the hands of my clock by telekinesis,
made things disappear, me too.

I was locked outside my own house,
without her engagement ring that I always wore.

You even charmed the policeman.

But I discovered what would kill you.

Water thrown over you in a heavy stream
reduced you to eyes and mouth.

In the last moments of your existence

I asked your name.

Uriel, you said.

Medicine*(for Anthony)*

To dream of a tiger or a standing bear is big medicine.
We've had ours in the field-mice and bees,
and the lighting glimpse of a hare
in the covert of the legendary fox.

We've played in our dreams' demesne,
stood by the fairy fort invisibly joining hands.
I've watched you when you didn't know,
to send mothering out like she would.
You've calmed my nerves
with kinder truths and disprin.
Yes, you've helped my pain.

And if the glaring yellow lines of man-done time
should come breaking things in parts,
we can swallow this capsule and sink safe –
into the christmas mornings
and the nights of booze
and the songs we sang anyway
and saturday afternoons in O'Neills'
and the certainty that the place still holds
where we were home.

LIBRA

China

Earth echoes in a Chinese museum,
where great crucibles and sculpted ids
make blue and white a telling fashion,
light and fissile as joy.

Everything teeters,
but in a break would scatter easy pieces –
like small scuds on the mirroring floor –
of laughs, bubbles, giggles and shrugs.

This dream is a bead for my memory chain
I will rub and wrap my tongue around,
letting taste and fizz transmit
to flagging nerves and sad somatic cells,
so I can believe something will change.
More chain than jewel these past five years.
I've been shouting, seeing through promises,
hacking the normal, cutting off ties,
making beauty an ideologue,
discharging honesty gut to gut,
baring my teeth,
snarling at the half-door.

From the museum to a hotel

I drift like a wisp with three good friends.

We lounge and the walls humour us,

leaning to hear our talk.

The two deep beds could meet in a flash

and we'd not mind the crowding.

He's sweet, the dark one, head lowered

in shy wit and respect.

So when the girl calls, it's a normal thing,

a job she does like waitressing or managing a shop.

She's young, hair black as clubs, eyes kohled,

shimmied into red silk.

We talk like friends. She's a student,

pays her fees by making east meet west,

conjuring the globe for leisured liberals like us,

who nod.

My woman friend and I will leave.

The girl can have two, what odds?

As I pass, she turns as if to ask

how we can walk and browse while she works.

I shouldn't stop, because when I do

it's I who shimmy in red silk,

then turn slim, then schoolgirl, then black pleats,

then smooth black hair and a job I do with my body,

while my heart spins and casts its arteries –

down the street to the china archives,

red streams under tourists' feet,

red streaks among the white and blue.

Ebbing back in a flair of colour

to deliver what's needed, what's due,

what anyone deserves –

a piece of clay formed into a planet,

held like a safe place, near enough to be home.

SCORPIO

Under

I might have been white as lightning,
no dark parts shadowing my ears.

I might have been innocent,
not harbouring the harsh word
nor the cold that spreads its tendrils,
miniaturizing the house.

But I come with dark foundation,
top half struggling to be lotus,
nether half in swamp.

That's why I twitch when my feet touch a glass floor
and there's no scandal beneath,
why I crook over on the river bank,
dive under the covering moss,
scatter the settled water lilies,
descend until I've known what it's like to drown.

Suckers lift the skylight.

I peer down to where a baby outlined in thick black
floats stiff and half-sunken in a limpid bath.

Great white tiles are rimmed with black,
the baby's skin white.

Something takes my shoulder, shakes and pulls me,
and I'm looking into a cave-like face
that calls seekers to its hollows.

No fear keeps me silent or stiff against the bed.

When in a second I decide, I proclaim my stand
and banish to its cronies this straggling thought

that wants to take me to itself,
that thinks I'm shiny, full of spirit nosh,
worth binding in its web and sucking.

It withdraws as quickly as it came,
but there are others waiting,
a team to push me under,
take me near to murdered babies
and the pain I might love.
They won't tell me to dam my eyes.
They'll give me night vision
and send me plunging,
until I can find some channel
and a clarifying guide to swimming high,
breaking through where you'd think was stagnant,
breathing light.

Eclipse

Sunhair suncheek sunlip sunglazed limbs.

Seen her on streets

hipsway tease.

Followed her track my eyes did

jumped out and bounced after

bounced until she turned the corner

lenses on her all the time

taking in

her sunlilt sunroll to the right and left.

She doesn't ask for attention she gets it

holds it like her jeans hold her

like her jumper hugs her.

Bodies like hers don't need designer clothes.

Plain blue doesn't phase a star.

She's been shot.

She's a wrap.

Candid video ripe for re-showing.

Edited dickied up.

Playing on the retina big time.

roll it

She's here

no longer walking.

Ours now

a gang of indiscriminate sex.

We shave her sunhair bare to the baseglow

throw her down

I willing too
mount her from behind and use her like a doll.
Something in her capture is a thriller.
I don't think beyond the simple plot.

the film stops

I have to tell a friend.
He mutters kindly
'The subconscious does strange things'.
I try to believe there's no part of me
would shave a sun of every ray
disregard a totem
turn movement to a slice of flesh
ride rough-shod
ever slash a smile
into a soiled and broken body
like a god.

Nick Cave Makes Love To Me**(Dreamscene)**

Little mother when I make love to you,
I'll scatter petals to your breasts –
domestic flowers that you never set,
sweet peas, peonies, laurels, violets.
I'll hold your knickered bottom in my hand
and kiss it like an apple with the stalk still.

I'll lick and stroke and maybe rub my teeth
along the veined marshmallow plains
of your thighs untuned and ghostly white.
Lifting thumb against your clit,
I'll raise you up like rivers on my head,
de-icing and creating in a generous swarm.

Little mother when I make love to you,
I'll hold your knickers in my hand,
and smell the juices you can't help but cook,
a mix of carelessness and school.
You know your secrets are deep red and full,
like the inner parts of rhubarb tarts and purple plums.

'I can stay up for a fair good time,'
I tell you as I probe the wet.
You bring my sex into your open home,
as a pillar to its bone foundation.
Bite me like the wolf you often are,
away from pack and practised in the loneliest desire.

Little mother I can bear your scars.

I can carry them away.

When we come to drown ourselves in slush,

I'll remember what you said:

'Did you have enough to eat? Are you cold?'

Little mother things that make us all afraid

and want to sex it out to Hell.

Little motherbrother of my songs,

come with me.

SAGITTARIUS

Bound

You could say I clung to a fat fish,
swimming at quiet depths,
where things by some perversion of the eye
were seen in only black and white,
although the sea was teeming with colour,
endlessly diverse.

I had to wrench myself from the simplicities:
good/evil;
love/hate;
truth/falsehood;
live/death;
for me/against me.

Can I float, alone and only bedded by the air,
among the unkept chronicles of space, questions at every turn?
Must stay cagey.
What I live for escapes me.
The body holds when the mind thinks go.

In my dream I'm dragged struggling to the people.
I'm thrown among them,
accounting for myself as the gallows is hammered.
I wake to silence, endemic hypocrisy,
and a huge wheel I'd like some room upon.

CAPRICORN

Daddy Married Me

It must have been an all-male ceremony I wasn't allowed to attend because this is the first I've known of it and it seems a given fact. He's standing there by the inner door getting his coat on with first a jerk and then a sweep about his hulkish chest. I know what's on that chest – spidery orange hairs that curl and twist until they're the jungle that chokes his heart.

Later I'll lie in his bed stiffly on those sticky browning sheets trying to switch off my senses, saying I don't feel what will shortly make me vomit, his barrels of fingers, his slabbed hands, the bristle on his chin, the smell of oils and vaseline, old tar and his spotted pan-shaped thighs. He'll force me because nothing I know finds pleasure in him. He says goodbye to my silent sons. His look says, 'I'm the boss and you'd better not move from here'. He leaves.

I haven't moved, seems I've never grown. There has been no avenue out. All my life I've been governed by him. Married one way or another. There's no doubt but that this house with the close walls is where I'm at his mercy, me and my children. Whom he owns.

I wake and remember that none of this is true. There's a man beside me. He and my father are not even alike, one small and sandy, the other tall and equine; one dipped in zambuk, the other steeped in radox. Still, for a time the dream pervades, and there's no difference in the air, no happy story.

Dream of a Yellow Wolf

Her face is close to mine.
I can see how she got here,
how she worked her way through the wood
with unrested sense,
hiding, then finding food.

Although her pack don't want her,
she'll survive.
She carries their rejection
in the deeper burrows of her fur,
letting it discolour her only a little.

She has walked alone for endless no-change days
and the pain is sometimes less.
You can see the rough sadness in her eyes
and the threat in her naked teeth.
You can't lack this much and not seethe.

She has learned.
Being timid was never the way to gain respect.
When the need takes her
she'll kill without thought,
then rest, fellowless, in the clearing.

Her fur is dirty yellow.
Nothing to be vain about.
She could fade but for two things –
her love of new prey
and her body's manic clinging to itself.

She knows she's a killer.

That leaves her free for kindness,

the odd time,

to a human or a bird.

She doesn't fret that she wasn't born generous.

Stonewalled

Scene 1: The dressing-room of a large theatre. Athene, an academic, part-time performer of political songs and poetry, and Medusa, an old woman.

Athene:

You were late for the sound-check, you smelly old bitch. What was I like, alone and fussing, my hands on a go-slow, couldn't get the foundation on right, without a brush to give my cheeks that earthy glow. I'm not earthy by nature. I like to assess how things work, how things should work. Logistics are my specialty. Everything runs better as a military operation. That's what you don't realize. Five means five and seven means seven. What were you doing, sunning your serpents?

Medusa:

It may come as a surprise to you but old women have pleasures too. One of them is keeping people waiting.

Athene:

I'd behead you again if I could, you useless hag. You're like a worm, growing your face back like that, reclaiming it as if it were still your logo. It's not. Perseus and I won it. You had no right to take it from my t-shirts without a clean fight, but then you always fought dirty.

Medusa:

You might have known, you of the acrobatic intellect, that everything reverts to its rightful owner, one way or another. History is a Ferris wheel and you can't always be at the top. Sometimes you have no view and all you can do is stare into the glazed face of the ticket seller while your seat swings and goes nowhere.

Athene:

If I could do without you I would. Look, I'll pay you. I have quite a good income. Let me buy the franchise on your face. I've asked you before. You know it's not impossible. And I'm sure you could do with the money to feed your profligate habits.

Medusa:

As usual, your ego misleads you. I have no need of your money. I always have enough because I take what I want, quietly, not like you, stalking in with the shotgun on your arm. I sit on the island with my sisters and women come to us, women who are grateful for our healing and protection. We know who we are. You haven't got a clue. You have done wonders for this man-made society of yours, poured into it your scientific expertise, your skill in technology, and made it prosperous. But you won't bring children into it, will you? You work with men but you won't mate with them. I wouldn't mind but you won't mate with women either. Your heart is a clock. Arrive at five, arrive at seven, arrive at nine! But when you want art you turn to me, you always turn to me. You know what I can do, but you can neither emulate nor appreciate. Times have changed. For years you could wear my face on your breast without looking at it yourself. Pretending you were teaching wisdom but never going past the essential threshold. Go out now and bare your vagina on the stage. Show them the pubic hair that reaches to the knees. Take the cock out of your mouth and speak.

Athene is called to the stage. She and Medusa look at each other in silence for some seconds. This is an old battle. One time Athene would have had more allies, but there has been a groundswell of change and the new ranks hold no proper definition for her. She doesn't know who to fight for any more so she's trying to fight for herself. It's a lonely task. The women perform the usual ritual. Standing with palms pressed together, a transfusion occurs which is marked by a shudder through each, and Medusa's features draw themselves onto Athene's t-shirt.

Athene:

But why do you always come?

Medusa:

Remember your mother, and how your father's roaring always shut her up? So much so that her throat seized and in the end she only whispered, manically focused on table items, whether she still had all her forks and small spoons, how to get the stain out of the table cloth, folding and re-folding the towels in the hot-press. You broke away, sneaked out the back window and ran. You thought of great things then, the fellowship of women, the lifting of stereotypes, an overhaul of the economy. You did great things, you were an inspiration. You're still an inspiration, although you've never properly defined your direction. That day you first saw me, my face floating towards you as you lay tired and worn out, you couldn't take it. I was a beauty in everyone's eyes and all I wanted was fun. Out every night, shifting men, slicing through your ideologies, painting myself, dying my hair. You couldn't look at my face, so you gave yourself a reason to hate me. What you called ugliness. What you didn't know is that, being immortal, you would live to see that ugliness turn to style. I was surprised myself when my sisters brought me back to life with my own blood and told me that my face would be prized by the women of this age.

Second call for Athene. Her make-up is in sweat-streaks on her face.

Medusa:

Go on. What you're about to say on that stage is true. My image will provide the rest.

Scene 2: The auditorium, shaped like an amphitheatre, is huge. To the left, the bar is frilled with noisy drinkers. Nearer the stage, there are tables covered with red cloths and people from many nations are clapping slowly, waiting for the show. When Athene arrives, she hears her name spoken and echoed. She begins. The words of the songs are raw, like glimpses of her inner organs, a bleed from the liver, a kidney overflow, a burst heart vessel, a bulging womb. All through, a hundred bar-huggers maintain a loud hum of conversation. She never wins them, although she yells enough to make her throat raw. A gathering at the front likes her, especially a French married couple who pound their table. It's not enough. It's as if the grey bowl of the theatre were crushing her; she feels it slowly closing in. She's singing without conviction. The granite-toned Medusan shadow

doesn't descend as it should. The audience should be silent as stone, to erupt in colour again once the set finished. All this time and she's no better than a support act. She bows anyway, and maintains her composure. Offstage, she presses herself to a wall, her face a rain of make-up, her jeans sweatily clinging, like children. Whatever happens, she can't cry in front of the hag.

Scene 3: The dressing-room again.

Medusa (taking back her face):

Don't worry. It's another beginning. Nothing can be by proxy in these times. What you give can't be borrowed or contrived. You'll arrive. Your greatest asset is your dissatisfaction. And I love you, you know.

Athene looks at her sharply. She believes that, at least, to be a lie.

Medusa: (stopping as she exits)

One day your face will be just like mine, and you won't worry then what side you're showing, or whose heart, even if it's your own, is turning to stone.

AQUARIUS

Aliens

We are no more like the polyglot god
than those beings were like you,
and no less.

You made them not in your image
but in your imagination.

This is how.

You wanted to paint presence without form,
so on a white page you made splashes of colour,
rubbed them out and drew over the traces
a spaceship you had seen on Star Trek.
It was when you stamped on it
that their presence was fulfilled.

They came invisible to inhabit my house.

I knew they were here by the arbitrary movements
of inanimate objects.

There goes the wooden elephant
and that blue Bristol Cream bottle that did for a vase.
I employed two psychics, one melon-haired, one dark.
The first had a line between her eyebrows
and a worried glare in her ionised eyes.

The dark one wore baubles and a gown too long not to catch
as she moved between the table and chairs.

Something was worked and I saw the melon-haired
change to a glass globe and float.

I understood then that the strangers
could assume our image.

What they saw they copied.

An old man, one of them, went shimmying out
over the harbour on a thin wire.

When he got to the deepest spot,

I stood on a balcony, stretched my hands
and mimed pushing him under.

Down he went.

But before I hauled away, up he rose –
way out there, buoyant and laughing on the water.

The balcony dissolved.

It seemed then that dividing lines needed a deep eraser
and that many more miles had to flit
before we could see between the image and the page.

PISCES

The Emerald Pool *

I am no self-contained woman,
no deep-throated, double-breasted repository of power.
I'm more a puzzled fish, snapping for food
in a sea of uncertain nourishment.
The shark is forever close.
I swim camouflaged,
my mouth pops, my mind spins.

You look from the window.
Outside is a clamorous flux
of words, philosophies, analyses, trends,
well-tended nature, cars, computers,
confident heels, ascending knees, argument,
certain involvement, laughs, love, hope,
other people desiring other people's methods.
But all you are is the spot where you stand,
the spaceship departing in a light-cone,
infusing the message, 'We will return'.
There seems no choice then but to enter
the only portal that remains unshielded.

That's how I came to say yes,
and accept for a time the silence that warps me.
To stand here and watch may be radical too,
as cruel on the gut as fighting;
as hard to be scaled in the still, deep, Emerald Pool
as it is to be armoured in the field.

I know that element as if it were skin;

I have floated face up and down,
and once I swallowed some that morphed inside.
I felt it form into a hand-shaped bowl,
that sits here now in a beg,
as if I could bend to a place so internal it's distant.

This is my habit.

I swim, am sleeked, come striding out,
shoulders back, hair pressed to my neck,
my sculpted body a polished teak.

I rest.

Until the trees start a whisper at my back,
the forest begins to cackle
and the sun does nothing to help.
My fingers stiffen, lose their quickness,
mass up like the toes that have begun to arch
and sprout sickles of claws.
My skin turns harsh,
my body convulses and re-forms.

In the Emerald Pool

the image I see shows two new eyes
bulging in my forehead.
My warp-spasm has not phased it.
Sí Gaoithe▪ in the valley
and this cursed pool will only sit prettily green,
waiting to lap me in.

When I open my mouth I don't know if it's to drink
or howl.

* Archetypal symbol of the Piscean consciousness. Still, sensing waters.

▪ Irish for 'Fairy Wind'. Refers to a tornado, or any freak, powerful wind.

ARIES

A Battle For Peace

I try to leave my house by the front door,
but the woman is there to stop me.
She has short black hair and a red wool top.
This time she's alone.
She has summoned, previously, ten others.
When I left my children they came,
she directing at a plush distance
as, faceless, they milled through the hall
into the front room.
When I returned I couldn't tell what damage had been done.

Now she breaks in, despite my say no,
and stands at the bedroom door with forehead aimed.
Next thing I've killed her and I'm fleeing the scene.
All's well until in the lift
I have to fight all over again –
her rabid daughter,
writhing and unselfconscious, tangled hair,
no skirt and red jumper,
a bedlam of flesh and muscle with no-one to please.

I'd like to leave this house by the front door
and know that it will stand,
that I can return in a day –
having moved to the monkey song
sidestepped on pub seats
hornpipied on tables
somersaulted off and bowed
– and find my children still sitting on a cosy sofa,

the moon in their faces, worry beads flung on the fire,
the warm spoon of home stirring a good one for me.

No Easy Way for Me Yet, Thanks

A pin-striped suit flies away.
I sit where there are frog-green trees,
grass to lie on, sun to shine in,
contacts to be made in scrubbed granite buildings
and autumn Dublin squares,
brown people who think in tow
in interesting cafés,
enthusiasts to work with,
friends with crybaby shoulders.

That's nice.

Goodbye.

I'm slipping away by the nearest gap
to the Medusa Breastplate,
more congruous establishment,
where I drink alone.

Lamb

In a large building, a woman with military hips
has gathered the orphans,
who shiver in brownish or stained-white shifts.
She paces and glares, stops at a four year-old.
'Who was the watcher?' she asks.
'Don't tell,' comes the whisper.
The little one cries.
Through splutters and sniffs she gives the name.
Then the cross is set up, the world goes whirligig,
the girls are sent wheeling,
the informer's eyes are put out.

I fly to mind her,
come down to blanket her with silver,
stay silent with her,
let my heart beat close,
so she'll know there's life somewhere
if she can weather this.
It's not for me to tell her, is it,
nor for her to hear,
that in some uneasy way
she will always be a lamb.

TAURUS

Cowboy

We sat at the same table,
you with your startled eyes,
I head-bowed, shifty.
Never could decide if we were friends or what.
The dining-room was crowded
and when the tremor came,
panic spread like fire on acrylic.
You wanted something done.
You always want something done.

As the earth began to split
I found myself beside my second love,
the one I nearly married, who sat and smiled,
although all society was vanishing
through a fault beside us, including you.

He used to do a cowboy act,
kick open the bedroom door as if it were a saloon,
come in blazing invisible six guns,
then gather me like a sheaf of wheat.

'Well, cowboy, I live in the big house. My daddy owns this ranch but my car has broken down, so I'll let you give me a lift'.

I invite him in, it's only polite. Up the great curled granite steps that flank the door like a two-handled moustache. He's an obvious illiterate, nothing to recommend him but his looks, which mark him as a man of the earth and open-air. As I walk in, I realise something has changed. The teak table is scored with knife marks, the oak desk has had its drawers flung to the floor like junk. In the chief reception room with the full-length windows and the cord-waisted velvet curtains, there's an intruder with his mind on

ransom. Cowboy, not hesitating, jumps him and knocks him smack on the floor. When he has been led away, it's Cowboy, not me, gets the attention, and it was all, I know, on my account.

Your shoulders, cowboy, and your rustic croon
have become welcome to me.
Sinking on you is as good
as a lie-down in a meadow
or a walk beside the long acre
with its crop of small suns and full moons.

I turn to you when the going gets rough,
when friends are vague or complex;
I find in your raspish chin and thickened fingers
something softer than clean,
finer than carpets,
never itching the nose.
There are random blue specks on your skin
that remind me you've been places,
you've touched down and fur, hoof and hair;
you've pulled calves from puzzled cows
and there's something you know about me
that sofas don't.

This Awkward Love

This awkward love is what the family confers,
so children are held in comfort and I responsible,
one man my guard against all the rest.

It escapes me
how others smile when they see the dinner scene,
a symmetry of male and female, as though we were opposite
and therefore had to suffer each other.

Who am I to say,
who have always wanted everything,
that this is right or not?
Society is a construct you can survive.
It's the ideal you choose.

No, says my earthy friend,
whose laugh holds wide green fields in its West Cork lilt,
it's not enough to be friends.
But neither she nor my feminist acquaintance
will not come between my sheets,
tell me I'm great, and be family.

This awkward love
may be a kind of reverence for history,
as one night in a dream I saw this:
I'm a tribeswoman in ceremonial dress
and I sit as if others must stand.
He comes to me with sweat on his hands
and a childlike question in wounded eyes.

He has failed to kill the bear. Will I still accept him?

My white skirt spreads like a sister's wedding train.

I give no answer.

The Last Life Perhaps Departing

The bullhead rises and closes in.

Here come my past lives.

I see myself pinned against a wall,
then fallen on the streets of Pamplona
with my stomach open.

Again, crouching with Mexican women in a dank prison,
until the warder lets in a chink of fatal light.

He moves a stiletto towards my eye.

I see the dark one, the devil I don't believe in,
moving towards me as if I were his.

He brings his red-teethed hounds
in battle formation, eyes hoping to honey-glaze.

I would be theirs,
but some ethereal being lifts me,
her hands under my armpits as if I were a baby.

She says:

'You have me at your back, my dear.
I can take you to your cubby,
to the peace they can't ruffle,
where the sallow air welcomes,
the grass waves without break
and watching mountains hide no fire'.

Beyond the Limits

The mourners have stayed for two days.
The house is black with them.
I'm to-ing and fro-ing with funeral fare,
my head like an earthenware jar.

Sunday evening comes.
The crowd genies down to
my brother and sister and their earnest faces.
You know what, I say,
I can't remember the funeral or the mass.
I should remember the bells
and some movement of people
to and from the pulpit.
And how could the burial be wiped out?
How could I forget the first thud of earth,
that she always said was the shutting door,
the final plutonic hello?

Look, he answers, when people go crazed
it can be a kindness to calm them.
You wouldn't want to go off the rails, overboard.
You drugged me?
I turn to my sister. She looks down and away.
You drugged me?

There's that sound that has no sense in it,
a solid swell like the tail-end of a hurricane,
a voiceless laugh because the world is pulling out,
nothing in it but me, and then how am I to understand?

In the end was no word.

I don't ever again, I say, ever again,
want to be drugged without my knowledge.
Now I'm the bully,
ranting at the wrong people as usual,
those who look down.

The noise burgeons and I pin it somewhere
in the lower rear of my cerebellum.
My head is a private stereo –
walk woman walk woman –
walls of sound.
Prison gets you everywhere.

Beyond, though my eyes can't function,
I know the others have slipped from the room
and are already beyond the limits.

GEMINI

Exacting

Mirroring is never exact.

The chrome of the bath-taps
tarnishes in the soapy water
and the bright yellow shampoo bottle
turns a dull cream.

Something happens in reflection
that's not a gift at all, but a drain.

Take the autumn scene –
trees pinnacled in rich orange
at this, the time of their decline.

If you painted, you would probably give them a reflection,
as if the trees liked to be mimicked by water,
which cannot give roundness to the bark,
smell to the resin, sound to the touching of leaves;
nor the special dimension
in the inevitable progress of brown.

I stand here, whipped by sudden storms,
in the hope that sometime I'll look in the water
and from it will emerge a four-dimensional replica,
who will tell me by her knobbls and bores,
her inner movements and her servitude to time –
explain to me – how my sap rises,
why I lean this way and not the other,
why my seeds are beyond my control.

But water is as much in flux as I am,
and so are you, in whom I have looked for my face.

Media

What you hear
on the propagation of a flower,
the second law of thermodynamics,
Fermat's last theorem
and a scroll of other matters,
may stay or not,
depending on your current need
and whether the facts find an echo
among the snagging ancient feelers
at the bottom of your personal,
ever-shifting riverbed.

Here's the information attack.
Always has been status attack.
Wish I lived in Chaucer's time,
when I might have read all the books.
Now a book is a piece of airborne dust,
instantly replaced once whooshed.

Who do you wear?
How do you hang your hat?
From a hundred million choose one,
or stand stony on the shore
with the wide-indexed tide rolling in.

X has sold a million books.

Y has sold two.

A B and C are such good writers

they got 500,000 each and that's just an advance.

Mary has a business worth a bomb.

Sylvie's one of the richest women in Ireland.

There's another self-made man.

I've definitely failed.

The odd time I soak myself in silence,

turn off media for practice.

No thought,

only mechanical domestic acts

or the eating of a meal,

looking at my children –

those moments of no epiphany,

or of some sudden decision you'll always remember.

And you were only looking out the window

at the unremarkable, could say barren, garden.

Often, when I close my eyes,

I see a white figure on a mountain path,

the mist of a medieval painting her destination.

Has she read

Doestoevskypushkinmolieredickensrussellgarcialorcapabloneudaceslawmiloszgertrudes
teinhildadoolittlesheridanlefanuelizabethbishopwilliamtrevorflannobrienjohnbanvillerich
ardellmangerardmanleyhopkinscarljungpatrickmccabekateobrienannemccaffreyisobelalle
nde?

Does she have

an MAMSCMPHILPHDHDTVSUV,

wear

Guccipradaivesstlaurentjimmychoolouisvuitton;

and if not,

what's she worth?

Three

There's one thing you wish for at three,
when an army has invaded your forehead
and the rain has something against
the clothes you've hung on the line
and forgotten to bring in,
and that's certainty.

At three it would be nice
to have a big hand smooth down your nose,
sweet to own a pet John Travolta
who would dimple just for you
and tell you something slow.

Some people enjoy their lives,
you know it's true.
They eat dinner unrushed,
the fork like a mother's feeding hand,
leaving 'I-love-you' on the tongue.

Might be that disgruntled e-message
and the clamour of silent voices queued to be read
that shook the shoulder this time.

Or else it's him, home from the Hill of Laurels,
which is forever in erosion,
threatening to be sucked
by a force stronger than all of us.
And his constant watchful pose –
no space for anything small

or a moment of inattention to the goal,
such as:

I hate this way of life. I nearly walked out today I felt such a waste.

Then there's the work you've been lax about
and the ocean of PhDs who've got it made
and the bleak shocks of your mind's embedded symbiont
to shake you wide alone.