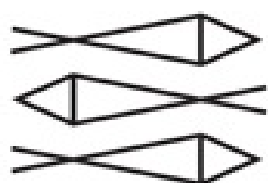


ELECTRIC LIGHT

SEAMUS HEANEY



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About the Author

Copyright

For Matthew and Caroline

At Toomebridge

Where the flat water

Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh

As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth

And fallen shining to the continuous

Present of the Bann.

Where the checkpoint used to be.

Where the rebel boy was hanged in '98.

Where negative ions in the open air

Are poetry to me. As once before

The slime and silver of the fattened eel.

Perch

Perch on their water-perch hung in the clear Bann River
Near the clay bank in alder-dapple and waver,

Perch we called “grunts,” little flood-slubs, runty and ready,
I saw and I see in the river’s glorified body

That is passable through, but they’re bluntly holding the pass,
Under the water-roof, over the bottom, adoze,

Guzzling the current, against it, all muscle and slur
In the finland of perch, the fenland of alder, on air

That is water, on carpets of Bann stream, on hold
In the everything flows and steady go of the world.

Lupins

They stood. And stood for something. Just by standing.
In waiting. Unavailable. But there
For sure. Sure and unbending.
Rose-fingered dawn's and navy midnight's flower.

Seed packets to begin with, pink and azure,
Sifting lightness and small jittery promise:
Lupin spires, erotics of the future,
Lip-brush of the blue and earth's deep purchase.

O pastel turrets, pods and tapering stalks
That stood their ground for all our summer wending
And even when they blanched would never balk.
And none of this surpassed our understanding.

Out of the Bag

I

All of us came in Doctor Kerlin's bag.
He'd arrive with it, disappear to the room
And by the time he'd reappear to wash

Those nosy, rosy, big, soft hands of his
In the scullery basin, its lined insides
(The colour of a spaniel's inside lug)

Were empty for all to see, the trap-sprung mouth
Unsnibbed and gaping wide. Then like a hypnotist
Unwinding us, he'd wind the instruments

Back into their lining, tie the cloth
Like an apron round itself,
Darken the door and leave

With the bag in his hand, a plump ark by the keel ...
Until the next time came and in he'd come
In his fur-lined collar that was also spaniel-coloured

And go stooping up to the room again, a whiff
Of disinfectant, a Dutch interior gleam
Of waistcoat satin and highlights on the forceps.

Getting the water ready, that was next—
Not plumping hot, and not lukewarm, but soft,
Sud-luscious, saved for him from the rain-butts

And savoured by him afterwards, all thanks
Denied as he towelled hard and fast,
Then held his arms out suddenly behind him

To be squired and silk-lined into the camel coat.
At which point he once turned his eyes upon me,
Hyperborean, beyond-the-north-wind blue,

Two peepholes to the locked room I saw into
Every time his name was mentioned, skimmed
Milk and ice, swabbed porcelain, the white

And chill of tiles, steel hooks, chrome surgery tools
And blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened
At the foot of each cold wall. And overhead

The little, pendent, teat-hued infant parts
Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling—
A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock

A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole.

II

Poeta doctus Peter Levi says
Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called *asclepions*)
Were the equivalent of hospitals

In ancient Greece. Or of shrines like Lourdes,
Says *poeta doctus* Graves. Or of the cure
By poetry that cannot be coerced,

Say I, who realized at Epidaurus
That the whole place was a sanatorium
With theatre and gymnasium and baths,

A site of incubation, where “incubation”
Was technical and ritual, meaning sleep
When epiphany occurred and you met the god ...

Hatless, groggy, shadowing myself
As the thurifer I was in an open air procession
In Lourdes in '56

When I nearly fainted from the heat and fumes,
Again I nearly fainted as I bent
To pull a bunch of grass and hallucinated

Doctor Kerlin at the steamed-up glass
Of our scullery window, starting in to draw
With his large pink index finger dot-faced men

With button-spots in a straight line down their fronts
And women with dot breasts, giving them all
A set of droopy sausage-arms and legs

That soon began to run. And then as he dipped and laved
In the generous suds again, *miraculum*:
The baby bits all came together swimming

Into his soapy big hygienic hands
And I myself came to, blinded with sweat,
Blinking and shaky in the windless light.

III

Bits of the grass I pulled I posted off
To one going into chemotherapy
And one who had come through. I didn't want

To leave the place or link up with the others.
It was mid-day, mid-May, pre-tourist sunlight
In the precincts of the god,

The very site of the temple of Asclepius.
I wanted nothing more than to lie down
Under hogweed, under seeded grass

And to be visited in the very eye of the day
By Hygeia, his daughter, her name still clarifying
The haven of light she was, the undarkening door.

IV

The room I came from and the rest of us all came from
Stays pure reality where I stand alone,
Standing the passage of time, and she's asleep

In sheets put on for the doctor, wedding presents
That showed up again and again, bridal
And usual and useful at births and deaths.

Me at the bedside, incubating for real,
Peering, appearing to her as she closes
And opens her eyes, then lapses back

Into a faraway smile whose precinct of vision
I would enter every time, to assist and be asked
In that hoarsened whisper of triumph,

“And what do you think
Of the new wee baby the doctor brought for us all
When I was asleep?”

Bann Valley Eclogue

Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus

—VIRGIL, Eclogue IV

POET:

Bann Valley Muses, give us a song worth singing,
Something that rises like the curtain in
Those words *And it came to pass* or *In the beginning*.
Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil
And the child that's due. Maybe, heavens, sing
Better times for her and her generation.

VIRGIL:

Here are my words you'll have to find a place for:
Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens.
Their gist in your tongue and province should be clear
Even at this stage. Poetry, order, the times,
The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth
And a flooding away of all the old miasma.

Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves:
Earth mark, birth mark, mould like the bloodied mould
On Romulus's ditch-back. But when the waters break
Bann's stream will overflow, the old markings
Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.
The valley will be washed like the new baby.

POET:

Pacatum orbem: your words are too much nearly.
Even "orb" by itself. What on earth could match it?
And then, last month, at noon-eclipse, wind dropped.
A millennial chill, birdless and dark, prepared.
A firstness steadied, a lastness, a born awareness
As name dawned into knowledge: I saw the orb.

VIRGIL:

Eclipses won't be for this child. The cool she'll know
Will be the pram hood over her vestal head.
Big dog daisies will get fanked up in the spokes.
She'll lie on summer evenings listening to
A chug and slug going on in the milking parlour.
Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions.

POET:

Why do I remember St. Patrick's mornings,
Being sent by my mother to the railway line
For the little trefoil, untouchable almost, the shamrock
With its twining, binding, creepery, tough, thin roots
All over the place, in the stones between the sleepers.
Dew-scales shook off the leaves. Tear-ducts asperging.

Child on the way, it won't be long until
You land among us. Your mother's showing signs,
Out for her sunset walk among big round bales.
Planet earth like a teething ring suspended
Hangs by its world-chain. Your pram waits in the corner.
Cows are let out. They're sluicing the milk-house floor.

Montana

The stable door was open, the upper half,
When I looked back. I was five years old
And Dologhan stood watching me go off,
John Dologhan, the best milker ever

To come about the place. He sang
“The Rose of Mooncoin” with his head to the cow’s side.
He would spin his table knife and when the blade
Stopped with its point towards me, a bright path

Opened between us like a recognition
That made no sense, like my memory of him standing
Behind the half door, holding up the winkers.
Even then he was like an apparition,

A rambler from the Free State and a gambler,
All eyes as the pennies rose and slowed
On Sunday mornings under Butler’s Bridge
And downed themselves into that tight-bunched crowd

Of the pitch-and-toss school. Sunlight on far lines,
On the creosoted sleepers and hot stones.
And Dologhan, who’d worked in Montana once,
With the whole day off, in the cool shade of the arch.

The Loose Box

Back at the dark end, slats angled tautly down
From a breast-high beam to the foot of the stable wall—
Silked and seasoned timber of the hayrack.

Marsupial brackets ... And a deep-littered silence
Off odourless, untainting, fibrous horsedung.

* * *

On an old recording Patrick Kavanagh states
That there's health and worth in any talk about
The properties of land. Sandy, glarry,
Mossy, heavy, cold, the actual soil
Almost doesn't matter; the main thing is
An inner restitution, a purchase come by
By pacing it in words that make you feel
You've found your feet in what "surefooted" means
And in the ground of your own understanding—
Like Heracles stepping in and standing under
Atlas's sky-lintel, as earthed and heady
As I am when I talk about the loose box.

* * *

*And they found the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes
And laid in a manger.*

But the plaster child in nappies,
Bare baby-breasted little *rigor vitae*,
Crook-armed, seed-nailed, nothing but gloss and chill—
He wasn't right at all.

And no hayrack
To be seen.

The solid stooping shepherds,
The stiff-lugged donkey, Joseph, Mary, each
Figure in the winter crib was well
And truly placed. There was even real straw
On the side-altar. And an out-of-scale,
Too crockery, kneeling cow. And fairy lights.
But no, no fodder-billowed armfuls spilling over ...

At the altar rail I knelt and learnt almost

Not to admit the let-down to myself.

* * *

Stable child, grown stabler when I read
In adolescence Thomas *dolens* Hardy—
Not, oddly enough, his Christmas Eve night-piece
About the oxen in their bedded stall,
But the threshing scene in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—
That magnified my soul. Raving machinery,
The thresher bucking sky, rut-shuddery,
A headless Trojan horse expelling straw
From where the head should be, the underjaws
Like staircases set champing—it hummed and slugged
While the big sag and slew of the canvas belt
That would cut your head off if you didn't watch
Flowed from the flywheel. And comes flowing back,
The whole mote-sweaty havoc and mania
Of threshing day, the feeders up on top
Like pyre-high Aztec priests gutting forked sheaves
And paying them ungirded to the drum.

Slack of gulped straw, the belly-taut of seedbags.
And in the stilly night, chaff piled in ridges,
Earth raw where the four wheels rocked and battled.

* * *

Michael Collins, ambushed at Beal na Blath,
At the Pass of Flowers, the Blossom Gap, his own
Bloom-drifted, soft Avernus-mouth,
Has nothing to hold on to and falls again
Willingly, lastly, foreknowledgeably deep
Into the hay-floor that gave once in his childhood
Down through the bedded mouth of the loft trapdoor,
The loosening fodder-chute, the aftermath ...

This has been told of Collins and retold
By his biographer:

One of his boy-deeds
Was to enter the hidden jaws of that hay crevasse
And get to his feet again and come unscathed
Through a dazzle of pollen scarves to breathe the air.
True or not true, the fall within his fall,
That drop through the flower-floor lets him find his feet
In an underworld of understanding

Better than any newsreel lying-in-state
Or footage of the laden gun-carriage
And grim cortege could ever manage to.

Or so it can be stated
In the must and drift of talk about the loose box.

Turpin Song

The horse pistol, we called it:
Brass inlay smooth in the stock,
Two hammers cocked like lugs,
Two mottled metal barrels,
Sooty nostrilled, levelled.

Bracketed over the door
Of the lower bedroom, a ghost
Heft that we longed to feel,
Two fingers on two triggers,
The full of your hand of haft.

Where was the Great North Road?
Who rode in a tricorn hat?
Bob Cushley with his jennet?
Ned Kane in his pony and trap?
The thing was out of place.

When I lift up my eyes at the start
Of Stanley Kubrick's film
A horse pistol comes tumbling
From over the door of the world
And it's nineteen forty-eight

Or -nine, we have transgressed,
We've got our hands on it
And it lies there, broken in bits.
Wind blows through the open hayshed.
I lift up my eyes with the apes.

The Border Campaign

for Nadine Gordimer

Soot-streaks down the courthouse wall, a hole
Smashed in the roof, the rafters in the rain
Still smouldering:
 when I heard the word “attack”
In St. Columb’s College in nineteen fifty-six
It left me winded, left nothing between me
And the sky that moved beyond my boarder’s dormer
The way it would have moved the morning after
Savagery in Heorot, its reflection placid
In those waterlogged huge pawmarks Grendel left
On the boreen to the marsh.

 All that was written
And to come I was a part of then,
At one with clan chiefs galloping down paths
To gaze at the talon Beowulf had nailed
High on the gable, the sky still moving grandly.

*Every nail and claw-spike, every spur
And hackle and hand-barb on that heathen brute
Was like a steel prong in the morning dew.*

Known World

“*Nema problema!*” The Macedonian
Taxi-driver screeched and the taxi screeched
At every unfenced corner on the pass,
Then accelerated.

“*Beria! Beria! Beria!*”

Screeched Vladimir Chupeski, every time
He smashed a vodka glass and filled another
During those days and nights of '78
When we hardly ever sobered at the Struga
Poetry Festival.

Rafael Alberti

Was “honouree” and Caj Westerburg,
A Finnish Hamlet in black corduroy,
Sweated “on principle” (or was that just projection
Of my northern tweed-wearer’s contrariness?).

Also there: “Hans Magnus Enzensberger.
Unexpected. Sharp in panama hat,
Pressed-to-a-T cream linen suit. He gets
Away with it.”

And a soothsaying Dane

Of the avant-garde, squinting up at a squinch,
His eye as clear as the water and coral floor
Of Lake Ohrid. His first words to me were:
“Is this not you, these mosaics and madonnas?
You are a south. Your bogs were summer bogs.”

* * *

In Belgrade I had found my west-in-east.

“Belmullet melancholy of huckster shops
And small shop windows. Unfresh bread, tinned peas.
Also Belmullet elders in the streets.
Black shawls, straight walk, the weather eye, the beads.”

Then I saw men in fezes, left the known world
On the short and sweetening mud-slide of a coffee.

* * *

At the still centre of the cardinal points
The flypaper hung from our kitchen ceiling,
Honey-strip and death-trap, a barley-sugar twist
Of glut and loathing ...

In a nineteen fifties

Of iron stoves and kin groups still in place,
Congregations blackening the length
And breadth of summer roads.

And now the refugees

Come loaded on tractor mudguards and farm carts,
On trailers, ruck-shifters, box-barrows, prams,
On sticks, on crutches, on each other's shoulders,
I see its coil again like a syrup of Styx,
An old gold world-chain the world keeps falling from
Into the cloud-boil of a camera lens.

Were we not made for summer, shade and coolness
And gazing through an open door at sunlight?
For paradise lost? Is that what I was taught?

* * *

That old sense of a tragedy going on
Uncomprehended, at the very edge
Of the usual, it never left me once ...
A pity I didn't know then (for Caj's sake)
Hygo Simberg's allegory of Finland,
The one where the wounded angel's being carried
By two farm youngsters across an open field:
Marshland, estuary light, a farther shore
With factory chimneys. Is it the socialist thirties
Or the shale and slag and sloblands of great hurt?
A first communion angel with big white wings,
White bandage round her brow, white flowers in hand,
Holds herself in place on a makeshift stretcher
Between manchild number one in round soft hat
And manchild number two in a bumfreezer
And what could be his father's wellingtons.
Allegory, I say, but who's to know
How to read sorrow rightly, or at all?

* * *

The open door, the jambs, the worn saddle
And actual granite of the doorstep slab.
Now enter another angel, fit as ever,

Past each house with a doorstep daubed "Serb house."

* * *

How does the real get into the made-up?
Ask me an easier one.

But this much I do know:

Our taximan, for all his speed, was late
For the poetry reading we were meant to give
At a cement factory in the mountains.
So a liquid lunch with comrade managers
Ended in siesta and woozy wake-ups
Just before sunset. Then, the notebook says,
"People on the move, field full of folk,
Packhorses with panniers, uphill push
Of families, unending pilgrim stream.
To-day is workers' day in memory
Of General Strike. Also Greek Orthodox
Madonna's Day."

We followed a dry watercourse,
Rattling stones, subdued by the murmuring crowd
As darkness fell. We passed a water-blessor
On his rock apart, El Greco-gaunt and cinctured
("Magician," said Vladimir), waving his cross
Above the tins and jampotfuls held up.

Then on the mountaintop, outside a church,
Icons being carried, candles lit, flowers
And sweet basil in abundance, some kind of mass
Being celebrated behind the iconostasis,
A censer swung and carried through the crowd.
I had been there, I knew this, but was still
Haunted by it as by an unread dream.
The sale of holy objects. The little groups
Who'd walked all day now gathering in rings,
Allowing themselves a taste of their bread and olives.

* * *

As the Boeing's innards trembled and we climbed
Into the pure serene and protocols
Of Air Traffic Control, courtesy of Lufthansa,
I kept my seat belt fastened as instructed,
Smoked the minute the *No Smoking* went off
And took it as my due when wine was poured
By a slight *de haut en bas* of my headphoned head.

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