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Loss and Recovery in Peter Fallon's Pastoral Elegies

By RICHARD RANKIN RUSSELL

But this is the positive season,
though loss is expected,
a part of the whole,
the breeches, abortions
accepted, it's minor,
the primary pulse is new.

—"The Positive Season." Peter Fallon

Though the green fields are my delight,
elegy is my fate. I have come to be
survivor of many and of much
that I love, that I won't live to see
come again into this world.

—"Requiem" Wendell Berry

CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY is currently enjoying a worldwide surge in popularity. This phenomenon, however, has actually been developing for some time and has been shaped by a number of factors, including the rise of the Irish publishing industry. The major press publishing Irish poetry in that country is Gallery, run by the Irish editor and poet Peter Fallon. Over the last twenty-five years, he has printed more than 300 titles by Irish poets, including his own work. Fallon has recently begun to receive long overdue praise for his work in publishing, but his own body of poetry has been critically neglected. Those critics who do treat Fallon's poetry regard him primarily as a publisher who happens to write poetry on the side, but Fallon's poetry deserves extensive critical study in its own right. He has been influenced by writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, Robert Frost, and Wendell Berry to create a unique agrarian poetry firmly grounded in contemporary rural Ireland. His finest poetry displays his dual roles as elegiac poet and farmer, anchoring him in a domestic, masculine space in which the deaths of animals and especially the passing of his day-old son acquire a universal significance. Fallon's stunning pastoral elegies celebrate life in all its forms and collectively write these deaths into the memory of his rural Irish community. Hope of personal and cultural regeneration ultimately springs out of his anguished meditations and commemorations of lives lost before their time.

In their introduction to their influential collection, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, co-editors Fallon and Derek Mahon define con-

temporary Irish poetry as “poems written by Irish men and women, in English and in Irish, in the course of the past thirty or forty years” (xvi). They especially praise the influence of Patrick Kavanagh on this generation of Irish writers: “[m]ore than MacNeice, more than Yeats, Kavanagh may be seen as the true origin of much Irish poetry today. One poem, the sonnet ‘Epic,’ gave single-handed permission for Irish poets to trust and cultivate their native ground and experience” (xvii).

The poetic dominance that Fallon and Mahon ascribe to Kavanagh suggests the impact that he has had on their own verse. Fallon especially has taken Kavanagh’s advice in his famous essay, “The Parish and the Universe,” to cultivate parochialism:

Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he had heard what the metropolis—toward which his eyes are turned—has to say on any subject [...]. The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism—Greek, Israelite, English. Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals. To know fully even one field or one lane is a lifetime’s experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts and not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields—these are as much as a man can fully experience. (quoted in the “Introduction” to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* xviii)

Fallon’s own “parish” is bounded both by neolithic remains and the Loughcrew Hills of County Meath. Often his poetry explores the fields, streams, and copses of this area. His intimacy with his landscape has lent him poetic nourishment; as he notes in an interview with Eileen Battersby, “it sustains me, it’s my natural habitat” (“The View from Gallery—25 Years on” 10).

Kavanagh’s poetic reputation is continuing to grow and develop; he appears in critical studies as a poet in his own right and his influence upon succeeding generations of Irish poets is being recognized. For example, Dillon Johnston has argued persuasively for his influence on Seamus Heaney, noting Heaney’s “vivid” use of images, and “the observant eye, patient ear, and celebratory tone that he found in the poetry of Kavanagh.” Johnston goes on to point out that “Kavanagh offered Heaney what MacNeice gave to Mahon, proof that out of inartistic settings poetry could arise [...]” (*Irish Poetry after Joyce* 138-39). Fallon has been similarly influenced by Kavanagh as he has carefully observed and written about the natural world of County Meath.

Fallon’s constant intense scrutiny of his local environment strongly reflects Kavanagh’s advice to be parochial. His poems display a rootedness in a physical landscape that seems increasingly rare in Irish poetry, though still extant.¹ The importance of his “parish” is evident in the first poem in his recent *News of the World: Selected Poems*. “The Lost Field” (13-14) opens with a lament:

1. Dennis O’Driscoll has observed Fallon’s relative adherence to parochialism in this sense: “Even if we are confident enough to have stopped looking over our shoulders, few of us are rooted enough to find Kavanagh’s parochialism attainable—though Richard Murphy’s Connemara, Thomas Kinsella’s Liberties, Michael Coady’s Carrick-on-Suir or Peter Fallon’s Meath would have elements of parochial autonomy” (“Foreign Relations: Irish and International Poetry” 51).

"Somewhere near Kells in County Meath / a field is lost, neglected, let by common law." The field is part of "outlying land" that the Fallon family owns, part of a parcel that the "Horse Tobin" sold to them. Although the field remains lost, the speaker (Fallon himself) comes home from Dublin, musing upon responsibilities inherent in the agricultural role he has adopted:

My part in this is reverence.
Think of all that lasts. Think of land.
The things you could do with a field.
Plough, pasture, or re-claim. The stones
you'd pick, the house you'd build.

Even though the field remains hidden, mysterious, Fallon believes in it as a site of potential—a quasi-mythic place where a variety of domesticating activities can take place. The poem closes with an invocation to the imagination: "Imagine the world / the place your own windfalls could fall. // I'm out to find that field, to make it mine." Fallon is reaffirming his desire to find and stake claim to the lost field that has evaded his family's reach for so long. On a more metaphoric level, the field represents the poetic arena Fallon hopes to find and negotiate through his own poetry, much of which centers upon the physical landscape of his sheep farm.

Fallon's move from Dublin to County Meath in 1988 signifies the transition in his allegiances from provincialism to parochialism. Even before this move, however, another turning point in Fallon's poetic career came with his year as poet-in-residence at Deerfield Academy in western Massachusetts. Just as a young Seamus Heaney would acquire American poetic influences with his trips to the United States in the early 1970s, Fallon's visit to America in the academic year 1976-77 enabled him to affirm "his already strong liking for Robert Frost's work" (Lincecum 54). If Kavanagh gave contemporary Irish poets such as Fallon permission "to trust and cultivate their native ground and experience" ("Introduction" to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* xvii), Frost likewise gave Fallon a transatlantic example of an outstanding poet with the courage to base a body of work upon a local, rural landscape, redolent with the unhurried movements of farm animals and the changes of the seasons. Lincecum also cites Fallon's "preference for simple diction" and "colloquial speech patterns" as having "antecedents in Frost" (54).

Fallon's upbringing in rural Meath and conscious decision to return there at a potential cost to his publishing company suggests his own love of the land and his dedication to an agrarian lifestyle similar to that articulated by the Nashville Agrarians in the 1930s. In his 1977 introduction to the collection published by the Agrarians in 1930, *I'll Take My Stand*, Louis Rubin argues that the book's real importance lies in "its assertion of the values of humanism and its rebuke of materialism" ("Introduction" xvii). The twelve essays contributed by various southern American writers and thinkers examined the rhetoric behind much of what was taken for progress in the America of 1930. They explored a common theme of man versus the machine grounded in a

southern tradition that “had made it possible for them to believe that human beings could *choose* their course of action” (xxi). The Agrarians clearly chose a localized, predominantly agricultural way of life as an antidote to dehumanizing modernity and felt that writing out of a rural lifestyle enhanced their imaginative literature. Fallon has adopted a similar agrarian stance in his approach to his farming and his poetry.

The contemporary poet who has most influenced Fallon in articulating his agrarian philosophy is the neo-agrarian American poet Wendell Berry, who still operates a family farm in rural Henry County, Kentucky.² Berry also made a conscious decision to return to the land after spending some time in the city. He has propounded his agrarian position in a series of articles and books, establishing himself as the primary American spokesman for sustainable agriculture as a viable way of life. In a 1977 essay, “The Use of Energy,” Berry expounds on the importance of topsoil—“living in both the biological sense and in the cultural sense, as metaphor”—in farming:

It is the nature of the soil to be highly complex and variable, to conform very inexactly to human conclusions and rules. It is itself a pattern of inexhaustible intricacy, and so it is easily damaged by the imposition of alien patterns. Out of the random grammar and lexicon of possibilities [...] the soil of any one place makes its own peculiar and inevitable sense [...] . Good farmers have always known this and [...] . are responsive partners in an intimate and mutual relationship. (*Standing on Earth* 9)

This passage from Berry amplifies Fallon’s conception of himself as farmer-poet. He shares with Berry this vision of “an intimate and mutual relationship” with his particular fields that has paradoxically given him an unlimited imaginative field in which to cultivate his own poetry. As Fallon notes in his acknowledgments at the end of *Eye to Eye*, “Wendell’s supreme example remains a guiding light” (62). Fallon’s commitment to farming is pervasive and ongoing and underscores the importance of community in his life and poetry.

Other critics have noticed the similarities Fallon shares with Berry, including Seamus Heaney and Berry himself. Heaney has explicitly connected Fallon with the American poet:

In photographs from that time [1971] he looks a bit like John Lennon, but nowadays he is more likely to remind you of a Berry (Wendell) than a Beatle. The Gallery Press has, of course, ended up being a central contributor to the rise of Irish studies in universities, but it is typical of Peter that many of his most cherished American contacts have been extra-mural, as it were. A farm in Kentucky, a school in western Massachusetts—he’s as likely to be found in these places as at a conference in Wake Forest. His journeyings have been as important as his sense of belonging in Meath, and have helped his vision both to widen and focus. (“Tributes to Peter Fallon: 25 Years of Gallery Press” 6)

2. Declan Kiberd’s tantalizingly brief introduction to Fallon in the third volume of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* hints at Berry’s influence on the younger Irish poet: “In committing himself to the local and the quotidian in the rural life of County Meath, where he lives as a farmer, poet and publisher, he is not only heir to Patrick Kavanagh’s ‘parochial’ achievements but is inspired by the ecological vision of transatlantic poets like Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry” (“Peter Fallon” 1417). Additionally, Dennis O’Driscoll points out Fallon’s “admiration” for Berry (“Foreign Relations: Irish and International Poetry” 57).

Berry himself has recently remarked upon his fondness for Fallon's poetry. On the back cover of Fallon's *News of the World: Selected Poems*, Berry approvingly notes, "here is a book of poems as whole hearted and readable as a good tale. Its characters and voices are deftly shaped within their moments of revelation."

Berry's approval of Fallon's "voices" is telling. Just as Berry has masterfully incorporated the rural dialect of his part of the American South into his fiction and poetry, Fallon has skillfully integrated Irish words and phrases into his poetry: in both cases the poet's relationship to the land and to his rural neighbors is reinforced.³ For example, in the poem *Winter Work*, Fallon uses the Irish word *meitheal* in line thirteen (*News of the World* 40). In his notes to *News of the World: Selected Poems*, he glosses the word as "a co-operative work force. I remember especially the congregations of friends and neighbours to help with the threshing. And I've learned since then of Amish barn-raising or 'frolics' and, in New England, of sewing and quilting bees" (79). In the context of the poem, the word ties his individual life as a farmer together with those of his neighbors: "I warm to winter work, its rituals / and routines [...] alone / or going out to work with neighbours, a *meitheal* still" (40). Fallon's communal stance is antithetical to a modernist worldview that values independence and often becomes imbued with despairing solipsism.

In this philosophy too, he shares a great deal with Berry. Berry's thinking about the function of rural communities radiates through Fallon's poems, such as "The Lost Field," already discussed, and "The Heartland" (42-43). In the latter poem, the speaker (Fallon again) answers the charge of "a Minnesota co-ed" who "rails I'm out of touch" (lines 8, 16). He answers her by reciting a litany of evils exploding in the countryside around him: the Kerry babies tragedy, the hatred of the Orangemen for Catholics, the recent discovery of a baby girl in a nearby lake. He concludes in a Frosteian vein, emphasizing the road he has taken—one of reclamation and self-discovery:

It's true I chose another course, talk
in small communities, a hope to sway
by carry-on people I understand
and love. I came on a place and had to stay

that I might find my feet, repair
the mark of human hand, and repossess
a corner of my country. I write to her:
our lives are rafts; risk happiness.

Explicit in this poem is the power of language in local communities to bridge the isolated "rafts" that our lives threaten to become. The poem itself, of course, becomes a sort of linguistic raft Fallon has sent out to the girl in hopes of influencing her to adopt a more positive approach to life.

3. Richard Wilbur approvingly notes Fallon's use of rural Irish dialect in his remarks on the back cover of *News of the World*: "On the whole, Fallon's words move artfully within the lexicon of the rural town; their poetry is in the rightness of naming and describing, the exact ear for the beat and savor of country speech, the honest tuning of the poet's feelings toward his chosen place."

Rural communities also enact more abstract but nonetheless real functions that supersede individual human lives. In an essay entitled "People, Land and Community," Berry describes the rural farming community as a repository of communal cultural and historical consciousness:

For good farming to last, it must occur in a good farming community—that is, a neighborhood of people who know each other, who understand their mutual dependences, and who place a proper value on good farming. In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in ways. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality. (*Standing by Words* 72-73).

Berry's articulation of the way in which lasting wisdom and agricultural fertility spring from local culture's preservation of knowledge guides his notion of the pastoral elegy, which Fallon has adopted. Berry's elegies collectively write the wisdom of his rural community into a living record that can be continually read by the community and, vicariously, by his readers.⁴

Fallon's best poems are pastoral elegies predicated upon the daily interaction with animals, locals, and his family on his farm. He has taken a virtually moribund poetic form and infused it with new life, given legitimacy by his profession of sheep farming. Whereas the traditional pastoral such as Virgil's "Eclogues" was "a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized setting" (Abrams 141), Fallon's pastoral poetry rejects nostalgia and the bucolic ideal for an intensely lived, realistic setting populated by contemporary farmers he knows personally. As Richard Wilbur has remarked on the back of *News of the World*, Fallon's poetry "does not filter the world of the small farm for some urban reader; rather it takes him there. It does so without sentimentality, giving us for instance the brute weariness of farm work ("Pastorale") as well as the triumph of work well done ("The Old Masters")."

His pastoral elegies similarly diverge from the traditional conventions of that form. First of all, he extends these elegies to include the animals of his farm along with humans. Additionally, he eschews at least two typical elements of the pastoral elegy: the invocation of the muse and a digression, usually on the church (Harmon and Holman 362). The usual procession of mourners is understandably absent from his animal elegies, while mourners appear in a much less public fashion in his elegy for his son, "A Part of

4. A poem that illustrates Berry's theory of local culture as a storehouse of knowledge is "The Record." This poem features an old man's stories of the past and the narrator's urge not to record his voice with a machine, but to instead "Listen to the next one / like him if there is to be one. Be / the next one like him, if you must. / Stay and wait. Tell your children. Tell them / to tell their children" (*The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* 153). Readers interested in Berry's pastoral elegies should read his extraordinary eight-part series simply entitled "Elegy," written in memory of his friend Owen Flood (*Selected Poems* 128-135). Berry's position as communal elegist is atypical among contemporary American elegists and thus all the more impressive. As Peter Sacks argues, "The unfamiliar placement, or rather displacement, of the American elegist reflects not merely an exclusion from the traditional settings of grief but also a marked distance from the comforts of community itself [...]." (*The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* 313).

Ourselves." Finally, the traditional consolation and declaration of things turning out for the best, accompanied by a strengthened belief in immortality, is also modified in the Fallon pastoral elegy. Some poems, such as "Caesarean," end on a stoic note, while others such as "A Part of Ourselves" offer a consolation early on—"There are things worse than death" (71)—subvert that consolation through subsequent elegies. All of these pastoral elegies, however, portray Fallon's intense sense of loss in the midst of the pastoral plenum that surrounds him as a kind of secondary irony and sustenance.

Two of his pastoral elegies for sheep on his farm illustrate the degree to which Fallon modifies the conventions of this form. In the poem "Fostering," Fallon writes powerfully and intimately about an incident in lambing season:

He was lost in the blizzard of himself
and lay, a cold white thing, in a drift
of afterbirth. Another stood to drink dry spins.
I put him with the foster ewe who sniffed

and butted him from his birthright, her milk.
I took the stillborn lamb and cleft
with axe on chopping-block its head,
four legs, and worked the skin apart with deft

skill and rough strength. I dressed the living lamb
in it. It stumbled with the weight, all pluck,
towards the ewe who sniffed and smelled and licked
raiment she recognized. Then she gave suck—

and he was Esau's brother and I Isaac's wife
working kind betrayals in a field blessed for life.
(33)

This poem is a variation on the traditional sonnet form (although line 8 enjambs into part of line 9) but does not follow either the Petrarchan or the English rhyme schemes, although it does end in the concluding couplet favored by the English model. Additionally, the sonnet's elegiac stanzas feature only one rhyme per quatrain (ABCB) instead of the usual ABAB rhyme scheme. Nevertheless, Fallon's adaptation of the sonnet form and his purposeful rhyme scheme enable him to give form and shape to his feelings on the death of one lamb and the fostering of another. Its terseness is a perfect vehicle to adequately convey the harsh reality of life on a sheep farm, while its allusion to the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27 and the use of archaic words such as "raiment" lend a religious significance and transcendence to what has transpired. Most important, the loss of the first lamb creates a chance for the second lamb to be given sustaining milk by his foster ewe. This sense of potential after death will emerge again at the end of Fallon's series of elegies for his dead son.

Another elegy about lambs is "Caesarean" (34-35), in which a "hump-backed, worn out" pregnant ewe is killed by Fallon and his helper so that her lambs might live (line 6). After they shoot her, "She opened like a bloom / beneath the red script of the scalpel's nib / and we found twins, abandoned,

perfectly formed in the warm nest of her womb" (lines 17-20). The flower simile suggests the maternal possibilities of the dead ewe, along with the "warm nest of her womb." But the men have miscalculated: the lambs are premature and "lay like kindlings dazed by daylight, / the tips of their tongues, their front feet pressed / to dive as one into the waters / of the world" (lines 24-27). The comparison of the premature lambs to "kindlings dazed by daylight" suggests the image of the beginnings of a fire which is paralyzed or extinguished by the much stronger light of day; further extinction of their potential life continues in the last three lines here, as the lambs seem poised to experience the world and all it has to offer, but will be subsumed shortly by the "waters," the harshness of the world. The poem ends with the speaker lamenting that "they'd never know their gifts, / the everyday miracles of which they were part. // They were part instead of that sacrifice of the whole" (lines 29-32). These were literally sacrificial lambs for Fallon, though what they are sacrificed for is unclear. The poem ends in the men's knowledge that they had done everything in their power to save the lambs, followed by their silence. This concluding stoicism is atypical for a Fallon pastoral elegy but suggests the degree to which reality tempers his adaptations of this form and utterly subverts the romanticized rusticism common to earlier examples of the genre.

Fallon's parochial elegies about life and death on his rural farm are not confined to his animals. He also has become an extraordinary chronicler of the tragedy that has recently visited his family. His seven brief elegies on the death of his infant son, John, "A Part of Ourselves," are wonderfully wrought, compact utterances of grief and heartache that attempt to encapsulate the potential of a life that might have been; these verses with their poignant, lean lyricism embody the best of the elegiac tradition. Taken collectively, they seamlessly integrate the deep personal loss of his son in the domestic, interior world of his farmhouse with the lesser deaths of the sheep in his surrounding fields. "A Part of Ourselves" ultimately writes his dead son into the memory of his rural farming community in a way that suggests Berry's reclamation of death as a site of cultural and personal potential.

Not technically part of the sequence, the poem "A Fortune" (previously titled "The World of Women" in *Eye to Eye*) serves as an introduction for the occasion that prompted the elegies:

She whispers 'Stay'.
You lie by her side.
You touch the silk
bandages.

Resist the will
to caress her breast.
It will fill
into a fortune of milk
for the baby who died
on Saturday. (69)

The "fortune of milk" functions as both a reminder for the death of the Fallon baby and the potential for another baby in the future. The quietness and intimacy of this little poem serves as prelude to the elegies that follow, in which poet and wife are united in their grief.

The first lyric in "A Part of Ourselves" (70) deals with the unprepared state of Fallon and his wife for the loss of their son: they were "Forewarned but not forearmed— / no, not for this" (lines 1-2). The eager anticipation of the baby has now become "a stammer, now a broken promise" (lines 4-5). This stuttering, fragmented air that is suggested in the first stanza is heightened by the depiction in the second stanza of the sonagram that shows their baby; this image both echoes their own turbulent emotions and suggests the already-distant baby with its vague lunar quality: "The scanned screen slips out of focus, / a lunar scene, granite shapes, shifting" (lines 8-9). The contraposing of complete and incomplete sentences—the first two lines of the second stanza are fragments, while the final four lines are whole and complete—serves to suggest the premature nature of the baby and the aborted potential for wholeness.

The next lyric (71) is composed of complete, although still terse, sentences, hinting at a move toward grief and remembrance on the family's part. The growing wholeness of the sentences here underscores Fallon's wish "for the open wound / to grow a scar" (lines 8-9). However, the atmosphere of the poem is fraught with uncertainties: how to remember the baby, how to properly grieve. The minutes themselves "are grief / or grief postponed—not to remember / seems to betray; laughter would be sacrilege" (lines 2-4). Furthermore, Fallon seems cognizant of the loss of a potential heir and struggles to find an appropriate image for this loss: "We will find a way to mind him as a leaf // who fell already from the family tree, / crushed" (lines 5-7). The final line of each of the seven lyrics is set off by itself, as if to suggest the severance of the child from his family. Here, the second lyric ends with Fallon's hopeful proclamation, "There are things worse than death" (line 11). As noted earlier, this early attempt at a verbal consolation is swiftly undercut in the following elegies, which explore the tense and grief-filled atmosphere of the Fallon home.

Underscoring the loss of breath experienced by the Fallon baby, the motif that runs through the third lyric (and which will be recalled in the seventh) has to do with breathing (72). The speaker imagines a man living in an oxygen tent in a dreadful, artificially sustained existence: "Night and day are one to him" (line 4). This figure "seems to breathe another air," rarefied but disconnected from normal humanity (line 7). The poem moves toward conclusion with a reference to "A summary execution, Budapest, October 1956," which appeared in "*The Best of LIFE*" (9,8 respectively). Heightening the ambiguous atmosphere of the entire sequence of elegies, the indefinite nature of the pronoun that follows in the final two lines make it unclear whether Fallon is referring to the

condemned man in Hungary or to his own son in Ireland: "He flinched that way from the snapshot glare / of the world laid out for him" (72).⁵

The fourth lyric (73) was occasioned by Fallon's dark night of the soul: the period in which he and his wife waited for the inevitable death of their son. She is given sedatives, while he "sought and found the comfort of a friend" (line 2). This lyric, more than any other except the final one, is fraught with suspense, emphasized by the repetition in line 5: "as I waited, waited, for the given end." This suspense ceases in the second and final stanza of the poem after "we'd already begun talking / the hushed courtesies of loss." The morning, traditional period of rebirth and resurrection, instead is metamorphosed into a time of mourning, coldly announced by the ringing telephone: "Then, at dawn, the telephone. / It seems I've been sleepwalking / since" (lines 7-11). The isolation of "since" in the final line emphasizes the sea-change in Fallon's life after the death of the baby and also serves as a marker in the sequence to signal a return for he and his wife from the intense grieving to the support of the community and their attempt to carry on with their lives.

For in the fifth elegy (74), they "broached the sorrow hoard / of women" (lines 1-2) who offer a catalog of previously buried stories "about unwanted pregnancies, abortions, miscarriages, // as his remains, a fingerful of hair, / a photograph, his cold kiss called, 'Remember me,' / and I stood with them at the lip / of graves" (lines 5-9). The enjambment of this final line of the first stanza to the first line of the second stanza successfully enables John Fallon's death to be literally written into this communal outpouring of loss, while also giving us glimpses of the icons his parents will carry with them. But the potential lost in the "cold kiss" is quickly transformed into the more permanent loss of the "lip / of graves"; the baby's death has been diminished temporarily, swallowed up in the list of other unfortunate incidents in the lives of the women. Furthermore, Fallon's vicarious peering-over into the abyss of endless sorrow distances him briefly from his wife's wail: "She cried from miles away, / 'I miss my baby,' as an amputee / laments a phantom limb" (lines 9-11). The overall sense of incompleteness in this elegy is comparable to that of the first elegy in the sequence, with perhaps an echo of the phrase "not forearmed" in the first line of that poem slipping into the speaker's comment on his wife's "amputation" here.⁶

The penultimate elegy takes place at the gravesite; we have now moved successfully from the necessary community inscription of the Fallon baby into the oral history of past local deaths in the previous poem to the physical, concrete grave of the child in the present (75). This poem opens with the

5. There is an echo here of the premature lambs in "Caesarean" who "lay like kindlings dazed by daylight" (New of the World 34).

6. This leitmotif of severed limbs is anticipated earlier in *Eye to Eye* in a remarkable poem entitled "A Handful of Air" (30-31), in which the speaker, spying a pub patron's mangled hand, muses on "all the dismembered / parts" and wonders "where they end up" (lines 12, 13). The speaker goes on to recall a "hand found strapped / by a leather belt to the arm / of an armchair in Belfast" and then remembers, "Later I learned I'd shaken / hands with a man / who shook hands with an Englishman / whose hand he'd taken / in a letter-bomb campaign" (lines 16-18, 22-26). The final lines are from a dream the speaker has had that chillingly indicts the complicity on both sides of "The Troubles": "I've had a dream / of a party where the separated limbs / congregate and re-unite [...] . Hands hold hands, / fingers are crossed, and the fingers point" (lines 29-31, 34-35).

speaker musing on a child's grave he once saw in Loughcrew; he has returned to this memory over the years, and "wondered how you'd walk away from burying / a child. Little I knew" (lines 6-7). His reverie is broken by "a cousin's prayers and Pa Grimes' spade," coupled with his wife's lament that occasioned the title for this poetic sequence: "'We are leaving / a part of ourselves in that ground.' / The innocent part" (emphasis mine; 9-11). The sparse finality of Fallon's unspoken reply to his wife echoes the amputation she has already vocalized at the end of the last poem, while also emphasizing the purity of the day-old child and the recognition that this death has also killed any semblance of innocence left in his parents.

The final elegy is the most powerful of all and successfully unites the turbulent emotions embodied in the preceding elegies:

He'll die again at Christmas every year.
We felt the need grow all night
to give him a name, to assert him
as a member of our care, to say he was
alive. Oh, he lived all right,

he lived a lifetime. Now certain sounds,
sights, and smells are the shibboleth
of a season. In a hospital corridor
I held him in my arms. I held him tight.
His mother and I, we held our breath—

and he held his. (76)

One immediate connection with the earlier poems is the arm imagery: unable to leave anything else to the child, the parents bequeath him a name, "to assert him / as a *member* of our care [...]" (my emphasis; 3-4). This use of bodily imagery, however, attempts to integrate the child into the living family, whereas earlier he was cut off from them. Their efforts to enfold the baby into their family are given a further poignancy in lines 8 and 9, when Fallon embraces the body of the child: "In a hospital corridor / I held him in my arms. I held him tight." Even as the life has ebbed away from the child, his naming and the creation of these elegies have given him a continuing life. The parents, moreover, are strengthened by the child's abiding presence that they have already begun incorporating into their identities. As Wendell Berry's elegized friend Owen Flood says to him, "'The dead abide, as grief knows. / We are what we have lost'" ("Elegy" 135). Finally, the tense air of waiting in the fourth elegy is recalled in the final lines here, which sharply juxtapose the suspension of the parents' breath with the permanent cessation of their baby's. Fallon's judicious, Dickinsonian use of the dash at the end of the tenth line also emphasizes this apprehensive atmosphere.⁷

7. Thomas Kilroy's characterization of Fallon's poetry is apposite here since this poem fights against an overwhelming sense of completeness by its very structure: "The Fallon poem is a construction of exceptional integrity, in the double sense of moral tone and wholeness of body. As a writer, he has always displayed a high degree of finish, of exactness, of discrimination" ("Tributes to Peter Fallon: 25 Years of Gallery Press" 6).

The final poem in *News of the World* is a previously unpublished poem that balances the sorrowful lamentations of "A Part of Ourselves" with its optimistic account of the arrival of a new Fallon family member. "A Human Harvest" opens in the aftermath of the death of John Fallon, and moves quickly to a sense of wholeness, of integration:

Our wishes quicken into flesh
and yield a human harvest.
Remembered, revived—
the parts of a family
flock home to nest.

His sister, our daughter—
we clutch her as a text
of faith. He needs to know,
Will she still be here in the morning?
Yes, love, tomorrow, and the next. (77)

The incompleteness of "A Part of Ourselves" represented by the images of severed limbs is surmounted here. The pared-down lines of this poem—even in comparison to the elegies that precede it—emphasize the close-knit quality of Fallon's family. They "clutch" the new baby "as a text of faith," sorrow replaced with joy. The poem's shape, a semicircle, further accents the outstretched arms of the family reaching for the new baby. Fallon then reappropriates the traditional rhetorical question asked in many pastoral elegies and employs it here as a simple question that once answered, builds confidence in the surviving elder child. The "Harvest" of the title seems particularly appropriate for Fallon the poet-shepherd, whose rich yield of selected poems ends with this elegiac glimpse at the birth of his third child.

Even though I have been terming only "A Part of Ourselves" elegiac, the preliminary poem, "A Fortune," the main sequence, "A Part of Ourselves," and the epilogic poem, "A Human Harvest," can be read as three consecutive parts of one long poem. These sections correspond respectively to the accepted tripartite function of the elegy:

Traditionally the functions of the elegy were three, to lament, praise, and console. All are responses to the experience of loss: *lament*, by expressing grief and deprivation; *praise*, by idealizing the deceased and preserving [...] his memory among the living; and *consolation*, by finding solace in meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values. ("Elegy" 324)

Thus "A Fortune" is essentially a lament for the day-old child, whereas the entire sequence "A Part of Ourselves," while composed of many lamentations, is ultimately a long praise poem that writes the dead baby into the memory of the living. In this second function of the elegy, Fallon's poem also displays an allegiance to Berry's agrarian concept of communal preservation. Finally, "A Human Harvest" is nothing if not a semantic and human consolation of sorts for the deceased John Fallon.

Peter Fallon's pastoral elegies constitute a unique contribution to twentieth-century Irish pastoral poetry in both their expanded subject matter and in

their inversion of many traditional conventions of this genre. Whereas Yeats would idealize the bucolic western counties of Ireland in his early poetry and Kavanagh (in *The Great Hunger*) and Heaney (in "Death of a Naturalist") would invert this optimistic view of rural Ireland with their anti-pastorals, Fallon recognizes losses that haunt the Irish countryside but then reconfigures these sorrows as sites of human and cultural potential. In so doing, he has reappropriated rural Ireland from the stereotypical deValerian view that idealized it as the heartland of the country and recast it as a viable, community-oriented alternative to the faster, more dehumanized pace of life in the major cities of the island. The loss of life in the local community—whether animal or even a beloved family member—resonates there in a way not found in today's urban Irish landscapes. As the atrocities of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and drug-related murders in Dublin mount, Fallon's pastoral elegies proclaim the value of all life in a deeply searching manner that refuses to descend into saccharine sentiment.⁸

His pastoral elegies answer Yeats's epitaph to "Cast a cold eye / On life, on death" with a refusal to do so. Instead, the very title of his collection of poems, *Eye to Eye*, in which "A Fortune," "A Part of Ourselves," and "A Human Harvest" first appeared, suggests his willingness to confront head-on surely the most difficult episode in his life. As Heaney has noted, Fallon's poems "belong to a particular place and a particular speech: his way of saying has become a way of seeing, eye to eye with griefs and crises he is emotionally well able for" (back cover of *NOW*). The full achievement of Peter Fallon's poetry has yet to be recognized. Given the timeliness and craftsmanship of his pastoral elegies, it is surely time to meet them with approving criti-

8. Fallon's achievement in the elegy is remarkable, given our prevailing views of death. As Peter Sacks has observed: "recent attitudes toward death have made it increasingly difficult to write a conventional elegy. Sociologists and psychologists, as well as literary and cultural historians, consistently demonstrate the ways in which death has tended to become obscene, meaningless, impersonal—an event either stupefyingly colossal in cases of large-scale war or genocide, or clinically concealed somewhere behind the technology of the hospital and the techniques of the funeral home" (*The English Elegy* 299). Fallon's achievement lies in successfully writing pastoral elegies that allow their animal and human subjects room to be themselves, not larger than life (as they are in the traditional pastoral elegy) or diminished (as they would be in a more modern, urban setting) but fully realized and commemorated.

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