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Poems from Snow Water

(Forthcoming from Jonathan Cape and
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Some of the poems have already appeared in the following magazines and journals: *The New Yorker*, *London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Irish Review*, *Thumbscrew*, *Dublin Review*, and *Metre*.

OVERHEAD

The beech tree looks circular from overhead
With its own little cumulus of exhalations.
Can you spot my skull under the nearby roof,
Its bald patch, the poem-cloud hanging there?

PETALWORT
for Michael Viney

You want your ashes to swirl along the strand
At Thallabaun—amongst clockwork, approachable,
Circumambulatory sanderlings, crab shells,
Bladderwrack, phosphorescence at spring tide—

Around the burial mound's wind-and-wave-inspired
Vanishing act—through dowel-holes in the wreck—
Into bottles but without a message, only
Self-effacement in sand, additional eddies.

There's no such place as heaven, so let it be
The Carricknashinnagh shoal or Caher
Island where you honeymooned in a tent
Amid the pilgrim-fishermen's stations,

Your spillet disentangling and trailing off
Into the night, a ghost on every hook—dab
And flounder, thorny skate—at ebb tide you
Kneeling on watery sand to haul them in.

Let us choose for the wreath a flower so small
Even you haven't spotted on the dune-slack
Between Claggan and Lackakeely its rosette—
Petalwort: snail snack, angel's nosegay.

CEILIDH

A ceilidh at Carrigskeewaun would now include
The ghost of Joe O'Toole at ease on his hummock
The far side of Corragaun Lake as he listens to
The O'Tooles from Inishdeigil who settled here
Eighty years ago, thirteen O'Tooles, each of them
A singer or fiddler, thirteen under the one roof,
A happy family but an unlucky one, Joe says,
And the visitors from Connemara who have rowed
Their currachs across the Killary for the music,
And my ghost at the duach's sheepbitten edge
Keeping an eye on the lamps in the windows here
But distracted by the nervy plover that pretends
A broken wing, by the long-lived oystercatcher
That calls out behind me from Thallabaun Strand.
The thirteen O'Tooles are singing about everything.
Their salty eggs are cherished for miles around.
There's a hazel copse near the lake without a name.
Dog violets, sorrel, wood spurge are growing there.
On Inishdeigil there's a well of purest water.
Is that Arcturus or a faraway outhouse light?
The crescent moon's a coracle for Venus. Look.
Through the tide and over Owennadornaun
Are shouldered the coffins of the thirteen O'Tooles.

AFTER TRA-NA-ROSSAN

You were still far away. I was only the wind
When I wrote in my woolgathering twentieth
Year about an abstract expanse in Donegal:

‘We walked on Tra-na-rossan strand;
The Atlantic winds were wiping the heat
From the August sun and the stretching sand
Was cold beneath our naked feet;

Our prints were washed and covered by the tide:
And so we walked through all our days
Until there was too much to hide;
No wind to cool our open ways,

No passing tide to wash the traces
Of transgression from the secret places.’

Then we filled the details in: a lapwing’s
Reedy sigh above the duach, a tortoiseshell
Hilltopping on the cairn, autumn lady’s tresses,
The sandwort-starry path to Carrigskeewaun.

I am looking at you through binoculars
As you open the galvanized Aeolian gate
In silence and walk away towards the sea.

THE PATTERN

Thirty-six years, to the day, after our wedding
When a cold figure-revealing wind blew against you
And lifted your veil, I find in its fat envelope
The six-shilling Vogue pattern for your bride's dress,
Complicated instructions for stitching bodice
And skirt, box pleats and hems, tissue-paper outlines,
Semblances of skin which I nervously unfold
And hold up in snow light, for snow has been falling
On this windless day, and I glimpse your wedding dress
And white shoes outside in the transformed garden
Where the clothesline and every twig have been covered.

DIPPER

Our only dipper on the Owennadornaun
Delayed us, so that we made it and no more
Through the spring tide, wading up to our waists:
Naked from the navel down, did we appear
Harmless to the golden plovers slow to rise
From their feeding on the waterlogged duach?
Then fire-gazing-and-log-and-turf-arranging
Therapy which should have unfrozen lust but
In the dark flood water a darker knot became
Two heron-unsettling-and-lapwing-lifting
Otters, our first for years at Carrigskeewaun,
And we rationed out binocular moments
Behind the curtains of the bedroom window
And watched them as they unraveled out of view.

WHEATEAR

Poem Beginning with a Line of J. M. Synge

Brown lark beside the sun
Supervising Carrigskeewaun
In late May, marsh marigolds
And yellow flags, trout at the low
Bridge hesitating, even
The ravens' ramshackle nest—
Applaud yourself, applaud me
As I find inside the cottage
A wheatear from Africa
Banging against the windowpane
And hold in my hands her creamy
Buff underparts and white rump
And carry her to the door
And she joins you beside the sun
Before skimming across the dunes
To mimic in a rabbit hole
Among silverweed and speedwell
My panic, my breathlessness.

LEVEL PEGGING

for Michael Allen

I

After a whole day shore fishing off Allaran Point
And Tonakeera you brought back one mackerel
Which I cooked with reverence and mustard sauce.
At the stepping stones near the burial mound
I tickled a somnolent salmon to death for you.
We nabbed nothing at all with the butterfly net.

Hunters, gatherers, would-be retġarii
We succeeded at least in entangling ourselves.
When the red Canadian kite became invisible
In Donegal, we fastened the line to a bollard
And sat for hours and looked at people on the pier
Looking up at our sky-dot, fishing in the sky.

II

You were driving my Escort in the Mournes when—
Brake-failure—Robert Lowell and you careered
Downhill: ‘Longley’s car is a bundle of wounds.’
When his last big poem had done for Hugh MacDiarmid
And he collapsed, we wrapped his dentures in a hanky
And carried them like a relic to the hospital.

We looked after poets after a fashion. And you
Who over the decades in the Crown, the Eglantine,
The Bot, the Wellie, the Chelsea have washed down
Poetry and pottage without splashing a page
And scanned for life-threatening affectation
My latest ‘wee poem’—you have looked after me.

III

I was a booby-trapped corpse in the squaddies' sights.
The arsehole of nowhere. Dawn in a mountainy bog.
From the back seat alcohol fumed as I slumbered
Surrounded by Paras, then—all innocence—you
Turned up with explanations and a petrol can.
They lowered their rifles when I opened my eyes.

Our Stingers-and-Harvey-Wallbangers period
With its plaintive anthem 'The Long and Winding Road'
Was a time of assassinations, tit-for-tat
Terror. You were Ulster's only floating voter, your
Political intelligence a wonky hedgehopping
Bi-plane that looped the loop above the killing fields.

IV

Rubbed out by winds Anaimines imagined,
The burial mound at Templedoomore has gone.
Locals have driven their tractors along the strand
And tugged apart the wooden wreck for gateposts.
There are fewer exits than you'd think, fewer spars
For us to build our ship of death and sail away.

Remember playing cards to the crash of breakers,
Snipe drumming from the estuary, smoky gossip
In Carrigskeewaun about marriages and making wills?
I'll cut if you deal—a last game of cribbage, burnt
Matches our representatives, stick men who race
Slowly round the board with peg legs stuck in the hole.

TWO SKUNKS

Why, my dear octogenarian Jewish friend,
Does the menagerie of minuscule glass animals
On top of your tv set not include a skunk?
I have been traveling around in America,
Sleeping in wooden houses with squeaky floors,
Landings hung with pictures of lost relatives,
Professors, stationmasters, wise embroiderers.
Driving along the Delaware my poet-host
Stops to let two wild turkeys cross the road.
Is that a third one dithering behind us?
We wind the car windows up—a freshly
Flattened skunk so pongily alive in death
Even the magpies in the dogwood hesitate.
Later we laugh as a three-legged dachshund
Raises its non-existent limb to piddle
At the only set of traffic lights in town.
Laid out in its cotton-wool-lined golden box
A skunk in the Novelty Store beguiles me.
Dawnlight and birdsong kindle my fourposter.
I swaddle your present in my underclothes
For it is time to pack and leave America.
A cardinal flusters at the bedroom window
Like the soul of a little girl who hands over
All of the red things her short life recalls.
Here, my dear octogenarian Jewish friend,
Is my gift for you, a skunk spun out of glass
And so small as to be almost unbreakable.

SYCAMORE

The sycamore stumps survived the deadliest gales
To put out new growth, leaves sticky with honeydew
And just enough white wood to make a violin.

This was a way of mending the phonograph record
Broken by the unknown soldier before the Somme
(Fritz Kreisler playing Dvorak's 'Humoresque').

The notes of music twirled like sycamore wings
From farmhouse-sheltering-and-dairy-cooling branches
And carried to all corners of the battlefield.

HARMONICA

A tommy drops his harmonica in No Man's Land.
My dad like old anaximenes breathes in and out
Through the holes and reeds and finds this melody.

Our souls are air. They hold us together. Listen.
A music-hall favourite lasts until the end of time.
My dad is playing it. His breath contains the world.

The wind is playing an orchestra of harmonicas.

WAR & PEACE

Achilles hunts down Hector like a sparrowhawk
Screeching after a horror-struck collared-dove
That flails just in front of her executioner, so
Hector strains under the walls of Troy to stay alive.
Past the windbent wild fig tree and the lookout
Post they both accelerate away from the town
Along a cart-track as far as double well-heads
That gush into the eddying Scamander, in one
Warm water steaming like smoke from a bonfire,
The other running cold as hailstones, snow water,
Handy for the laundry-cisterns carved out of stone
Where Trojan housewives and their pretty daughters
Used to rinse glistening clothes in the good old days,
On washdays before the Greek soldiers came to Troy.

IN NOTRE-DAME

When I go back into the cathedral to check
If the candle I lit for you is still burning,
I encounter Job squatting on his dunghill
(Can those be cowrie-shell fossils in the stone?
No. Imagine imagining and carving turds
At eye-level for our sorry edification!)
Such tiny figures make my own body feel huge
And fleshy and hopeless inside the doorway.
In my voice-box the penitents and pickpockets
Murmuring in hundreds down the aisles find room.
Each mouth is a cathedral for the god-crumbs.
Where is the holy water, the snow water for Job?
All of our eyes are broken rose windows.
Your candle sings the eyelashes of morning.

A NORWEGIAN WEDDING

Because the Leprosy Museum is still closed
We find ourselves in St Olaf's, eavesdropping
On a Norwegian wedding. The Lutheran light
Picks us out from among the small congregation.
How few friends anyone has. I'm glad we came.
Christ holds his hands up high above the lovers
And fits his death into the narrow window. Oh,
His sore hands. How many friends does a leper have?
Bride and bridegroom walk past us and into the rain.
It is mid-May. All of the roads out of Bergen
Are bordered with lady's smock and wood anemones.

MONTALE'S DOVE

He writes about a dove that flies away from him
Between the pillars of Ely Cathedral—wing
Clatter and aphrodisiac burbling as well as
Sepulchral knick-knack—a lover's soul escaping.

After a life-time of honey-coloured sunlight
He craves darkness—not death exactly but a nest
Perhaps, a hole in the religious masonry
For resurrection under a smouldering breast.

He doesn't mention how the stained-glass windows
Make walls a momentary rainbow patchwork if
The sun is shining: instead he lets one white feather
Drift among terrible faces up in the roof.

HERON

in memory of Kenneth Koch

You died the day I was driving to Carrigskeewaun
 (A remote townland in County Mayo, I explain,
 Meaning, so far as I know, The Rock of the Wall Fern)
 And although it was the wettest Irish year I got the car
 Across the river and through the tide with groceries
 And laundry for my fortnight among the waterbirds.
 If I'd known you were dying, Kenneth, I'd have packed
 Into cardboard boxes all your plays and poems as well
 And added to curlew and lapwing anxiety-calls
 The lyric intensity of your New York Jewish laughter.
 You would have loved the sandy drive over the duach
 ('The what?'), over the machair ('the what?'), the drive
 Through the white gate-posts and the galvanized gate
 Tied with red string, the starlings' sleeping quarters,
 The drive towards turf-fired hilarity and disbelief,
 'Where are all those otters, Longley, and all those hares?
 I see only sparrows here and house sparrows at that!'
 You are so tall and skinny I shall conscript a heron
 To watch over you on hang-glider wings, old soldier,
 An ashy heron, *ardea cinerea*, I remind you
 (A pedant neither smallminded nor halfhearted):
 'And *cinerarius*?': a slave who heats the iron tongs
 In hot ashes for the hair-dresser, a hair-curler
 Who will look after every hair on your curly head.
 That afternoon was your night-season. I didn't know.
 I didn't know that your were 'poured out like water
 And all your bones were out of joint'. I didn't know.
 Tuck your head in like a heron and trail behind you
 Your long legs, take to the air above a townland
 That encloses Carrigskeewaun and Central Park.