

Autumn Villanelle

The bright days flicker out like memories,
We do not know the joys they take away.
September has put blight into the trees.

The wind is sweeping up the fallen leaves,
It seems like everything they have their day.
The bright days flicker out like memories.

Within the holly-bush a blackbird grieves,
Across the park the children's voices say
September has put blight into the trees.

The swallows have departed overseas
And exiled hearts have followed on their way,
The bright days flicker out like memories.

The seagulls glide and swoop with perfect ease
And mock imprisoned limbs that once could play.
September has put blight into the trees.

Yet Autumn cures our April's old disease,
Which prodigal, has learnt to hoard the day,
Though bright days flicker out like memories,
September has put blight into the trees.

TIMOTHY BROWNLOW

The trees of the forest

Stag on the westward ridge, melodious
 One, clamourer with your high notes
 Of point and tine. Below, the roe-bucks
 Are grazing in a dappled row.

Oak, mighty one, my shelterer,
 I lie beneath you, acorn in shell.
 Crush of your bark will cure a mastoid,
 Swine root among the years of mast.

The water-willow is never hostile.
 I pull down wetness, cross green stile,
 Frail blossom of the catkin. Baskets
 Are woven, supple as your sap.

The wicked blackthorn, claws sharp as Pangur
 Baun's. Each prickle is a pang,
 Appetite has been well sustained by
 Those berries, juicy, darksome, stainful.

The yew-tree, gloomer in churchyard. Coffins
 Go under it, funereal cough.
 The yewy yew thickens: a sturdy
 One. Winds blow strong. It is unstirred.

Aspen, the trembler, leaves a-racing
 Fast as competitions in Thrace.
 I hear within it the sound of fray.
 That whispering makes me afraid.

Hateful the ash, a nub for chariot.
 Let every branch above be charred.
 Avoid the ash that brings contention,
 Quarrel on chessboard, blows in tent.

Apple tree shaken by many hands,
 Wide spreader out of pink bloom, handsome
 One. Bark for tanning, wealth in garden.
 Sweet crop that every man must guard.

Elder that women strain, boil twice,
 The bark will dry the pus in boil.
 Out of the flowers will come a greenness.
 Dyers make the dark and the pale be seen.

Holly, cold light in woods, silver
 As winter moon, icedrip from sill,
 The leaves are fierce and disagreeable
 Although they glitter like filagree.

Pleasant the whiteness of the May,
 I smell and pluck it while I may,
 Go by it in the twilight, listen
 To music coming from rath and liss.

Pleasant, also, the lofty beech
 That comes down to the river beach.
 Under the shady shade, I drag
 My weariness, sore-footed, bedraggled.

Briar, deceitful friend, you hold me
 With tiny fingers, unholy one,
 Drawing a drop from small or big vein.
 I jump away. Your tricks are vain.

Birch, the smooth, the blessed, sent down
 From Heaven, with summer grace and scent,
 Delicate one: breezes are leaving
 Half of your sweetness with other leaves.

Dear hazel, bring an end to my story,
 Pantry of plenty, my winter store.
 Sweet, sweet, is the brown-covered kernel:
 Good bite for gallowglass and kern.

Stag of the topmost ridge, melodious
 One, clamourer with your high nodes
 Of point and tine. Below, the roe-bucks
 Are grazing in a dappled row.

This translation is from 'The Frenzy of Sweeney', a Middle-Irish story, in prose and verse, of a king who was cursed by a saint and wandered in madness through the woods.

AUSTIN CLARKE

At The World's Fair

The Admiral of the ocean Sea —
 The copies of his ships
 Were in the wharf that boundaried
 This, The World's Fair.

Through crowd that paid for sessions here
 Their toll, we made our way
 To ships that had one sacred name,
 And two not sacred near.

Two of us three went on the ships
 Nina and Pinta named:
 I went upon the ship that bore
 Sancta Maria's name.

I marvelled when I came to view
 The instruments were there:
 A double skill in every one:
 Copyist's and first hand's.

And then I went to deck below
 Where seamen, watches past
 Went down to where were no commands —
 Mate, bo'sun, cabin-boy.

From ceiling in long corridor
 Hung cages, copies, too
 For singing-birds the mariners
 Had brought from neighbourhoods.

And when the ships left Tenerife,
 To sail the ocean main,
 Where even sea-birds stayed behind,
 They heard the village songs —

Bo'sun and mate and cabin-boy,
 Heard them, the thrush, the wren,
 The blackbird and the linnet, too —
 No birds could better them.

The longing of some sailor-man
Came to me like a dream.
A magic circle closed me round:
I heard a linnet's song.

I turned to her, my own dear love,
And said 'So we will go
Even to that far and foreign land
With songs that we once heard

In hedge, o'er field, in grove, in glen,
When we had summer's part.'
Then the songs ceased that bo'sun, mate,
And cabin-boy had heard.

I stood upon the copied deck
To look upon the Fair.
She was not in the Fair, the World's,
Nor never would be there.

PADRAIC COLUM

Love Poem

Last night on the hill
When the birds were not looking
And the priests were saying Mass
I saw two men with steel bars
• Breaking you to Heaven.

And to-day in God's house
When the Prefect mentioned your name
And the killers took Holy Communion
I saw you standing at the altar rail
With blood in your mouth.

Now they will bury you
And I shall not attend Mass again
Or go to Confession.
I do this, my love,
In remembrance of you.

PATRICK GALVIN

Something to say

(Dialogue between Thomas Carlyle and Lewis Carroll)

T.C. 'Would you care to explain
Why they fight for your books
With already too many
Tight-packed on their shelves
(Many hundreds of thousands
Or hundreds of millions)
As though you had written
Those few for themselves?'

L.C. 'In reply to your query:
I wrote for one reason
And only one reason
(That being my way):
Not for fame, not for glory,
Not yet for distraction,
But oddly enough
I had something to say.'

T.C. 'So you wrote for one reason?
Be damned to that reason!
It may sound pretty fine
But relinquish it, pray!
There are preachers in pulpits
And urchins in playgrounds
And fools in asylums
And beggars in corners
And drunkards in gutters
And bandits in prisons
With all the right reasons
For something to say.'

ROBERT GRAVES

Nocturne

There is no reticence about the owl,
That inconsistent bird,
No rhythm in her interruptions,
No rhyme nor reason in the chilling voice
With which she cuts my sleep,
Or wavers mocking through my mind:
Hers is a cold, inconstant influence.

There is no reticence about my thoughts,
Those inconsistent coils,
That never reach conclusion,
But spiralling return
To wind undone the done,
And twine, too late, their knots of doing otherwise:
Theirs is a self-deriding influence.

But now the music of the small birds' song
Runs like a ripple up the edge of night
And, as the dark grows faint,
Your listening head can almost be discerned,
That heard the fox's bark, and caught the badger's
cry,
And shares with me this music of the birds:
Near as the morning is your influence.

BRYAN GUINNESS

Parallels never meet

Events in my native province now
twist my heart, threatening
any future I had planned.

To find focus for my hurt
I thrust all back into a remote setting,
dressing the circumstances
in the properties of antiquity,
allegorising the actions and the actors
drawing Peloponnesian parallels
for the arrogant soothsayer,
the ambitious knave, the blundering buffoon,
the just man without courage,
and the shouting crowds.

But they trip and flounder in their togas,
the classical names inappropriate,
deflecting by their associations and resonance.

Reality is of a coarser texture.
The scene collapses, lath and canvas.

But the heartbreak remains;
the violence and the hate are palpable,
the flames blacken and consume,
the wounds weep real blood,
and the future is not to be foretold.

JOHN HEWITT

The search

We left the western island to live among strangers
in a city older by centuries
than the market town which we had come from
where the slow river spills out between green hills
and gulls perch on the bannered poles.

It is a hard responsibility to be a stranger,
to hear your speech sounding at odds with your neighbours;
holding your tongue from quick comparisons,
remembering that you are a guest in the house.

Often you will regret the voyage,
wakening in the dark night to recall that other place
or glimpsing the moon rising and recollecting
that it is also rising over named hills
shining on known waters.

But sometimes the thought
that you have not come away from, but returned
to this older place whose landmarks are yours also,
occurs when you look down a long street remarking
the architectural styles or move through a landscape
with wheat ripening in large fields.

Yet you may not rest here, having come back,
for this is not your abiding place, either.

The authorities declare that in former days
the western island was uninhabited
just as where you reside now was once Tundra,
and what you seek may be no more than
a broken circle of stones on a rough hillside, somewhere.

JOHN HEWITT

The given days

I have noticed in the middle of winter
 When it seemed the cold would never relent
 Days that God had borrowed from summer
 And given to us at the proper moment.
 How strange then to walk out in the morning
 To witness a transfigured element,
 Friendly air and pigeons drifting
 To perch on the head of a warm monument.
 I understand but little of such mercy
 And in fact I do not forget the cold,
 The nightmare dark, the familiar cries,
 But accept what is given from God's plenty,
 Sparrows pranking in silvery pools, gold
 Light on buildings, pity in the skies.

Questions and answers

Religion class. Moriarty taught us God
 While he heated his arse to a winter fire
 Testing with his fingers the supple sallyrod.
 'Explain the Immaculate Conception, Maguire,
 And tell us then about the Mystical Blood.'
 Maguire failed. Moriarty covered the boy's head
 With his satchel, shoved him stumbling among
 The desks, lashed his bare legs until they bled.

'Who goes to hell, Dineen? Kane, what's a saint?
 Doolin, what constitutes a mortal sin?
 Flynn, what of the man who calls his brother a fool?'
 Years killed raving questions. Kane stomped around Dublin
 In policeman's boots. Flynn was afraid of himself.
 Maguire did well out of whores in Liverpool.

BRENDAN KENNELLY

Mountain swim

Hilltop and valley floor we sway between,
 Our bodies sustained as by a hammock,
 Our nakedness water stretched on stone,

One with the shepherd's distant whistle,
 The hawk lifted on its thermal, the hare
 Asleep in its excrement like a child.

Beside the seaside

1

The whole scene I reduce to a postcard
 Which will put me in mind of the seaside,

Or else I dissolve it in my mouth like
 The red letters in a stick of rock —

This is the trip my midnight bathers take,
 This is where pier and promenade embark.

2

Indeed, I wish I was there to prove
 The effluence of the splintered tide,
 The fun palace's darkening arcade,

Or to tune in to that submarine
 Hearsay — the noises-off which sailors even
 And men on the land catch nothing of.

MICHAEL LONGLEY

Game

I am a tall chap
 And more than four.
 Sing. Push.
 Long stride into the back door.
 My hands are sandy:
 Dry sort of grit.
 The green soldier
 Is buried in the pit.
 This is what
 The fingerwork was for:
 I put him down there.
 It was war.

Ignition failure

I move in close to me
 to lazy bleary eye
 to droopy sock
 to crooked tie
 to hair a little greasy and
 to skin
 a little stale,
 I say to this
 'Perplex me with a touch of mystery,
 Astonish me with some rich history,
 Display some energy,
 Come on up out of that!'
 Of course,
 in spite of these admonishments,
 My lips stay squeezed in dim disparagement.
 My heart?
 My heart remains
 quite cold
 quite flat.

SÉAN LUCY

Men of destiny

This pierhead is his globe where
 in the paint the sea becomes
 a quilt of colour; light ebbs
 on the sill of far islands
 glowing, rare as ebony.

Their smack is stitched to the tide.
 Like a wrecked sea the pier swims
 in viscid oil. The flags burn
 under their feet when they land
 like fishes, gasp at the play.

No title; no deed

If the hill's a flight of steps
 it leads to the lichened sky.
 He is sitting on the well
 and the white horse is lapping
 him, half way to the castle.

There is no night; he is break-
 ing in sleep. The castle is
 dimly lit and the sky aches.
 Water flows from his sides;
 his cupped hands are empty.

HUGH MAXTON

Bris Mo Chree

There is a brooding hill in Ireland
 Whose top was fashioned by an ancient hand
 Into a ringed fort held by a ramp
 Of clay that crumbles from the perfect stamp
 Of other days when pride within the court
 Would never have let whin clumps mar the fort.

A plough upturned a pagan burial urn
 That lay dark centuries for hand to turn
 To daylight dust and ash remains of bone
 And flesh a man with soul who worked with stone
 Whose people were by custom strictly bound
 To burn the dead and put them on high ground.

A legend tells how once a rapparee
 Gave his last breath to name it Bris Mo Chree
 When hard pressed by the law above the glen
 With loot tried hard to reach his refuge den
 But felt the bullet end his run of luck
 And uttered loud the gaelic and it stuck.

In hungry years the locals dug the glen
 For gold of legendary little men
 Led on by dreams that made their senses nod
 Imagining they knew the very sod
 Where lay the pot beside a fairy tree
 Within a shadow cast by Bris Mo Chree.

They turned against the barren fatherland
 And sought hope where whole brimming shiploads
 clanned
 With other nations taken to the heart
 With promises of plenty, a fresh start
 But few returned to see the cherished old
 Or kill the legend with a laugh of gold.

PATRICK McCANN

Sunday in Winter

I arrived down from Dublin in the morning
When the last Mass had just ended
And the rain had almost ended
And the trees shook huge drops
On the brown sodden leaves below.
Outside the church the people moved away
Into the winter that was hanging in the sky
And seemed to touch the covered heads
With limp wet silence.
The priest moved alone through the old gravestones
That stood upright like stone pagan gods.
Dinner with relations was strange
But the food was hot and the rain had stopped
And I could hear the sea quite close
Although the windows rattled in the wind
And the wireless was loud.
The rain came again in the late afternoon
While I walked along the long empty beach
My feet sank deep if I stood near the sea
And the wet sand squashed through my toes
And the rain was running down my face
And slid down my neck in rivers of ice.
Back in the house my clothes were dried by the fire
While I drank hot tea and ate thick bread
And hard cold tomatoes.
Talk wasn't easy but the faces were friendly
And I sat by the fire in an old pair of trousers
And an oilstained jumper with holes in the sleeves
And curled my toes to the flames.

JUSTIN MCCARTHY

Tempe

Neither myrtle nor rock-rose,
 No warmth nor sun;
 Ice shafts come hoarsely crying
 from Ossa, Olympia, Helicon;
 Here where the Muses lived,
 By Daphne's fountain.
 Vanished is Flaxman's picture
 of holy inspiring Immortals.
 Human flesh for their worship;
 The roots of life
 Nourished by life-stripped offering
 to kindle the spoil of Prometheus.
 These the attendants of Wisdom,
 Memory's daughters;
 Savager far than the Ancients
 dared to record for the future.
 Urania laughs today —
 Man's planet-hunger
 Preparing worthy hecatombs
 to assuage life-burning Melpmene.
 Only by resurrection
 Shall Vale of Tempe
 Wheel earth's metamorphosis
 to summer of human maturity.

HUGH MCKINLEY

The poet's request

I ask for a thatched house
 swept spick and span;
 not a hut for dogs or cattle
 but dignified in welcome.
 I ask for a high chair
 comfortably lined with down.

from an early (pre-eighth century) legal tract

Partholan's wife

According to *Leabhar Gabhála*, the Book of Conquests, the *second* invasion of Ireland, after the Flood, was by Partholan, whose wife's conduct anticipates the freedom of the Brehon laws.

Partholan went out one day
 To tour his widespread lands;
 Leaving his wife and servant,
 Both bound by his commands.

Long they waited in his house,
 Until the lady, feeling desperate —
 A state before unheard of —
 Propositioned the pure servant.

Rightly he ignored her,
 Stubborn against temptation,
 Until she removed her clothes:
 Strange work for a dacent woman!

Then, so frail is humanity,
 Topa rose without doubt,
 And joined the lovely Delgnat,
 Lonely upon her couch.

Wise Partholan possessed
 A vat of ale, sweet and cool,
 From which none might drink
 Save through a golden spigot.

Thirsty after their action,
 Topa and Delgnat, truth to tell,
 Leaned from bed so urgently
 Their mouths met on the barrel.

When Partholan returned
 From wandering his wide fields
 A surly black demon revealed
 The stains on the golden tube.

'Look, the track of the mouth
 Of Topa, as low down as this,
 And beside it, the smear left
 By married Delgnat's kiss!'

Whereupon his wife replied:
 'Surely the right to complain
 Is mine, innocently left
 To confront another man.

Honey with a woman, milk with a cat,
 A sharp tool with a craftsman,
 Food with a child or spendthrift:
 Never couple things like that.

The woman will eat the honey,
 The cat lap the new milk,
 While the child eats the food
 Not bestowed by the spendthrift.

The craftsman will use the tool,
 Because one and one make two:
 So never leave your belongings
 Long unguarded, without you!'

That is the first adultery
 To be heard of in Ireland.
 Likewise the first lawcase:

THE RIGHT OF HIS WIFE AGAINST
 PARTHOLAN.

from the eleventh-century Irish

JOHN MONTAGUE

Here are roses

Here are roses, the reluctant heart
 Dragged through the gamut of pain
 Endured, comes back to,
 Long years as naught.
Roses, like the first rose,
 Damask, dark, in a sunny garden,
 Given by an old woman to a child
 Who drank the scent to nothing.

Here are roses, *rosa centifolia*,
 Floppy cabbage roses, in hedges,
 And Zephrine Drouhin, of
 A wild garden in Offaly,
 (A girl's voice counterpoints that tale
 With talk of an orchard in Wales).
 O, drink them, drink them, now
 As then, in dew as in rain.

Never mind the voices raised against them
 Who would weave round even roses
 Webs of delicate abstinent abstraction —
 Where would the voices themselves be,
 Had we not always chosen
 The rose instead of reason?
 Roses remain, though gardens are unmade,
 Here are roses, roses, in rain, as in sun.

LORNA REYNOLDS