

Six Poems

Mairéad Byrne

["Briathra Comonta sa Teanga" and "The Pillar" originally appeared in The *Seneca* Review.]

GROOMING

I brush with your father's soft silver brush,
which you love, for it smoothens the surface,
asks no questions, like his hands, hurriedly
settling, before lighting a cigarette.

Then with my brush, which you hate, difficult
fingers rake, immune to your cries, insistent
on manifest destiny, *idée fixe*
of encroachment, *I will know, I will know.*

I take up the fine tooth comb, snout nosing
blankly along white runnels of scalp, north
to south, snuffling for inroads, thrust back
again and again by covert refusal of hair.

I change tack, airlift from the interior,
send foot patrols out, skirmishing on the perimeter,
stalking unfurrowed brow, skirting the pools
your forehead exudes — your hairline presses
out beads like the crowns of the princesses
you draw — as silence falls down

and I come to the delicate country
at the back of your neck, my Burren flower,
damp tropics at the down-covered nape,
my only one, exposing the mauvish inlet,
naïve skin, candid hollow (which took
such ages to cover) to risk of the sun.

I lift molten strands, copper straps, ox-blood
ribbons, I sift and I pin, caught in the task
of placement, displacement, separation
a dream that evades until,
abandoning instruments, I plunge in,
I handle your warm weight of hair,
rummage through it, meditative as a cat

remembering the ache of this head, or
was it this head, under my ribs before
birth, then the rudeness of passage
and after, when it still needed propping,
already turned from me, neck red and stunned
with milk, this head which I almost own!

*remembering long afternoons in the schoolroom,
slow storage of heat from high windows
hair heavy as a hat on my listening head*

lulled now, resistance to blunt finger-tip
fades to nudge slips to shift at my touch

I unfold skein after skein, layer loosing
layer, lustrous fiber, tessellation
sans syntax, blonde heliograph, amber
chatter, criss-cross of russet on gold,
burnished chaos, semiotics of shafts'
gleam and glint, now, at its most maddening,
the hair opens up to me,
yields from its mass the particular
rhythm of the singular hair
like a poem from debris of drafts
child from the pit of birth
it seems that at last I can know
one living hair of your head, for nothing
to the diligent expert is impossible,
my consort my familiar my mate.

At night you lie finished beside me,
heaped on our bed, sculpted
in light from uncurtained windows,
inviolate as marble,
anointed at forehead and throat
with the rank oil of the mother,
sleep clothing each exit and entrance
that morning gives access to —

the imperious voice has turned in,
imperious finger that points
to this button, that nail,
collaborative silence that submits
to my stroking, fastidious
naming of parts —

And still your fingers furl towards me,
still the incessant winking of time,
involuntary donorship of parts.
I trade my red meat for all your soft substances,
your harvests of hair and skin.
You repay your debts in scales and secretions
and a threat (that you will always sleep with me),
your blood pulsing onward as I relapse

afraid to look at your milk-teeth
to mark the first signs of decay

And still your fingers furl towards me,
while your head, hair tied tightly back,
bent in dream, explodes on a vision
of Adam and Niamh, as you hear it,
gallantly naked and riding the waves,
Niamh's golden hair whipping round them,
astride her white mare and galloping
from Eden to Beann Éadair, Howth,
from Paradise to the Land of Youth.

The bright diadem breaks out!
You sort through the myths I have funneled you
for fear you might think I am God.

A TYPICAL IRISH COTTAGE

This is of Ireland
the holy land of Ireland
where the blue of the sky is the bluest blue
and the white of the wash is the whitest wash
and the gold of the thatch is the goldest gold
and the plants on the sill are the most planted plants
and the black hole of no-door the blackest of holes
and the unworn track to the hole the most unworn track
and the outhouse which props gable wall fairly shouts
that the animals one and all have moved out
and the confusion of speedwell buttercup on the grass
goes to prove that nobody tends this land
and the word *lawn* is foreign to us all.

At the back of our cot with its rainbarrell
plop and the crack of cement gutter's drip
and its drop and its struts rusted outlet
flattened twine in the muck empty
drum plastic crap corrugation
of the old counterey rise the fields,
fall the fields, heave away
from your back, with their harvest of rock
held in thrall to the wind spread
and spilling out of sight
to the blue of the blue Mediterranean sea.

And to the right, don't you know,
in brown and dun, *nach chín tu*,
the freshly turfed out standing by and keening
children's faces smothered in their skirts
and the passivity of dangling hand
and the rhythm of the ram
back and forth back and forth
making of the whole house a door

to pass through and go down
in your shoes with your sacks
down the track to the cove
take the boat to the port
to the ships with their holds
deep down in the wet grey sea

And to the left, smug and neutral,
a beige car tucks under
the bothán's pig-eye, prow
pointed east or west or anywhere
but here

from THE PILLAR

"I am now only a captain but I will, if I live, be at the top of the tree."
Horatio Nelson to Sir William Hamilton

Clouds scud, what else, in the grey sky, and yes,
gulls hang all the way out, to the bay, I guess,
the river neck, and the sky lets loose
bannerfuls of rain, hail, snow, tumbleweeds
of darkness, cold; that old familiar drizzle
emptying the dawn, down all the days,
the yellow city nights; and his head sleek
like a lizard, like a cobra, like a basilisk
inserted in our heavens, in the bells'
clamor, clangor, Nelson, lord of us all.

We were low, no supposing, low-down in our boots,
battering past the pillar's base, clattering into this ravine
or that, clip-clopping up the gulch of North Earl
Street, step after step lapping at the shop-fronts
like a tide coming in, inexorable, not to be baulked.
Dwarfed by the buildings of what was Sackville,
then O'Connell, stranded now, the hug of the crowd
slackened, light-headed, wondering *where's me bus* and
which side of the road am I on, stunned to find life
in the shape of big lit buses, tattered queues, going on;
ready to plunge at the drop of a hat or a hand into a blue
funk or stock taken, bearings found, Henry Street,
the gorge chock-a-block, rain melting down its windows,
and the women's rough mouths like O's roaring *Toblerone* or
Get the last of this or that *Cheeky Charlies* don't you know
the whole street rocking underneath the red and yellow shock
of neon on its bedrock of black and the double bass of feet thudding
all the way down to Mary Street, the smell of wet fur.
So this was *dubh le daoine* and we were shoulder to shoulder
ag baint dhá thaobh den bóthar, drink or no drink, for sure,
we were *íseal*, right enough, as *íseal* as *íseal* could be
beneath our *uasal*, casting his long shadow on us, and we
in our stew, in our soup, in our mate and potatoes mess.

**BRIATHRA COMONTA SA TEANGA /
COMMON VERBS IN THE LANGUAGE**

Adhlacaim I bury
Adhmhaim I admit
Agraim I avenge
Aimsim I aim
Ainmnim I name
Aiséirim I rise again
Aistrim I change, translate
Aithrisim I recite, imitate
Athscriobhaim I rewrite
Athbheoim I revive
Atógaim I reconstruct

Bailim I gather
Baistim I baptize
Beannaim I bless
Beathaim I feed
Beoim I quicken
Blím I milk
Bogaim I loosen, soften
Bronnaim I bestow
Buaim I win

Caillim I lose
Cainin I abuse
Canaim I sing
Caoinim I weep
Casaim I turn, twist
Ceanglaim I fasten, tie
Céilim I conceal
Ciontaim I convict
Clisim I fail
Clóim I overcome
Clúdam I cover
Cnagaim I strike
Cnuasaim I gather
Coimeadam I keep
Coisricim I bless
Cosnam I defend
Cothaim I feed
Cráim I torment
Creidim I believe
Crithim I tremble
Crochaim I hang
Croithim I shake
Cruaim I harden
Crúim I milk
Cruinnim I gather
Cuimhnim I remember
Cumaim I compose, I shape

Dearbhairm I swear
Deimhnim I affirm
Dibrim I banish
Dirim I aim
Diultaim I refuse
Dóim I burn
Doirtim I pour out
Dreoim I wither, rot

Éagaim I die
Éalaim I escape
Eirim I rise
Eitlim I fly

Fágaim I leave
Fánaim I stay
Fiafraim I ask
Fillim I return
Fiosraim I inquire
Foghlaimim I learn
Freastalaim I wait upon

Geallaim I promise
Géillim I submit
Glacaim I accept
Glaeim I shout out
Gléasaim I harness
Goidim I steal
Goinim I wound
Goirtim I hurt
Greaimim I grip
Gúim I pray, beseech

Iarraim I ask, seek

There is no j in the Irish language.
There is no k in the Irish language.

Labhairim I speak

SOLD AT CHRISTIES

May 21st, 1898

ST. ANNE. Panel, 2 ft. 1 in. X 1 ft. 1 in.

Small full-length figure of the saint, facing, looking to the right, holding a book in her left hand, her right hand raised.

TO S. T. Gooden, 57, Pall Mall.

ST. SISINNIUS. Panel, 2 ft. 1 in. X 1 ft. 1 in.

Small full-length figure of the saint, standing facing head to the right, in red and green deacon's dress, holding palm in right hand, and book in left.

TO C. F. Murray, 17, Shaftesbury Road, Hammersmith.

ST. ALEXANDER. Panel, 2ft. 1 in. X 1 ft. 1 in.

Small full-length figure of the saint, standing facing in green dress and red cloak, banner with red cross in right hand, and palm in left.

TO Colnaghi, 13, Pall Mall East.

ST. CATHARINE OF ALEXANDRIA. Panel, 2 ft. 1 in. X 1 ft. 1 in.

Small full-length figure of the saint, facing, looking to the left, in green dress and red cloak, palm branch and book in right hand, her left resting on wheel.

TO Agnews.

i.m. Bernadino Luini

TRAVELLING TO ERASE TWO MINUSES

Muskrat I might have thought at first
after *slick cobbles*
coffee-grounds

Then there they were:
two iron bars in the snow

no use pretending they were
eyelashes or
dandruff
— try knocking iron bars
off your neck —

contemporary sculpture perhaps

or what the gangly sculptor set up

or what the gangly sculptor forgot

was meant to send a truck round to collect

what should have been erect

The verbs which came to mind were *flung pitched*
implacable the adjective

(For a noun: try *gravity*)

There was no sound

Something sacral occurred
I would have knelt

But the students were breaking loose from knitted clumps
they were jiggling in little eddies
breasting from their jetties
they were coming at me
safe in the turrets of their winter clothes
shoving silence like a colossal snowball before them

They had me in their crosshairs

I thought of Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*
the book in the college library with that page torn out

They were woollen, very wrappt

I was scared and shouted
The snow will erase them
No need to call me out

But they were having none of it and advanced
Looking terribly American and blank

The sky and the town went out

I had stepped back into my own kiosk

Snowflakes puckered their fishlips at me
dished out kisses hard and fast
some would say *scorching*
some *cold*
I would have to say *beaky*
not at all like band-aids stripped
or grazing
more like clean cartilage
pressed
There was a transparency

Everything was coldening

The sky had decanted all its blue

We were very high

I was hot under the collar
hot and bothered
wishing I was a dog's hind leg
or a pint of whiskey —
anything that melts

By now all I could see was blue eyes

By this time I was sweating

So —
I pulled off my mittens
and my gloves
my gloves and my mittens
and my gloves
I pulled off my gloves with my tight teeth
my zigzag Peruvian gloves
my oiled wool mittens
my mittens with very tricky stitches
my gloves with knobs
my mittens with tictac seams
and the fur poking out
my thin and thick gloves
and my mittens

all the while fixing with one steel eye the students

I had a pen, forms in triplicate, a sense of my own efficacy let's say

I did my thing, passed my hands over
the iron bars in the snow
before witnesses
licked my stub
signed —

There I say
turning to the students
but already they're backing away
becoming less woollen, more grey
the very opposite to *let warm wind feather*
with wet plumage through my rooms

more like a certain type of fog (clammy)

or the skirts of an oxidized bell

the pattern on a slick cloth jerked by a conjuror

then the whole scene passed away:

the students in their zippy jackets, brown and purple knit caps
with flaps, skinned noses tinted pink, open mouths filling with snow

Then the sky is restored
azure brushed thick
and the town is humming again

and I am high above it

stamping, clapping my arms
snowflakes descending like rafts
and Wallace Stevens' cat
a black *smudge*
an *ember*
charcoal scintilla
an *ash*
padding off across the snow
into the campus' dim heart
two minuses upright

Mairéad Byrne

Mairéad Byrne is the author of *Talk Poetry* (Miami University Press 2007), *SOS Poetry* (ubu Editions 2007), and *Nelson & The Huruburu Bird* (Wild Honey Press 2003); and chapbooks including *State House Calendar* (Dusie Kollektiv 2008), *Vivas* (Wild Honey Press 2005), *An Educated Heart* (Palm Press 2005) and *Kalends* (Belladonna 2005). She hosts a monthly reading/performance series, *couscous@tazza*, in Providence and is an Associate Professor of English at Rhode Island School of Design.

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