

Michael Longley

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

No Continuing City
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Man Lying on a Wall
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Poems 1963–1983
Gorse Fires
The Ghost Orchid
Selected Poems
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AS EDITOR

Causeway: The Arts in Ulster
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20th-Century Irish Poems

COLLECTED POEMS

Michael Longley

CAPE POETRY

WORDS FOR JAZZ PERHAPS

for Solly Lipsitz

Elegy for Fats Waller

Lighting up, lest all our hearts should break,
His fiftieth cigarette of the day,
Happy with so many notes at his beck
And call, he sits there taking it away,
The maker of immaculate slapstick.

With music and with such precise rampage
Across the deserts of the blues a trail
He blazes, towards the one true mirage,
Enormous on a nimble-footed camel
And almost refusing to be his age.

He plays for hours on end and though there be
Oases one part water, two parts gin,
He tumbles past to reign, wise and thirsty,
At the still centre of his loud dominion –
THE SHOOK THE SHAKE THE SHEIKH OF ARABY.

Bud Freeman in Belfast

Fog horn and factory siren intercept
Each fragile hoarded-up refrain. What else
Is there to do but let those notes erupt

Until your fading last glissando settles
Among all other sounds – carefully wrapped
In the cotton wool from aspirin bottles?

To Bessie Smith

You bring from Chattanooga Tennessee
Your huge voice to the back of my mind
Where, like sea shells salvaged from the sea
As bright reminders of a few weeks' stay,
Some random notes are all I ever find.
I couldn't play your records every day.

I think of Tra-na-rossan, Inisheer,
Of Harris drenched by horizontal rain –
Those landscapes I must visit year by year.
I do not live with sounds so seasonal
Nor set up house for good. Your blues contain
Each longed-for holiday, each terminal.

To Bix Beiderbecke

In hotel rooms, in digs you went to school.
These dead were voices from the floor below
Who filled like an empty room your skull,

Who shared your perpetual one-night stand
– The havoc there, and the manoeuvrings! –
Each coloured hero with his instrument.

You were bound with one original theme
To compose in your head your terminus,
Or to improvise with the best of them

That parabola from blues to barrelhouse.

To exercise in metaphor
Our knockings at the basement door,
A ramrod mounted to invade
The vulva, Hades' palisade,
The Gates of Horn and Ivory
Or the Walls of Londonderry.

To Derek Mahon

And did we come into our own
When, minus muse and lexicon,
We traced in August sixty-nine
Our imaginary Peace Line
Around the burnt-out houses of
The Catholics we'd scarcely loved,
Two Sisyphuses come to budge
The sticks and stones of an old grudge,

Two poetic conservatives
In the city of guns and long knives,
Our ears receiving then and there
The stereophonic nightmare
Of the Shankill and the Falls,
Our matches struck on crumbling walls
To light us as we moved at last
Through the back alleys of Belfast?

Why it mattered to have you here
You who journeyed to Inisheer
With me, years back, one Easter when
With MacIntyre and the lone Dane

Our footsteps lifted up the larks
Echoing off those western rocks
And down that darkening arcade
Hung with the failures of our trade,

Will understand. We were tongue-tied
Companions of the island's dead
In the graveyard among the dunes,
Eavesdroppers on conversations
With a Jesus who spoke Irish –
We were strangers in that parish,
Black tea with bacon and cabbage
For our sacraments and pottage,

Dank blankets making up our Lent
Till, islanders ourselves, we bent
Our knees and cut the watery sod
From the lazy-bed where slept a God
We couldn't count among our friends,
Although we'd taken in our hands
Splinters of driftwood nailed and stuck
On the rim of the Atlantic.

That was Good Friday years ago –
How persistent the undertow
Slapped by currachs ferrying stones,
Moonlight glossing the confusions
Of its each bilingual wave – yes,
We would have lingered there for less . . .
Six islanders for a ten-bob note
Rowed us out to the anchored boat.

To Seamus Heaney

From Carrigskeewaun in Killadoon
I write, although I'll see you soon,
Hoping this fortnight detonates
Your year in the United States,
Offering you by way of welcome
To the sick counties we call home
The mystical point at which I tire
Of Calor gas and a turf fire.

Till we talk again in Belfast
Pleasanter far to leave the past
Across three acres and two brooks
On holiday in a post box
Which dripping fuchsia bells surround,
Its back to the prevailing wind,
And where sanderlings from Iceland
Court the breakers, take my stand,

Disinfecting with a purer air
That small subconscious cottage where
The Irish poet slams his door
On slow-worm, toad and adder:
Beneath these racing skies it is
A tempting stance indeed – *ipsis*
Hibernicis hiberniores –
Except that we know the old stories,

The midden of cracked hurley sticks
Tied to recall the crucifix,
Of broken bones and lost scruples,
The blackened hearth, the blazing gable's
Telltale cinder where we may
Scorch our shins until that day
We sleepwalk through a No Man's Land
Lipreading to an Orange band.

Continually, therefore, we rehearse
Goodbyes to all our characters
And, since both would have it both ways,
On the oily roll of calmer seas
Launch coffin-ship and life-boat,
Body with soul thus kept afloat,
Mind open like a half-door
To the speckled hill, the plovers' shore.

So let it be the lapwing's cry
That lodges in the throat as I
Raise its alarum from the mud,
Seeking for your sake to conclude
Ulster Poet our Union Title
And prolong this sad recital
By leaving careful footprints round
A wind-encircled burial mound.

KINDERTOTENLIEDER

There can be no songs for dead children
Near the crazy circle of explosions,
The splintering tangent of the ricochet,

No songs for the children who have become
My unrestricted tenants, fingerprints
Everywhere, teethmarks on this and that.

WOUNDS

Here are two pictures from my father's head –
I have kept them like secrets until now:
First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!'
'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,
Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!'
'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words
Of admiration and bewilderment.
Next comes the London-Scottish padre
Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,
With a stylish backhand and a prayer.
Over a landscape of dead buttocks
My father followed him for fifty years.
At last, a belated casualty,
He said – lead traces flaring till they hurt –
'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'
I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.

Now, with military honours of a kind,
With his badges, his medals like rainbows,
His spinning compass, I bury beside him
Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.
A packet of Woodbines I throw in,
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Paralysed as heavy guns put out
The night-light in a nursery for ever;
Also a bus-conductor's uniform –
He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers
Without a murmur, shot through the head
By a shivering boy who wandered in
Before they could turn the television down
Or tidy away the supper dishes.
To the children, to a bewildered wife,
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

NIGHTMARE

In this dream I am carrying a pig,
Cradling in my arms its deceptive grin,
The comfortable folds of its baby limbs,
The feet coyly disposed like a spaniel's

I am in charge of its delivery,
Taking it somewhere, and feeling oddly
And indissolubly attached to it –
There is nothing I can do about it,

Not even when it bites into my skull
Quite painlessly, and eats my face away,
Its juices corroding my memory,
The chamber of straight lines and purposes,

Until I am carrying everywhere
Always, on a dwindling zig-zag, the pig.

THE FAIRGROUND

There, in her stall between the tattooist
And the fortune-teller, all day she sits –
The fat lady who through a megaphone
Proclaims her measurements and poundage.
Contortionists, sword-swallowers, fire-eaters

As well as a man with no arms or legs
Who rolls his own cigarettes, managing
Tobacco-pouch, paper, the box of matches
With his mouth: painstaking the performance.
He wears his woollens like a sausage-skin.

WREATHS

The Civil Servant

He was preparing an Ulster Fry for breakfast
When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:
A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,
The books he had read, the music he could play.

He lay in his dressing gown and pyjamas
While they dusted the dresser for fingerprints
And then shuffled backwards across the garden
With notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes.

They rolled him up like a red carpet and left
Only a bullet hole in the cutlery drawer:
Later his widow took a hammer and chisel
And removed the black keys from his piano.

The Greengrocer

He ran a good shop, and he died
Serving even the death-dealers
Who found him busy as usual
Behind the counter, organised
With holly wreaths for Christmas,
Fir trees on the pavement outside.

Astrologers or three wise men
Who may shortly be setting out
For a small house up the Shankill
Or the Falls, should pause on their way
To buy gifts at Jim Gibson's shop,
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.

The Linen Workers

Christ's teeth ascended with him into heaven:
Through a cavity in one of his molars
The wind whistles: he is fastened for ever
By his exposed canines to a wintry sky.

I am blinded by the blaze of that smile
And by the memory of my father's false teeth
Brimming in their tumbler: they were bubbles
And, outside of his body, a deadly grin.

When they massacred the ten linen workers
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.

Before I can bury my father once again
I must polish the spectacles, balance them
Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth.

LAST REQUESTS

I

Your batman thought you were buried alive,
Left you for dead and stole your pocket watch
And cigarette case, all he could salvage
From the grave you so neatly had to share
With an unexploded shell. But your lungs
Surfaced to take a long remembered drag,
Heart contradicting as an epitaph
The two initials you had scratched on gold.

THE BUTCHERS

When he had made sure there were no survivors in his house
And that all the suitors were dead, heaped in blood and dust
Like fish that fishermen with fine-meshed nets have hauled
Up gasping for salt water, evaporating in the sunshine,
Odysseus, spattered with muck and like a lion dripping blood
From his chest and cheeks after devouring a farmer's bullock,
Ordered the disloyal housemaids to sponge down the armchairs
And tables, while Telemachos, the oxherd and the swineherd
Scraped the floor with shovels, and then between the portico
And the roundhouse stretched a hawser and hanged the women
So none touched the ground with her toes, like long-winged thrushes
Or doves trapped in a mist-net across the thicket where they roost,
Their heads bobbing in a row, their feet twitching but not for long,
And when they had dragged Melanthios's corpse into the haggard
And cut off his nose and ears and cock and balls, a dog's dinner,
Odysseus, seeing the need for whitewash and disinfectant,
Fumigated the house and the outhouses, so that Hermes
Like a clergyman might wave the supernatural baton
With which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses,
And waken and round up the suitors' souls, and the housemaids',
Like bats gibbering in the nooks of their mysterious cave
When out of the clusters that dangle from the rocky ceiling
One of them drops and squeaks, so their souls were bat-squeaks
As they flittered after Hermes, their deliverer, who led them
Along the clammy sheughs, then past the oceanic streams
And the white rock, the sun's gatepost in that dreamy region,
Until they came to a bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels
Where the residents are ghosts or images of the dead.

VII

THE GHOST ORCHID

(1995)

for John & Janet Banville

*You walked with me among water mint
And bog myrtle when I was tongue-tied:
When I shouted at the ferny cliff
You adopted my echo like a child.*

A PAT OF BUTTER

after Hugo Claus

The dodderly English veterans are getting
Fewer, and point out to fewer dodderly pals
Hill Sixty, Hill Sixty-one, Foelkapelle.

My dad's ghost rummages for his medals
And joins them for tea after the march-past.
The butter tastes of poppies in these parts.

THE CAMPFIRES

All night crackling campfires boosted their morale
As they dozed in no man's land and the killing fields.
(There are balmy nights – not a breath, constellations
Resplendent in the sky around a dazzling moon –
When a clearance high in the atmosphere unveils
The boundlessness of space, and all the stars are out
Lighting up hilltops, glees, headlands, vantage
Points like Tonakeera and Allaran where the tide
Turns into Killary, where salmon run from the sea,
Where the shepherd smiles on his luminous townland.
That many campfires sparkled in front of Ilium
Between the river and the ships, a thousand fires,
Round each one fifty men relaxing in the firelight.)
Shuffling next to the chariots, munching shiny oats
And barley, their horses waited for the sunrise.

CEASEFIRE

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

THE EXHIBIT

I see them absentmindedly pat their naked bodies
Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been.
The grandparents turn back and take an eternity
Rummaging in the tangled pile for their spectacles.

A LINEN HANDKERCHIEF

for Helen Lewis

Northern Bohemia's flax fields and the flax fields
Of Northern Ireland, the linen industry, brought Harry,
Trader in linen handkerchiefs, to Belfast, and then
After Terezin and widowhood and Auschwitz, you,

Odysseus as a girl, your sail a linen handkerchief
On which he embroidered and unpicked hundreds of names
All through the war, but in one corner the flowers
Encircling your initials never came undone.

A BUNCH OF ASPARAGUS

It was against the law for Jews to buy asparagus.
Only Aryan piss was allowed that whiff of compost.
I bring you a bunch held together with elastic bands.
Let us prepare melted butter, shavings of parmesan,
And make a meal out of the mouthwatering fascas.

A POPPY

When millions march into the mincing machine
An image in Homer picks out the individual
Tommy and the doughboy in his doughboy helmet:
'Lolling to one side like a poppy in a garden
Weighed down by its seed capsule and rainwater,
His head drooped under the heavy, crestfallen
Helmet' (an image Virgil steals – *lasso papavera*
Collo – and so do I), and so Gorgythion dies,
And the poppy that sheds its flower-heads in a day
Grows in one summer four hundred more, which means
Two thousand petals overlapping as though to make
A cape for the corn goddess or a soldier's soul.

POETRY

When he was billeted in a ruined house in Arras
And found a hole in the wall beside his bed
And, rummaging inside, his hand rested on *Keats*
By Edward Thomas, did Edmund Blunden unearth
A volume which 'the tall, Shelley-like figure'
Gathering up for the last time his latherbrush,
Razor, towel, comb, cardigan, cap comforter,
Water bottle, socks, gas mask, great coat, rifle
And bayonet, hurrying out of the same building
To join his men and march into battle, left
Behind him like a gift, the author's own copy?
When Thomas Hardy died his widow gave Blunden
As a memento of many visits to Max Gate
His treasured copy of Edward Thomas's *Poems*.

Ciaran Carson

**BELFAST
CONFETTI**



Gallery Books

Do m'athair, Liam Mac Carráin
For my father, William Carson

Turn Again

There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built.
A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed.
Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane, Stone-Cutter's Entry –
Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons.

The linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs by a thread.
When someone asks me where I live, I remember where I used to live.
Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into
A side-street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed.

Snow

A white dot flicked back and forth across the bay window: not
A table-tennis ball, but 'ping-pong', since this is happening in
another era,
The extended leaves of the dining-table – scratched mahogany
veneer –
Suggesting many such encounters, or time passing: the
celluloid diminuendo
As it bounces off into a corner and ticks to an incorrigible
stop.
I pick it up days later, trying to get that pallor right: it's neither
ivory
Nor milk. Chalk is better; and there's a hint of pearl,
translucent
Lurking just behind opaque. I broke open the husk so many
times
And always found it empty; the pith was a wordless bubble.

Though there's nothing in the thing itself, bits of it come back
unbidden,
Playing in the archaic dusk till the white blip became invisible.
Just as, the other day, I felt the tacky pimples of a ping-pong
bat
When the bank-clerk counted out my money with her rubber
thimble, and knew
The black was bleeding into red. Her face was snow and roses
just behind
The bullet-proof glass: I couldn't touch her if I tried. I
crumpled up the chit –
No use in keeping what you haven't got – and took a stroll
to Ross's auction.

There was this Thirties scuffed leather sofa I wanted to make a
bid for.
Gestures, prices: soundlessly collateral in the murmuring
room.

I won't say what I paid for it: anything's too much when you
have nothing.
But in the dark recesses underneath the cushions I found
myself kneeling
As decades of the Rosary dragged by, the slack of years ago
hauled up
Bead by bead; and with them, all the haberdashery of loss –
cuff buttons,
Broken ball-point pens and fluff, old pennies, pins and
needles, and yes,
A ping-pong ball. I cupped it in my hands like a crystal, seeing
not
The future, but a shadowed parlour just before the blinds are
drawn. Someone
Has put up two trestles. Handshakes all round, nods and
whispers.
Roses are brought in, and suddenly, white confetti seethes
against the window.



*I know the wild geese
ate my barley – yesterday?
Today? Where did they go?*

— Yasui

Ambition

*'I did not allow myself to think of ultimate escape . . .
one step at a time was enough.'*

John Buchan, *Mr Standfast*

Now I've climbed this far, it's time to look back. But smoke obscures
The panorama from the Mountain Loney spring. The city and the mountain are on fire.
My mouth's still stinging from the cold sharp shock of water – a winter taste
In summer – but my father's wandered off somewhere. I can't seem to find him.
We'd been smoking 'coffin nails', and he'd been talking of his time inside, how
Matches were that scarce, you'd have to split them four ways with your thumb-nail;
And seven cigarette ends made a cigarette. *Keep a thing for seven years,*
You'll always find a use for it, he follows in the same breath . . . it reminds me
Of the saint who, when he had his head cut off, picked up his head, and walked
With it for seven miles. And the wise man said, *The distance doesn't matter,*
It's the first step that was difficult.

Any journey's like that – *the first step of your life,* my father interrupts –
Though often you take one step forward, two steps back. For if time is a road,
It's fraught with ramps and dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti; here and there,

The dual carriageway becomes a one-track, backward mind.
And bits of the landscape
Keep recurring: it seems as if I've watched the same suburban
tennis match
For hours, and heard, at ever less-surprising intervals, the
applause of pigeons
Bursting from a loft. Or the issue is not yet decided, as the
desultory handclaps
Turn to rain. The window that my nose is pressed against is
breathed-on, giving
Everything a sfumato air. I keep drawing faces on it, or prac-
tising my signature.

And if time is a road, then you're checked again and again
By a mobile checkpoint. One soldier holds a gun to your head.
Another soldier
Asks you questions, and another checks the information on the
head computer.
Your name. Your brothers' names. Your father's name. His
occupation. As if
The one they're looking for is not you, but it might be you.
Looks like you
Or smells like you. And suddenly, the posthumous aroma of an
empty canvas
Postman's sack – twine, ink, dead letters – wafts out from the
soldiers'
Sodden khaki. It's obvious they're bored: one of them is watch-
ing Wimbledon
On one of those postage-stamp-sized TV screens. *Of course, the
proper shot,*
An unseen talking head intones, *should have been the lob.* He's
using words like
Angled, volley, smash and strategy. Someone is *fighting a losing
battle.*

Isn't that the way, that someone tells you what you should have
done, when
You've just done the opposite? *Did you give the orders for this man's
death?*
On the contrary, the accused replies, as if he'd ordered birth or
resurrection.
Though *one nail drives out another,* as my father says.

And my father should have known better than to tamper with
Her Majesty's
Royal Mail – or was it His, then? His humour was to take an
Irish ha'penny
With the harp on the flip side, and frank a letter with it. Some
people didn't
See the joke; they'd always thought him a Republican. He was
reported,
Laid off for a month. Which is why he never got promoted. So
one story goes.
The other is a war-time one, where he's supposed to go to
England
For a training course, but doesn't, seeing he doesn't want to get
conscripted.
My mother's version is, he lacked ambition. He was too content
to stay
In one place. He liked things as they were . . . *perfect touch,*
perfect timing, perfect
Accuracy: the commentary has just nudged me back a little, as I
manage
To take in the action replay. There's a tiny puff of chalk, as the
ball skids off
The line, like someone might be firing in slow motion, far away:
that otherwise
Unnoticeable faint cloud on the summer blue, which makes the
sky around it

All the more intense and fragile.

It's nearer to a winter blue. A zig-zag track of footsteps is imprinted
On the frosted tennis-court: it looks as if the Disappeared One rose before
First light, and stalked from one side of the wire cage to the other, off
Into the glinting laurels. No armed wing has yet proclaimed responsibility:
One hand washes the other, says my father, as sure as one funeral makes many.
For the present is a tit-for-tat campaign, exchanging *now* for *then*,
The Christmas post of Christmas Past, the black armband of the temporary man;
The insignia have mourned already for this casual preserve.
Threading
Through the early morning suburbs and the monkey-puzzle trees, a smell of coffee lingers,
Imprisoned in the air like wisps of orange peel in marmalade; and sleigh-bell music
Tinkles on the radio, like ice cubes in a summer drink. I think I'm starting, now,
To know the street map with my feet, just like my father.

God never shuts one door, said my father, but he opens up another; and then,
I walked the iron catwalk naked in the freezing cold: he's back into his time
As internee, the humiliation of the weekly bath. It was seven weeks before
He was released: it was his younger brother they were after all the time.

God never opens one door, but he shuts another: my uncle was inside for seven years.

At his funeral, they said how much I looked like him: I've got his smoker's cough,
At any rate. And now my father's told to cut down on the cigarettes, he smokes
Them three or four puffs at a time. Stubs them out and lights them, seven times.
I found him yesterday a hundred yards ahead of me, struggling, as the blazing
Summer hauled him one step at a time into a freezing furnace.
And with each step
He aged. As I closed in on him, he coughed. I coughed. He stopped and turned,
Made two steps back towards me, and I took one step forward.



*To Lord Toba's hall
five or six horsemen blow in:
storm-wind of the fall.*

— Buson

Queen's Gambit

A Remote Handling Equipment (Tracked) Explosive
Ordnance Disposal unit – *Wheelbarrow*,
For short – is whirring and ticking towards the Ford Sierra
parked in Tomb Street,

Its robotic arm extended indirectly towards this close-up of a
soldier. He's wearing
An M69 flak jacket, Dr Marten boots and non-regulation
skiing gloves.

Another soldier, armed with Self-loading Rifle, squats
beneath a spray-gunned
Flourish of graffiti: *The Provos Are Fighting For You. Remember
It. Brits Out.*

Now they're seen together leaning against the façade of a
chemist's shop,
Admiring – so it would appear – the cardboard ad. for
Wilkinson Sword razor blades.

So much, they're now in the interior: a gauzy, pinkish smell of
soap and sticking-
Plaster, through which they spit word-bubbles at the white-
coated girl assistant.

Much of this is unintelligible, blotted out by stars and
asterisks
Just as the street outside is splattered with bits of corrugated
iron and confetti.

Her slightly antiseptic perfume is a reminiscent *je-ne-sais-quoi*
Glimpsed through Pear's Soap, an orange-sepia zest of
coal-tar –

It's that moiré light from the bathroom window, or a body
seen behind
The shower-curtain, holding a Champagne telephone – the
colour, not the drink,

Though it gives off a perceptible hiss. And the continuous
background
Rumble is a string of *Ms* and *Rs*, expanding and contracting

To reveal the windswept starry night, through which a
helicopter trawls
Its searchlight. Out there, on the ground, there's a spoor of
Army boots;

Dogs are following their noses, and terrorists are contemplating
Terror, a glittering, tilted view of mercury, while the
assistant slithers

Into something more comfortable: jeans, a combat jacket, Doc
Marten boots;
Then weighs the confidential dumb-bell of the telephone. She
pushes buttons:

Zero Eight Double Zero. Then the number of the Beast, the
number of the Beast
Turned upside down: Six Six Six, Nine Nine Nine . . .



The ambient light of yesterday is amplified by talk of might-
have-beens,
Making 69 – the year – look like quotation marks, comment-
ators commentating on

The flash-point of the current Trouble, though there's any
God's amount
Of Nines and Sixes: 1916, 1690, The Nine Hundred Years'
War, whatever.

Or maybe we can go back to the Year Dot, the nebulous
expanding brain-wave
Of the Big Bang, releasing us and It and everything into
oblivion;

It's so hard to remember, and so easy to forget the casualty list –
Like the names on a school desk, carved into one another till
they're indecipherable.

It's that frottage effect again: the paper that you're scribbling
on is grained
And blackened, till the pencil-lead snaps off, in a valley of the
broken alphabet

And the streets are a bad photostat grey: the ink comes off on
your hand.
With so many foldings and unfoldings, whole segments of the
map have fallen off.

It's not unlike the missing reel in the film, the blank screen
jittering
With numerals and flak, till the picture jumps back – a bit out
of sync,

As soldiers A and B and others of the lettered regiment discuss
the mission
In their disembodied voices. Only the crackly Pye Pocketfone
sounds real,


A bee-in-the-biscuit-tin buzzing number codes and decibels.
They're in the belly
Of a Saracen called 'Felix', the cartoon cat they've taken as a
mascot:

It's all the go, here, changing something into something else,
like rhyming
Kampuchea with Cambodia. It's why Mickey Mouse wears
those little white gloves –

Claws are too much like a mouse. And if the animals are trying
to be people,
Vice versa is the case as well. Take 'Mad Dog' Reilly, for
example, who

This instant is proceeding to the rendezvous. A gunman, he
isn't yet; the rod
Is stashed elsewhere, somewhere in a mental block of dog-leg
turns and cul-de-sacs.

He sniffs his hand, an antiseptic tang that momentarily brings
back
The creak of a starched coat crushed against his double-
breasted gaberdine.



After the recorded message, the bleep announces a magnetic
silence
Towards which she's drawn as conspirator, as towards a
confessional, whispering

What she knows into the wire-grilled darkness: names, dates,
places;
More especially, a future venue, Tomb Street GPO.

She wants the slate wiped clean, *Flash* or *Ajax* cutting a bright
swathe
Through a murky kitchen floor, transforming it into a gleaming
checkerboard.

Tiles of black and white on which the regiments of pawns move
ponderously,
Bishops take diagonals, and the Queen sees dazzling lines
of power.

Or, putting it another way, Operation 'Mad Dog', as it's known
now,
Is the sketch that's taking shape on the Army HQ blackboard,
chalky ghosts

Behind the present, showing what was contemplated and
rubbed out, Plan A
Becoming X or Y; interlocked, curved arrows of the mortgaged
future.

The raffia waste-paper bin is full of crumpled drafts and
cigarette butts,
And ash has seeped through to the carpet. There's a smell of
peeled oranges.

But the Unknown Factor, somewhat like the Unknown Soldier,
has yet to take
The witness box. As someone spills a cup of tea on a discarded
Irish News

A minor item bleeds through from another page, blurring
the main story.
It's difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart
in your hands,

But basically it invokes this bunch of cowboys, who,
unbeknownst to us all,
Have jumped on board a Ford Sierra, bound for You-Know-
Where.

They're Ordinary Criminals: you know them by the dollar
signs that shiver
In their eyes, a notion that they're going to hit the jackpot
of the GPO.

Unbeknownst to themselves, they'll be picked up in the
amplified light
Of a Telescope Starlight II Night Observation Device
(NOD) – *Noddy*, for short,

But not before the stoolie-pigeon spool is reeled back;
amplified,
Its querulous troughs and peaks map out a different curve of
probability.



My newly-lowered ears in the barber's mirror were starting to
take on a furtive look.
A prison cut – my face seemed Born Again – but then, I'd asked
for *short*.

And I've this problem, talking to a man whose mouth is a
reflection.
I tend to think the words will come out backwards, so I'm
saying nothing.

And then, says he, – he's staring straight into my eyes, the
scissors poised –
It seems they think they're just about to nail your man O'Reilly

*When a bunch of hoods pulls up in a Ford Sierra and jumps out with the
sawn-off
Shotguns, plastic masks they must have got in Elliot's – Mickey Mouse,
Donald Duck*

*And Pluto – too much watching TV, if you ask me – so of course the
Brits let go
With everything. He snips at my right ear. But now hear this:*

*This Post Office van bombs out from Tomb Street loading bay, its side
door open
And they've got this effing Gatling gun or something going full blast –*

*Dot, dot, dot, dot – and the Brits are all shot up – could you move your
head a bit –
Right – so the Mad Dog, he jumps in the back and him and the boys are off
like a shot.*

So what do you think? It looks to me, it was a set-up job, though who exactly

Was set up, God only knows. You can see it for yourself – they've been checking out

That Ford Sierra for the past two hours, just as soon as it was light.

Seems they think the Disney characters were in on it. If you ask me,

With these confidential telephones, you never know who's doing who, or why.

Better to keep your mouth shut, that's what I say. Haircut OK, sir?

He held a mirror to my neck. I nodded. He shook out the cloth, and curls

And snippets writhed like commas on the chessboard tiles.

Now that I could see

Myself without the hair and beard, I looked like someone else.

He brushed

My shoulders, and I left him to a row of empty mirrors, sweeping up

The fallen swathes. Turning into Tomb Street, I began to feel a new man.

Perfume breathed from somewhere, opening avenues of love, or something déjà vu.



*These are wild slow days,
echoes trickling in from all
around Kyoto.*

— Buson

*. . . that the Mastive dogs belonginge to Butchers,
Tanners, and other Inhabitants dwelling in this
Corporation and the suburbs and ffields thereunto
belonginge, have Barbarously ffallen upon horses
in Carrs, upon the Street, and also horses out of
carrs, And have violently Torne and abused them,
That some of them have been in hazard to die, And
also ffallen upon severall cattell bothe upon the
Streets and in the ffields. Inso much that severall
catell are mightily abused, and some of them killed
to the great loss of many of the poore Inhabitants
of this Corporacon. And also that the said Dogs
have ffallen upon severall men and boyes upon the
Streets and Lanes of this Towne and suburbs
thereunto belonginge, and have pult them to the
Ground, Torne their cloathes and Torne some of their
ffleshe and eaten the same Insoemuch that many
Inhabitants ffeare their lives to walk the streets
or laines either by night or day for the said
dogs and Bitches . . .*

*Ordinance of the Corporation of Belfast,
25th July 1678*

Gate

Passing *Terminus* boutique the other day, I see it's got a bit of flak:

The *T* and the *r* are missing, leaving *e minus*, and a sign saying,

MONSTER

CLOSING DOWN SALE. It opened about six months back, selling odd-job-lots,

Ends of ranges. Before that it was Burton's, where I bought my wedding suit.

Which I only wear for funerals, now. *Gone for a Burton*, as the saying goes.

The stopped clock of *The Belfast Telegraph* seems to indicate the time

Of the explosion – or was that last week's? Difficult to keep track:

Everything's a bit askew, like the twisted pickets of the security gate, the wreaths

That approximate the spot where I'm told the night patrol went through.

Last Orders

Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but
It's someone else who has you in their sights. Click. It opens.

Like electronic

Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who's who, or
what

You're walking into. I, for instance, could be anybody. Though
I'm told

Taig's written on my face. See me, would *I* trust appearances?

Inside a sudden lull. The barman lolls his head at us. We order

Harp –

Seems safe enough, everybody drinks it. As someone looks
daggers at us

From the *Bushmills* mirror, a penny drops: how simple it would
be for someone

Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and
ourselves, to Kingdom Come.

Farset

Trying to get back to that river, this river I am about to
explore, I imagine or remember peering between the
rusted iron bars that lined one side of the alleyway behind
St Gall's School at the bottom of Waterville Street, gazing
down at the dark exhausted water, my cheeks pressed
against the cold iron. It is only years later I will find its
name. For now I take it in with a child's rapt boredom.
Muck. Water. A bottomless bucket. The undercarriage of
a pram. A rusted spring mattress. The river, the stream,
the sewer trickles from a black mouth and disappears
down a black hole. It is this which gives Belfast its name.

*The utmost obscurity and perplexity, however, attend the derivation
of the name . . . the name of Bealafarsad, which means, according
to some, hurdleford town, while others have translated it, the mouth
of the pool. Either of these explanations might receive some corrob-
oration from local facts, but as it is a matter of complete hypothesis,
there seems to be further room for further speculation.*

So says George Benn, writing in the 1820s. Dubourdieu,
writing some years earlier, claims that Belfast *is supposed to
have derived its present name from Bela Fearsad, which signifies a
town at the mouth of a river, expressive of the circumstances, in
which it stood.* Ward, Lock & Co.'s *Guide to Northern Ireland*,
a hundred-odd years later, has yet another version: *While
the bell in Belfast's civic coat of arms is a feeble pun, the word 'fast'
refers to the 'farset', or sandbank (also the now-covered-in High
Street river). 'Bel' in Celtic means 'ford', i.e. Bel-feirste, the 'bel'
or 'ford' of the 'farset'.*

In all this watery confusion one thing seems certain: that *Belfast* is a corruption of the Irish *Béal Feirste*. *Béal* is easy. It means a mouth, or the mouth of a river; an opening; an approach. Benn's informant seems to have mistaken it for *baile*, a town, thereby arriving at an English equivalent of the modern Irish name for Dublin, *Baile Átha Cliath*, which is precisely *hurdleford town*. But it is this *feirste* in which meaning founders, this genitive of *fearsad*, the Irish word for

The Rev. Dineen glosses it as a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; a club; the spindle of an axle; a bar or bank of sand at low water; a deep narrow channel on a strand at low tide; a pit or pool of water; a verse, a poem. The dictionaries of Edward O'Reilly and Thomas de Vere Conys agree substantially, though O'Reilly has the strange *wallet*, which turns up again in Duelly's Scottish Gaelic dictionary; and he has the nice adjective *fearsach*, *full of little ridges in the sand*, one of those illuminations glimpsed at dawn's low tide, where seeming *terra firma* mimics the ridges of the sea: I remember seeing this precisely in the remote Gaeltacht of *Rann na Feirste*, or *Ranafast* in Donegal. Not to mention *Béal Feirste*, or *Belfarset* in County Mayo, where I have never been.

But let us take the simple approach, and imagine that *fearsad* is a sandbank, formed by the confluence of the river of that name – the *Farset* – and the *Lagan*. So *Belfast* is the *approach to the sandbank*, or the *mouth of the Farset*; or the *approach to the ford*, since historically there was a ford at that point, and St George's Church in High Street, below which the *Farset* runs, reputedly stands on the site of the *Chapel by the Ford*. Or let us suppose, with the Jesuit McCionnaith's English-Irish dictionary, that *fearsad* stands for *axis*, as in the expression, *Bíonn an domhan ag casadh ar a shearsaid féin*, *the world revolves on its own axis*: one

imagines this, not as a scientific observation, but as a stock response to another's elaborate and banal anecdote. And my father tells me that the Axis forces in the Second World War were indeed known as *Lucht na Feirste*, or the Axis People (not to be confused with the X People of the eponymous SF novel dreamed up by Belfast's ex-political-correspondent of the BBC, W. D. Flackes). Or more fancifully, we could take Dineen's *poem* and let *Belfast* be the *mouth of the poem* – surely *Farset* is related to the Latin turn in the furrow known as *versus*? And strangely, by a conspiracy of history and accident and geography, the river *Farset*, this hidden stream, is all these things: it is the axis of the opposed Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill, as we follow it through the old Shankill Graveyard – now a municipal park – till it disappears beneath the Shankill Road and surfaces in Bombay Street (burned down in the '68 Troubles), sidles along the back of Cupar Street, following almost precisely the line of the Peace-Line, this thirty-foot-high wall of graffitized corrugated iron, the interface, the deadline, lost in what survives of Belfast's industrial Venice – for water, after all, was power – a maze of dams, reservoirs, sluices, sinks, footbridges that I remember in my dreams as walled-in by Titanic mills, gouts of steam breaking intermittently through the grit and smog, as it sinks and surfaces finally in Millfield and then is lost in its final culvert under High Street. It remembers spindles, arms, the songs of mill-girls. It remembers nothing: no one steps in the same river twice. Or, as some wag has it, no one steps in the same river once.

Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii

On an almost-blank wall where East 46th Street intersects Avenue A in the area called Alphabet City in New York, New York, is this graffito in three-foot-high black letters, saying BELFAST, with the cross-stroke of the T extended into an arrow pointing east, to Belfast. I have a photograph to prove this, but it's lost. In New York, no one that I ask seems to know the meaning of this careful scrawl, whether it's a gang, the code-word of a gang, a fashion, a club, or the name of the city where I was born; but the latter seems unlikely, though Alphabet City – barricaded liquor stores, secretive tobacco shops and elaborate Russian Orthodox churches – resembles Belfast, its roads pocked and skid-marked, littered with broken glass and crushed beer-cans.

And on the back wall of Gallaher's tobacco factory in North Queen Street in Belfast there has recently appeared this New York underground graffiti mural – coded, articulated, multi-coloured spray-gunned alphabet – pointing west by style and implication.

At times it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives, but mostly names, or nicknames – Robbo, Mackers, Scoot, Fra – sometimes litanized obsessively on every brick of a gable wall, as high as the hand will reach, and sometimes higher, these snakes and ladders cancelling each other out in their bid to be remembered. *Remember 1690. Remember 1916.* Most of all, *Remember me. I was here.*

Remembering is one of the main functions of the Falls Road Club which meets on the first Thursday of every month in the Woolongong Bar in Adelaide, Australia. Exiled here since the emigrations of the Fifties and the early Sixties, these Kennedys and McErleans and Hugheses begin with small talk of the present, but are soon immersed in history, reconstructing a city on the other side of the world, detailing streets and shops and houses which for the most part only exist now in the memory. Or ghosts which exist only in the memory: someone is telling the story of the policeman who was shot dead outside the National Bank at the corner of Balaklava Street in 1922; but the story does not concern the policeman; rather, it is about the tin can which was heard that night rolling down Balaklava Street into Raglan Street, and which was heard again for years after, whenever there was trouble in the offing; thousands heard it, no one saw it. Someone else produces a week-old copy of *The Irish News* which gives another slant to the story: the tin can has not been heard since the streets concerned were demolished; this is hardly surprising, since even ghosts must have somewhere to live. Someone else again ventures the notion that the ghost is only a by-product of the elaborate version of hide-and-seek known as *kick-the-tin*, and they all start to remember more, their favourite hidey-holes in entries and alleyways and back yards, till they are lost in the comforting dusk and smog and drizzle of the Lower Falls, playing: games of imitation, games of chance, of luck, of initiation; the agglomerate tag or *tig* called *chain-tig*. Or they recall the names carved on the desks of Slate Street School, the taste of school milk in winter, the aura of plasticine and chalk-dust as they chant the twelve-times table for the twelfth or thirteenth time. Fortified by expensively-imported *Red Heart* Guinness and

Gallagher's *Blues*, they talk on, trying to get back – before the blitz, the avalanche, the troubles – the drinker interrupted between cup and lip – winding back the clock

The walls where they inscribed their names have been pulled down, but somewhere they survive. *Graffito*, says the dictionary, *a mural scribbling or drawing, as by schoolboys and idlers at Pompeii, Rome, and other ancient cities*

Running back the film of the mind's eye, the alphabet soup of demolition sorts itself into phrases, names, buildings, as if, on the last day, not only bodies are resurrected whole and perfect, but each brick, each stone, finds its proper place again:

the spire of St Malachy's Church, which was *removed, with advantage, for the tolling of the great bell in it interfered with the satisfactory maturing of the whiskey in Messrs. Dunville's adjacent distillery . . .*

the seven arches of the Long Bridge which fell in, *weakened by the passage of Schomberg's heavy cannon on their way to the Battle of the Boyne . . .*

the Great Salt Water Bridge, which still exists, *for it was not taken down when the Boyne Bridge was built, but was simply incorporated into the new structure and completely enveloped by it . . .*

bridges within bridges, the music in bad whiskey, the demolished air-raid shelters used as infill for the reclaimed land of Belfast Lough – who will sort out the chaos? Where does land begin, and water end? Or memory falter, and imagination take hold?

Barfly

Maybe you can figure it, why The Crown and Shamrock and
The Rose and Crown
Are at opposite ends of the town. Politics? The odds change.
The borders move.
Or they're asked to. A nod's as good as a wink. For example, in
The Arkle Inn
This night, I'm getting it from the horse's mouth, when these
two punters walk in,
Produce these rods, and punctuate the lunchtime menu:
there's confetti everywhere.

Which, I take it, was a message. Or an audio-visual aid. At
any rate, I buzzed off.
For, like the menu, everything's chalked up, and every now
and then, wiped clean.
So now, I am a hyphen, flitting here and there: between The
First and Last –
The Gamble – The Rendezvous – The Cellars – The Crow's
Nest – The Elephant – The Fly.

Jump Leads

As the eggbeater spy in the sky flickered overhead, the TV developed a facial tic
Or as it turned out, the protesters had handcuffed themselves to the studio lights.
Muffled off-camera, shouts of *No*. As I tried to lip-read the talking head
An arms cache came up, magazines laid out like a tray of wedding rings.
The bomb-disposal expert whose face was in shadow for security reasons
Had started very young by taking a torch apart at Christmas to see what made it tick.
Everything went dark. The killers escaped in a red Fiesta according to sources.
Talking, said the Bishop, is better than killing. Just before the Weather
The victim is his wedding photograph. He's been spattered with confetti.

Question Time

A native of Belfast, writes George Benn in his 1823 history of the city, who had been brought up in one of the best streets which it contained, lately came over from America, after nearly a life-long absence, to visit the home of his youth. He could hardly find it. An immense place of business occupied its site, and he compared Belfast to an American town, so great was its progress in his absence, and so unexampled the growth of its population.

That disorientation, that disappointed hunger for a familiar place, will be experienced all the more keenly by today's returning native; more than that, even the little piggy who stayed at home will sometimes feel lost. *I know this place like the back of my hand* – except who really knows how many hairs there are, how many freckles? A wound, a suture, and excision will remind us of the physical, of what *was* there – as the song has it, *you'll never miss your mother till she's buried beneath the clay*. For Belfast is changing daily: one day the massive Victorian façade of the Grand Central Hotel, latterly an army barracks, is *there*, dominating the whole of Royal Avenue; the next day it is gone, and a fresh breeze sweeps through the gap, from Black Mountain, across derelict terraces, hole-in-the-wall one-horse taxi operations, Portakabins, waste ground, to take the eye back up towards the mountain and the piled-up clouds.

The junk is sinking back into the sleet and muck. Pizza parlours, massage parlours, night-clubs, drinking-clubs, antique shops, designer studios momentarily populate the wilderness and the blitz sites; they too will vanish in the morning. Everything will be revised. The fly-specked gloom of The Elephant Bar is now a Winemark;

Mooney's Bar is a denim shop; The Gladstone has disappeared. The tangle of streets that was the Pound Loney is the Divis Flats Complex, which is also falling apart, its high-rise Sixties optimism sliding back into the rubble and erasure. Maps and street directories are suspect.

No, don't trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows this city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations: the surge of funerals and parades, swelling and accelerating, time-lapsed, sucked back into nothingness by the rewind button; the wired-up alleyways and entries; someone walking his dog when the façade of Gass's Bicycle Shop erupts in an avalanche of glass and metal forks and tubing, rubber, rat-trap pedals, toe-clips and repair kits. Or it may exist in photographs – this one, for example, of Raglan Street, showing

... a sight that was to become only too common to a generation of British soldiers as rioters stone 'A' Company, 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Regiment, during the savage Lower Falls riots of 3-5 July 1970 which left five civilians dead and eighteen military casualties . . .

But the caption is inaccurate: the camera has caught only one rioter in the act, his stone a dark blip in the drizzly air. The others, these would-be or has-been or may-be rioters, have momentarily become spectators, as their protagonist does his David-and-Goliath act; some might be talking about the weather, which seems unusually grey for July, or maybe this is a bad print; some others are looking down Bosnia Street at what is happening or might happen next. The left-hand frame of the photograph only allows us the

'nia' of Roumania Street, so I don't know what's going on there, but I'm trying to remember – was I there that night, on this street littered with half-bricks, broken glass, a battered saucepan and a bucket? In this fragment of a map, here is the lamp-post where I swung as a child, there is Smyth's corner shop; I can almost see myself in the half-gloom and the din. From here – No. 100 – I would turn into Leeson Street, on up to the Falls Road, across to Clonard Street on my way to St Gall's Primary School; at least, that was how I was told to go, and generally I did, but remember, *Never go by Cupar Street*, my father would warn me, and I knew this was a necessary prohibition without asking why, for Cupar Street was one of those areas where the Falls and Shankill joined together as unhappy Siamese twins, one sporadically and mechanically beating the other round the head, where the Cullens, Finnegans and Reillys merged with Todds and Camerons and Wallaces. One day I did come home by Cupar Street, egged on by a fellow pupil. Nothing happened, and we felt the thrill of Indian scouts penetrating the British lines, the high of invisibility. We did it again; it became addictive, this perilous sin of disobedience and disappearance. We crept along in the dark shadow of the Falls Flax Spinning Mill, becoming bolder day by day in our deceit. For who knew what we were, who could tell? The forays ended when we were stopped one day by four boys about our own age. One of them had fashioned two little charity-type flags from paper and pins: he held a Union Jack in one hand, a tricolour in the other. He eyed us slyly, knowingly: *See them flags?* We nodded nervously. *Well, which of them would youse say was the best?* He had us cornered. If we chose the Union Jack, we were guilty of cowardice and treason – and he would know we were lying anyway; if we chose the tricolour, we would get a hiding. So we ran

the gauntlet, escaping with a few bruises into the unspoken force-field of the Catholic end of the street. My father knew something was up when I got home; I broke down under questioning, and got a real hiding. I had learned some kind of lesson. So I thought.

I was reminded of this today, when I went out for what I imagined was a harmless spin on the bike. A showery day, blowing warm and cold – past the west side of Girdwood Barracks along Clifton Park Avenue – a few inhabited houses in a row of derelicts backing on to Crumlin Road Jail – up the Shankill; I come to the Shankill Road Library on the corner of Mountjoy Street (the name of yet another jail), remembering how I used to go here as a child in search of Biggles books because I had exhausted the entire Biggles stock of the Falls Library – I was older then, and was allowed to go, I think – how was it, across Cupar Street, up Sugarfield Street? I see the green cupola of Clonard Monastery towering high, almost directly above me, it seems, and I realise again with a familiar shock how little separates the Shankill and the Falls, how in the troubles of '68 or '69 it was rumoured that this monastery tower was a sniper's nest – so yes, I think, why not re-trace the route of all those years ago, 1959 or 1960. I turn idly down Mountjoy Street, Azamor Street, Sugarfield Street. Dead end. Here is the Peace Line, a thirty-foot-high wall scrawled with graffiti, mounted with drab corrugated iron; Centurion Street; Battenberg Street; dead end again. Where I remember rows of houses, factories, there is recent wasteland, broken bricks, chickweed, chain-link fencing. Eventually I find a new road I never knew existed – or is it an old street deprived of all its landmarks? – which leads into the Springfield Road. Familiar territory now, well, almost, for going down the Kashmir Road into Bombay Street –

burned out in '68, some new houses there – I come to the other side of the Peace Line, which now backs on to St Gall's School – still there, graffitized, wire mesh on the windows, but still the same, almost; the massive granite bulk of Clonard is still there; Greenan's shop is now a dwelling; and the west side of Clonard Gardens, where the Flax & Rayon mill used to be, is all new houses; Charleton's shop is bricked up; Tolan's the barber's is long since gone, I knew that; this side of the street is all derelict, breeze-blocked, holes knocked into holes; so on to the Falls. I go down the road a bit, almost as far as the library, then stop; I'd like to go down the Grosvenor Road, so I make a U-turn and stop at the lights at the Grosvenor Road junction, and I'm just wondering what's the point, it's Sunday and there's no traffic about, and certainly no policemen, when somebody mutters something in my ear, I turn, and I'm grabbed round the neck by this character, while someone else has me by the arm, twisted up my back, another has the other arm and I'm hauled off the bike, *Right – where're you going? Here, get him up against the railings – what do you think you're at?* – Legs kicked apart, arms slapped up, *Right, here, get him here – come on, MOVE –* and I'm dragged across the road into what used to be McQuillan Street, only it isn't there any more, into one of these hole-in-the-wall taxi places, arms up against the breeze-block wall, legs apart, frisked, and all the time,

You were seen coming from the Shankill.

Why did you make a U-turn?

Who are you?

Where are you coming from?

Why did you stop when you seen the car?

You know the car.

The car. Outside Sinn Féin headquarters.

*You looked at it.
You looked at it.
You were seen. You were seen.
Coming from the Shankill.
Where are you from?
Where is he from?
The Falls? When? What street?
What was the number of the house?
How far down the street was that?
When was that?
What streets could you see from the house?
Cape Street? Yeah.
Frere Street? Yeah. Where was Cape Street?
Again. Who lived next door?
Next door again.
Why did you stop when you seen the car?
Why did you turn?
So you moved up the road? When?
How old were you then?
Where was that? Mooreland?
Where is that?
Stockman's? Where is that?
What's next?
Casement? Right. What's next?
You were seen.
Where do you live now?
Where's that?
So where did you live again?
Yeah, I know it's not there any more.
You just tell me what was there.
Again. No. 100. Where was that?
You were seen.
What's the next street down from Raglan Street?
Coming from the Shankill*

The questions are snapped at me like photographs.

The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies. Eventually I pass the test. I am frisked again, this time in a regretful habitual gesture. *A dreadful mistake*, I hear one of them saying, *has been made*, and I get the feeling he is speaking in quotation marks, as if this is a bad police B-movie and he is mocking it, and me, and him.

I am released. I stumble across the road and look back; they have disappeared. I get on my bike, and turn, and go down the Falls, past vanished public houses – The Clock Bar, The Celtic, Daly's, The Gladstone, The Arkle, The Old House – past drapers, bakers, fishmongers, boot shops, chemists, pawnshops, picture houses, confectioners and churches, all swallowed in the maw of time and trouble, clearances; feeling shaky, nervous, remembering how a few moments ago I was *there*, in my mind's eye, one foot in the grave of that Falls Road of thirty years ago, inhaling its gritty smoggy air as I lolled outside the door of 100 Raglan Street, staring down through the comforting gloom to the soot-encrusted spires of St Peter's, or gazing at the blank brick gable walls of Balaklava Street, Cape Street, Frere Street, Milton Street, saying their names over to myself.

Revised Version

Trying to focus on the imagined grey area between Smithfield and North Street – jumbled bookstalls, fruitstalls, fleshers, the whingeing calls of glaziers and coal-brick men – I catch glimpses of what might have been, but it already blurs and fades; I wake or fall into another dream. I have before me Nesbitt's *The Changing Face of Belfast*, the first edition of 1968, and the second (revised) 1982 edition, which has somehow skimmed on the ink, so that the dark threatening historicity of *High Street, looking east, 1851* – the stage-coach waiting, a one-legged man with a doomy placard tied to his back, two dogs fighting in the tramlines under the scratchy black clouds – has been replaced by a noon-day shimmer (we note the long morning shadows still) in which the dogs are merely playing, and the one-legged man proclaims salvation. We become aware of other shifts of emphasis, elisions and contractions, croppings: the observer taking a step backwards from *Victoria Square in the 1880s*, as if passing time has necessarily distanced the fixed past even more, and the new edition is a worn-out copy of the old; a photograph of The Ulster Institute for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind (1845-1963) becomes an old engraving of the same building; the entrance to Belfast Castle has vanished.

In waking life I expect streets which are not there. So, both versions of the *Demolition of Hercules Place, looking north, 1879* – one light, the other dark – suggest the ambivalence of this dilapidated present, the currency of time passing. For this could be now, 1987, as the Royal Avenue which the butchers' shambles of Hercules Place was to become is, in its turn, torn apart and a huge vista yawns

through the vanished Grand Central Hotel (built to service a Central Railway Station that never was to be) to the Belfast Mountains, last refuge of the wolf and rebel. Transpose the dates: in 1879, two men in the right bottom corner have moved too quickly for the shutter; they are ghosts, wavering between memory and oblivion. Then a haze begins in the middle distance, the grainy dust of blitz sites and bad printing.

For everything is contingent and provisional; and the subjunctive mood of these images is tensed to the ifs and buts, the yeas and nays of Belfast's history. Going back another lifetime, to 1808, we find that *Mr Williamson proposes to make a new map of the town, but from the streets lately made, and the uncertain direction of others, it will be spring before any further progress will be made*. Spring became summer, autumn, winter; 'the map does not seem to have been produced'. It lives on in our imagination, this plan of might-have-beens, legislating for all the possibilities, guaranteed from censure by its non-existence. For maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind, like Dubourdieu's 'very incorrect' *Plan of Belfast in 1811*, which shows *streets and blocks of buildings which have never existed; and also a bridge across the Lagan which was proposed but not carried out*. John Mulholland's Plan of 1788, dedicated to the Earl of Donegall, who owned half the town, shows a grand never-to-be canal flowing down the line of what was to be Chichester Street from the front of the White Linen Hall, now the City Hall, echoing the second Venice dreamed by George Macartney, Sovereign of Belfast in the late 1600s. Here too are 'intended streets', miasmas, projections on the reclaimed sleech which lies between the *ancient folded purple grits and shales of North Down and the tilted black basalts of Antrim, where on both sides of the river's mouth the valley sides fall back as if to form a great cup*

destined to hold the brimming city – teetering and spilling, distilled from thin air, this intoxicating draught of futures swallowed at one gulp, as someone sets another up. We have seen Phillips' New Cutt River (on his Plan of 1685) before: not only does it almost follow the line of Mulholland's dream-canal, but it suggests the 1987 Concept Plan for Laganside, where a 'new cut' will make an island out of Maysfield, and the Blackstaff river is deculverted to form a marina; our architect has drawn little boats and happy figures here, absolving the stench and excrement and rubbish of the present. Here is the Eden of the future – gardens, fields, streams, clear water – looking like the banished past, before linen, ships, tobacco, ropes. We are going back to the source, as it is proposed that the Farset, which gave the town its name, be opened up again, this clear blue line leading up to the Albert Clock. Going back to Phillips, what are we to make of this earthen rampart built in 1642, already partly obliterated at its north end? Obliterated? Never finished? Proposed? And do we trust this improvement made out on the strand?

Improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change: the map appended to the Parliamentary Report of 1859 shows very clearly the improvements effected by the making of Victoria Street and Corporation Street, which are laid down on the map over the old lanes and small streets, as follows; so we follow the ghosts of Forest Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane, Elbow Lane, Blue Bell Entry, Stone Cutter's Entry, Quay Lane, Ireland's Entry, names that seem to spring up from an invented past. Or here, in 1853, we are shown the Municipal Boundary of the Borough before its extension in 1853; after its extension; the Boundary of the Lighted and Watched Districts, recalling the ordinance of 1680, that Lights in Lanthorns be hunge at every other house doore or window time aboute in ye dark Nights from ye houres of six to tenn . . . to prevent

disorders and mischeife, later amended to at their respective doores or shops one Lanthorne and candle lighted from ye hour of seaven oClock till ten at night when it is not moon-shine in ye saide houres

As we shift sideways into the future of 30 August 1823, ignoring the rival schemes to produce gas from the oil of Irish basking sharks, we can clearly read a letter 60 yards distant from High Street's extra large light in the form of a dolphin's head; before we understand what it is telling us, or appreciate the clear effulgence of a cloudless atmosphere illumined by the moon, there is a whiff of ozone, a blue flicker, and we find ourselves stumbling through a ruinous Gasworks – midnight echo-chambers, clangorous retorts – as the 1300 miles of piping give up the ghost – a tiny whisper and a hiccup.

The maps are revised again, as a layer of toxic spoil would have to be removed from the whole site and the view across the Lagan from the Ormeau embankment completely transformed by the obliteration of the gas-holders. The jargon sings of leisure purposes, velodromes and pleasure parks, the unfurling petals of the World Rose Convention. As the city consumes itself – scrap iron mouldering on the quays, black holes eating through the time-warp – the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment announces that to people who have never been to Belfast their image of the place is often far-removed from the reality. No more Belfast champagne, gas bubbled through milk; no more heads in ovens. Intoxication, death, will find their new connections. Cul-de-sacs and ring-roads. *The city is a map of the city.*

Jawbox

What looks to us like a crackly newsreel, the picture
jumping with flak,
Was clear as day, once. But that's taken as read, since this is a
'quotation'
In the main text of the film, which begins with someone
flicking open
The glossy pages of a *Homes and Gardens* kitchen supplement:
Sink or Swim, the caption
Says, *The Belfast sink combines old-fashioned charm with tried and
tested*
Practicality . . . 'Why Belfast?', the character begins to ponder –
he puts the accent
On the *fast*, as if the name was Irish, which it was (or is); this
is how
His father says it, just as, being from Belfast, he calls the
sink a 'jawbox'.

At first you think the screen's gone blank, till you realise the
camera
Has focussed on the sink itself: it has eaten up the whole
Picture. Then it backtracks, to reveal a Forties kitchen with a
kind of wartime
Atmosphere: an old bakelite Clydesdale radio glows in the
corner, humming
Over names like Moscow, Hilversum, Berlin. There's those
jugs with blue and white
Striped bars, which give a premonition of the future (still
our past) – filled
With flowers, they're déjà vu before their time, just as the
sink, retired now

To the garden, overflows with hyacinths, geraniums.

There's something threatening about the kitchen – knives,
glass, the epileptic
Buzzing of the overhead fluorescent strip, the white glaze
blotched with calligraphic
Tea-leaves. Something in the pattern brings to mind an
ornamental
Slightly murderous detail, and the picture changes with a
click to show
The handcuffed metal Xs of an old-style elevator gate.
Someone's going down –
Chinese shadows flicking off and on across the various floors –
to the Forensic Lab.
It's like suspicion, this weightless feeling in his stomach; and
the clickety-clack
Reminds him of a railway journey, interrupted, for the
seventh time that week,
By a bomb on the line between Dundalk and Newry. Or
Newry and Dundalk, depending
Where you're coming from: like the difference between
Cambodia and Kampuchea.

Shepherded on board an *Ulsterbus*, knowing now that the
appointment won't be kept,
His attention wanders out across the rushy unkempt
landscape, where a white dot
Concentrates his gaze. He lurches nearer. A hedge, a stone
wall, gets in the way,
And then, brimming with water, wind-skimmed, rippled – he
remembers how
He used to scoop an icy draught from it – the Belfast sink
reveals itself.

It's now a cattle-trough, ripped out from a deconstructed
farmhouse renovated
In the 'hacienda' style – not inappropriately, since *South of
the Border*
Down Mexico Way is a big hit in these parts. Just then the border
passes through him
Like a knife, invisibly, as the blip of the bus is captured on
surveillance radar.

What's been stirring in his memory, like tea-leaves stirred in
water –
He's elbow-deep in it, fingers trying to unblock the plug-hole
– is the half-gnawed
Apple found at the *mise-en-scène*. The body, face-down on the
steaming
Freshly-tarmacked road. He bites into the core, imagining
his mouth's interior.
That twinge, an old occlusion. The tooth he broke on the rim of
the jawbox
When he was eight. Blood-spattered white glaze; dilating, red
confetti.
He spits out the pips and stares at the imaginary pith, seeing
himself engraved there:
Furrows, indentations, grooves, as crisp as fingerprints. A
little hinge of skin.

The mouth suggests the body –
Biting, grinding, breathing, chewing, spitting, tasting;
clenched
In a grimace or a smile – his child's body, hunched in the dark
alcove underneath
The sink, sulking, tearful, wishing he was dead. Imprisoned
by so many

Small transgressions, he wants to break out of the trap. He's
caught between
Belfast and *Belfast*, in the accordion pleats between two
lurching carriages
Banging, rattling, threatening to break loose, as he gets a
terrifying glimpse
Of railway sleepers, blotchy gravel flicking past a smell of
creosote and oil and urine.

The coupling snaps; another mouth floats into view, its rust-
tinged canine edges
Sealed in labelled see-through polythene; there's an *O* of
condensation. From the cloud
A face begins to dawn: something like his own, but thicker,
coarser, Jekyll
Turning into Hyde – an Englishman into an Irishman –
emerging from the bloom
Behind the mirror. Breathed-on, becoming whole, the
murderer is hunched
Behind the hedge. One bite from the apple, as the victim's
Ford Fiesta trickles
Up the driveway. The car door opens. The apple's thrown
away.

There's a breath of fresh tar. The scent will always summon
up that afternoon,
As it blossoms into apple, into mouth. It's hanging in the air
as Dr Jekyll finally
Makes it into Belfast. Beyond the steamed-up window, the half-
dismantled gasworks
Loom up, like a rusty *film noir* laboratory – carboys, vats,
alembics, coils, retorts.
It's that effect where one image warps into the other, like the
double helix

Of the DNA code, his footsteps dogged throughout the action
by another. Or
A split screen might suggest the parallels of past and present,
Jekyll ticking
Downwards in the lift, as Hyde runs down the spiral stairwell.
Till they meet.

What looks to us like a crackly newsreel, the picture jumping
with flak,
Is the spotted, rust-tinged mirror screwed above the Belfast
sink. Jekyll's head
Is jerking back and forward on the rim. Red confetti spatters
the white glaze.
The camera backtracks to take in a tattered *Homes and
Gardens* kitchen supplement.
A pair of hands – *lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor, and
thickly shadowed*
With swart hair – come into view, and flick the pages of the
magazine.
Belfast, the voice says, not *Belfast*. Then the credits roll.



*Darkness never flows
except down by the river:
shimmering fireflies.*

— Chiyo



*Wild rough seas tonight:
yawning over Sado Isle,
snowy galaxies.*

— Basho

Hamlet

As usual, the clock in The Clock Bar was a good few minutes fast:

A fiction no one really bothered to maintain, unlike the story
The comrade on my left was telling, which no one knew for
certain truth:

*Back in 1922, a sergeant, I forget his name, was shot outside the
National Bank*

Ah yes, what year was it that they knocked it down? Yet, its
memory's as fresh

As the inky smell of new pound notes – which interferes with
the beer-and-whiskey

Tang of now, like two dogs meeting in the revolutionary 69 of
a long sniff,

Or cattle jostling shit-stained flanks in the Pound. For *pound*, as
some wag

Interrupted, was an off-shoot of the Falls, from the Irish, *fál*,
a hedge;

Hence, *any kind of enclosed thing*, its twigs and branches
commemorated

By the soldiers' drab and olive camouflage, as they try to melt
Into a brick wall; red coats might be better, after all. *At any rate,*
*This sergeant's number came up; not a winning one. The bullet had
his name on it.*

Though Sergeant X, as we'll call him, doesn't really feature
in the story:

The nub of it is, *This tin can which was heard that night,*
trundling down

*From the bank, down Balaklava Street. Which thousands heard, and
no one ever*

*Saw. Which was heard for years, any night that trouble might be
Round the corner . . . and when it skittered to a halt, you knew
That someone else had snuffed it: a name drifting like an
afterthought,
A scribbled wisp of smoke you try and grasp, as it becomes
diminuendo, then
Vanishes. For fál, is also frontier, boundary, as in the undiscovered
country
From whose bourne no traveller returns, the illegible, thorny hedge
of time itself –
Heartstopping moments, measured not by the pulse of a wrist-
watch, nor
The archaic anarchists' alarm-clock, but a mercury tilt device
Which 'only connects' on any given bump on the road. So, by
this wingèd messenger
The promise 'to pay the bearer' is fulfilled:*

*As someone buys another round, an Allied Irish Banks £10
note drowns in
The slops of the counter; a Guinness stain blooms on the
artist's impression
Of the sinking of *The Girona*; a tiny foam hisses round the
salamander brooch
Dredged up to show how love and money endure, beyond
death and the Armada,
Like the bomb-disposal expert in his suit of salamander-cloth.
Shielded against the blast of time by a strangely-mediaeval
visor,
He's been outmoded by this jerky robot whose various
attachments include
A large hook for turning over corpses that may be booby-trapped;
But I still have this picture of his hands held up to avert the
future*

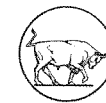
In a final act of *No surrender*, as, twisting through the murky
fathoms
Of what might have been, he is washed ashore as pearl and
coral.

This *strange eruption to our state* is seen in other versions of the
Falls:
A no-go area, a ghetto, a demolition zone. For the ghost, as it turns
out –
All this according to your man, and I can well believe it – this
tin ghost,
Since the streets it haunted were abolished, was never heard
again.
The sleeve of Raglan Street has been unravelled; the helmet of
Balaklava
Is torn away from the mouth. The dim glow of Garnet has gone
out,
And with it, all but the memory of where I lived. I, too, heard
the ghost:
A roulette trickle, or the hesitant annunciation of a downpour,
ricocheting
Off the window; a goods train shunting distantly into a siding,
Then groaning to a halt; the rainy cries of children after dusk.
For the voice from the grave reverberates in others' mouths, as
the sails
Of the whitethorn hedge swell up in a little breeze, and tremble
Like the spiral blossom of Andromeda: so suddenly are shrouds
and branches
Hung with street-lights, celebrating all that's lost, as fields are
reclaimed
By the Starry Plough. So we name the constellations, to put a
shape
On what was there; so, the storyteller picks his way between
the isolated stars.

But, *Was it really like that?* And, *Is the story true?*
You might as well tear off the iron mask, and find that no one,
after all,
Is there: nothing but a cry, a summons, clanking out from the
smoke
Of demolition. Like some son looking for his father, or the
father for his son,
We try to piece together the exploded fragments. Let these
broken spars
Stand for the Armada and its proud full sails, for even if
The clock is put to rights, everyone will still believe it's fast:
The barman's shouts of *time* will be ignored in any case, since
time
Is conversation; it is the hedge that flits incessantly into the
present,
As words blossom from the speakers' mouths, and the flotilla
returns to harbour,
Long after hours.

Ciaran Carson

**THE IRISH
FOR NO**



Gallery Books

The Irish for No was first published
by The Gallery Press
in July 1987.
Reprinted October 1994.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

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ISBN 1 85235 016 4 (*paperback*)
ISBN 1 85235 017 2 (*clothbound*)



Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to John Campbell of Mullaghbawn whose storytelling suggested some of the narrative procedures of some of these poems; and to Michael Foley for reminding him of what Frank Ifield really sang.

The Gallery Press receives financial assistance from An Chomhairle Ealaíon / The Arts Council, Ireland.

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Belfast Confetti

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining
exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the
explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of
rapid fire . . .
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept
stuttering,
All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and
colons.

I know this labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman,
Odessa Street –
Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street.
Dead end again.
A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-
talkies. What is
My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A
fusillade of question-marks.

Clearance

The Royal Avenue Hotel collapses under the breaker's
pendulum:
Zig-zag stairwells, chimney-flues, and a 'thirties mural
Of an elegantly-dressed couple doing what seems to be the
Tango, in Wedgewood
Blue and white – happy days! Suddenly more sky
Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from nowhere –

There, through a gap in the rubble, a greengrocer's shop
I'd never noticed until now. Or had I passed it yesterday?
Everything –
Yellow, green and purple – is fresh as paint. Rain glistens on the
aubergines
And peppers; even from this distance, the potatoes smell of
earth.

Linear B

Threading rapidly between crowds on Royal Avenue, reading
Simultaneously, and writing in this black notebook, peering
through
A cracked lens fixed with Sellotape, his *rendez-vous* is not quite
vous.
But from years of watching, I know the zig-zags circle:
He has been the same place many times, never standing still.

One day I clicked with his staccato walk, and glimpsed the
open notebook:
Squiggles, dashes, question-marks, dense as the Rosetta stone.
His good eye glittered at me: it was either nonsense, or a
formula – for
Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the
collapsing city.

Night Patrol

Jerking his head spasmodically as he is penetrated by invisible
gunfire,

The private wakes to a frieze of pull-outs from *Contact* and
Men Only.

Sellotape and Blu-Tack. The antiquated plumbing is stuttering
that he

Is not in Balkan Street or Hooker Street, but in a bunk bed
In the Grand Central Hotel: a room that is a room knocked into
other rooms.

But the whole Victorian creamy façade has been tossed off
To show the inner-city tubing: cables, sewers, a snarl of
Portakabins,

Soft-porn shops and carry-outs. A Telstar Taxis depot that is a
hole

In a breeze-block wall, a wire grille and a voice-box uttering
gobbledygook.

August 1969

As the huge façade of Greeves's Mill is washed in a Niagara of
flame

The riot fizzles out. Still smouldering as the troops march in,
this welcome,

Singing, dancing on the streets. Confetti drifts across the city:

Charred receipts and bills-of-lading, contracts, dockets, pay-
slips.

The weave is set: a melt of bobbins, spindles, shuttles.

Happy days, my mother claims, the mill-girls chattering,
linking arms.

But then, it all changed when I met your father. The flicker of a
smile.

It lights again on this creased photograph, a weekend
honeymoon.

She is crossing the Liffey, the indelible ink of *Dublin*
September 1944.

Campaign

They had questioned him for hours. Who exactly was he?
And when
He told them, they questioned him again. When they accepted
who he was, as
Someone not involved, they pulled out his fingernails. Then
They took him to a waste-ground somewhere near the
Horseshoe Bend, and told him
What he was. They shot him nine times.

A dark umbilicus of smoke was rising from a heap of burning
tyres.
The bad smell he smelt was the smell of himself. Broken glass
and knotted Durex.
The knuckles of a face in a nylon stocking. I used to see him in
the Gladstone Bar,
Drawing pints for strangers, his almost-perfect fingers flecked
with scum.

Smithfield Market

Sidelong to the arcade, the glassed-in April cloud – fleeting,
pewter-edged –
Gets lost in shadowed aisles and inlets, branching into
passages, into cul-de-sacs,
Stalls, compartments, alcoves. Everything unstitched,
unravelling – mouldy fabric,
Rusted heaps of nuts and bolts, electrical spare parts: the
ammunition dump
In miniature. Maggots seethe between the ribs and
corrugations.

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a
map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the
labyrinth.

Army

The duck patrol is waddling down the odd-numbers side of
Raglan Street,
The bass-ackwards private at the rear trying not to think of a
third eye
Being drilled in the back of his head. Fifty-five. They stop.
The head
Peers round, then leaps the gap of Balaclava Street. He waves
the body over
One by one. Forty-nine. Cape Street. A gable wall. Garnet
Street. A gable wall.

Frere Street. Forty-seven. Forty-five-and-a-half. Milan Street.
A grocer's shop.
They stop. They check their guns. Thirteen. Milton Street. An
iron lamp-post.
Number one. Ormond Street. *Two ducks in front of a duck and
two ducks*
Behind a duck, how many ducks? Five? No. Three. This is not the end.

33333

I was trying to explain to the invisible man behind the wire-
grilled
One-way mirror and squawk-box exactly where it was I
wanted to go, except
I didn't know myself – a number in the Holy Land, Damascus
Street or Cairo?
At any rate in about x amount of minutes, where x is a small
number,
I found myself in the synthetic leopard-skin bucket-seat of a
Ford Zephyr

Gunning through a mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way
systems. We shoot out
Under the glare of the sodium lights along the blank brick wall
of the Gasworks
And I start to ease back: I know this place like the back of my
hand, except
My hand is cut off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I
never knew existed.

Two Winos

Most days you will find this pair reclining on the waste ground
Between Electric Street and Hemp Street, sharing a bottle of
Drawbridge
British Wine. They stare at isolated clouds, or puffs of steam
which leak out
From the broken pipes and vents at the back of the Franklin
Laundry . . .
They converse in snarls and giggles, and they understand each
other perfectly.

Just now they have entered the giggling phase, though what
there is
To laugh at, who knows. Unless it was this momentary ray of
sunlight
That glanced across their patch of crushed coke, broken glass
and cinders;
And the bottle which had seemed half-empty until then is now
half-full.

Cocktails

Bombing at about ninety miles an hour with the exhaust
skittering
The skid-marked pitted tarmac of Kennedy Way, they hit the
ramp and sailed
Clean over the red-and-white guillotine of the check-point
and landed
On the M1 flyover, then disappeared before the Brits knew
what hit them. So
The story went: we were in the Whip and Saddle bar of the
Europa.

There was talk of someone who was shot nine times and lived,
and someone else
Had the inside info. on the Romper Room. We were trying to
remember the facts
Behind the Black & Decker case, when someone ordered
another drink and we entered
The realm of Jabberwocks and Angels' Wings, Widows'
Kisses, Corpse Revivers.

Travellers

On the waste ground that was Market Street and Verner
Street, wandering trouserless
Through his personal map – junked refrigerators, cars and
cookers, anchored
Caravans – the small boy trips over an extended tow-bar, picks
himself up, giggles
And pisses on a smouldering mound of *Pampers*. *Sic transit
gloria mundi* –
This is the exact site, now that I recall it, of Murdock's stables,
past tense.

Murdock himself moved out to the *Flying Horse* estate some
years ago. He wanted
To end his days among friends; there were Murdocks in the
local graveyard.
The long umbilicus of dung between his back yard and
Downpatrick faded. Belfast
Tore itself apart and patched things up again. Like this. Like
his extended family.

Box

I can't sleep as long as I see this man with a cardboard box
perched
On his head – no hands, his body bent into the *S* or *Z* of a
snake-charmer's
Rope. HP Sauce, Heinz Baked Beans or Crosse & Blackwell's
Cock-a-Leekie?
Hen-stepping out of a pea-soup fog, he makes a shift for
Cornmarket
And pops up again in Smithfield: has he discarded this box
for another?

In all these years, don't ask me what was in there: that would
take
A bird's-eye view. But I get a whiff of homelessness, a scaldy
fallen
From a nest into another nest, a cross between a toothbrush
and a razor.
Open-mouthed, almost sleeping now. A smell of meths and
cardboard.

Slate Street School

Back again. Day one. Fingers blue with cold. I joined the
lengthening queue.
Roll-call. Then inside: chalk-dust and iced milk, the smell of
watered ink.
Roods, perches, acres, ounces, pounds, tons weighed
imponderably in the darkening
Air. We had chanted the twelve-times table for the twelfth or
thirteenth time
When it began to snow. Chalky numerals shimmered down; we
crowded to the window –

*These are the countless souls of purgatory, whose numbers constantly
diminish
And increase; each flake as it brushes to the ground is yet another soul
released.*
And I am the avenging Archangel, stooping over mills and
factories and barracks.
I will bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow: inches,
feet, yards, chains, miles.

PART THREE

The Irish for No

Was it a vision, or a waking dream? I heard her voice before I saw
What looked like the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, except
Romeo
Seemed to have shinned up a pipe and was inside arguing with
her. The casements
Were wide open and I could see some Japanese-style wall-
hangings, the dangling
Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile. *It's got nothing*, she was
snarling, *nothing*
To do with politics, and, before the bamboo curtain came down,
That goes for you too!

It was time to turn into the dog's-leg short-cut from Chlorine
Gardens
Into Cloreen Park, where you might see an *Ulster Says No*
scrawled on the side
Of the power-block – which immediately reminds me of the
Eglantine Inn
Just on the corner: on the missing *h* of Cloreen, you might say.
We were debating,
Bacchus and the pards and me, how to render *The Ulster Bank –*
the Bank
That Likes to Say Yes into Irish, and whether eglantine was alien
to Ireland.
I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, when *yes* is the verb repeated,
Not exactly *yes*, but phatic nods and whispers. *The Bank That*
Answers All
Your Questions, maybe? That Greek portico of Mourne granite,
dazzling
With promises and feldspar, mirrors you in the Delphic black
of its windows.

And the bruised pansies of the funeral parlour are dying in
reversed gold letters,

The long sigh of the afternoon is not yet complete on the
promontory where the victim,
A corporal in the UDR from Lisbellaw, was last seen having
driven over half
Of Ulster, a legally-held gun was found and the incidence of
stress came up
On the headland which shadows Larne Harbour and the black
pitch of warehouses.
There is a melancholy blast of diesel, a puff of smoke which
might be black or white.
So the harbour slips away to perilous seas as things remain
unsolved; we listen
To the *ex cathedra* of the fog-horn, and *drink and leave the world
unseen* –

What's all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled
Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker? It was just
a normal morning
When they came. The tennis-court shone with dew or frost, a
little before dawn.
The border, it seemed, was not yet crossed: the Milky Way
trailed snowy brambles,
The stars clustered thick as blackberries. They opened the door
into the dark:
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. Empty jam-jars.
Mish-mash. Hotch-potch. And now you rub your eyes and get
acquainted with the light
A dust of something reminiscent drowns over the garage smell
of creosote,
The concrete: blue clouds in porcelain, a paint-brush steeped in
a chipped cup;
Staples hyphenate a wet cardboard box as the upturned can
of oil still spills
And the unfed cat toys with the yin-yang of a tennis-ball,
debating whether *yes is no*.

Serial

As the Guinness-like chiaroscuro of the cat settled into the
quickthorn hedge
I had a feeling I'd been there before: in a black taxi, for
example, when this bullet
Drilled an invisible bee-line through the open window and
knocked a chip
Off the Scotch sandstone façade of the Falls Road Library.
Everybody ducked
To miss the already-dead split-second; the obvious soldier
relaxed back into
His Guinness-and-tan uniform, since to hear the shot is to
know you are alive.

It is this lapse of time which gives the film its serial quality: the
next
Episode is about the giant statue of the newly-renovated
Carson, verdigris becoming
Bronze. It is suggested that it might be camouflage – as glossed
on
In the SF novels of W. D. Mackes, particularly in
his novel, *The X
People*. And so in the words of another commentator, *the future is
only today
Fading into the past* – drawing, perhaps, a retrospective dotted
line on the map

For from here the border makes a peninsula of the South,
especially in the shallows
Of Lough Erne, where so much land is so much water anyway.
And, since the Ormsby
Room in Lakeland still remains un-named, they are thinking of
calling it
Something else: not a name, but the name of a place. Blacklion,
for instance.

The City in Michael Longley and Ciarán Carson

Community

Only in [...] communication are singular beings given – without a bond *and* without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common and fusional interiority. Communication is the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity. In its being, as its very being, singularity is exposed to the outside. By virtue of this position or this primordial structure, it is at once detached, distinguished, and communitarian. Community is the presentation of the detachment (or retrenchment) of this distinction that is not individuation, but finitude compearing.

-- Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)

Modernist cities

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
[...]
No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...

-- from T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917)

'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'

-- from Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Theories of the City

The city has always had relations with the society located within it, with its constitutive elements (countryside and agriculture, offensive and defensive powers, political powers, the States, etc.), and with its history. The city changes when the society within it changes. However, the city's transformations are not the passive results of the global society, nor of its own modifications. The city also relies on (and no less essentially) relations of immediacy, direct connections between the individuals and the groups which make up society (families, organised bodies, professions and corporations); it is no more reducible to the organisation of these immediate connections, than to the metamorphoses in their changing.

-- from Henri Lefèbvre, *Le droit à la ville* [*The Right to the City*] (1968)

To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way. From their very inception, cities have arisen through the geographical and social concentration of a surplus product.

-- from David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2012)

We should also have to re-evaluate [...] the respective roles of States, Unions, Federations or State Confederations on the one hand. And of the cities on the other. If the name and identity of something like the city still has a meaning, could it, when dealing with the related questions of hospitality and refuge, elevate itself above nation-states[?]

-- from Jacques Derrida, 'On Cosmopolitanism' in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (1997)