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Selections from *Still This Need*

(Coventry: Heaventree Press, 2009)

### Fledgling

This is the time of night  
when freight trains start to rumble past  
and flicker their electric light  
and let off their sharp blasts.  
I'd just got off to sleep at last,

it seems, but now awake  
I want to conjure up a bird,  
for you, a lapwing, a corncrake,  
a teal – those ones you've heard  
me list before. Without a word

I'll bring it to the bed,  
this quiet living thing, this gift  
of air, and set it by your head,  
and add my own and drift  
towards slumber. For what else could lift

me off to sleep except  
a grounded bird to keep an eye  
on our slight bodies – unslept –  
exhausted by surprise,  
two timid fledglings in the sky?

## The Rookery

*for Anthony Taylor, who was burned out, 2005*

He showed me where the rooks had made their nests  
amongst the chestnut trees behind his house.  
Weightier noise had not been heard before,  
the high-pitched lumber of their working calls,  
to build those nests, to build that fort of nests.  
And the missiles that we dodged, air defence,  
sticks and nuts, chunks of bark and shit, and noise,  
noise their best defence. We hid there in  
the shelter of the sheugh and let them hush  
their panicked calls, and let them rest their beaks,  
their breaths, and let the coastline quieten,  
until, who knows what set it off – a branch  
snapped somewhere in the woods, a fallen cone –  
the black wave buckled into flight, an arch  
of noise and weight and always looping back.

### Cartographers on Errigal

*Nimh*: Poison (Gaelic) *Neamh*: Heaven (Gaelic)

Scatch-grass and slow water, wild-roaming lambs.  
This is what we take in on the walk  
through briars and whins, until we start to climb  
the hulk of rock, moon rock, unfathomable rock,  
patched in the crimson blood of Balor slain  
by Lugh, and the quartzite white that cakes  
its peak and shines a beacon on the glen,  
and sends the light in bolts across the lake.

The English, when they came here, named it 'Poison'  
and that is how it stands. The two words were  
the same to them, their vowels different,  
and too few listened when the troops were sent  
to take the stock of a shattered farmer:  
'Heaven, this is the place we call heaven.'

## The Burial

Despite the fear, the knowing lurch of what he'd lost  
and could in future lose, there was still the need.

He headed east in spring, Dunseverick, Ballintoy,  
under the red bulk of Knocklayd, where the road

swerved through banks of mottled gorse, and the rock,  
carved out like a piece of wood that's lathed and turned,

produced the forest park where it had happened  
fifteen years before: the unforgivable, taken

as a given. He bought an ice cream from the vendor  
and asked himself, *Am I remembered here? Or has*

*it been too long?* He had stood there a thousand times,  
it seemed, always when the light was high on the lip

of the glen, and the cold sent a shudder to the spine  
and the wind would find its silence. For there was still

the need, to stand beneath the trees and smell the soil,  
the furring bark, and watch the hedge-line redden

in the dusk. He closed his eyes and listened to the rustle  
of the leaves up in the dark, and shivered as it all

came back to him: the unremarkable hatchbacks,  
the pick-axe and the shovels, the way the earth turned

easily under the weight of his foot, the edge of the spade.  
Then the smouldering unrest of the life he'd made.

## Resurrection

As the cod that's cooked in a mountain  
of salt comes out delicate as butter, a fur  
of disappearances, unrecognisable,  
so have I buried the book of our lives  
in the salt mines of Cheshire, twenty  
miles of white tunnels, two hundred feet deep.  
I have taken a knife and carved out a shelf  
and placed there the first time we met,  
the bar where I read you my poems,  
the movies we watched, the first piece of furniture  
you bolted together, the meals that we ate;  
I have stored them in salt where they will  
be dry, not feel the touch of blight:  
these thoughts, these kisses, these places,  
this memory of a white fish becoming tongue,  
mouth, throat, disappearing into your body

## The Cycling Geologist

*Grenville Arthur James Cole (1859-1924)*

### Excursion 1: The Gypsy Road

Poland first, and the minerals of Myslenice,  
then across the alluvial plains, and up through  
the Tatra mountains, Grenville on the three-wheeled  
Humber-Beeston, Gerald Butler in the crow's nest,  
the old penny-farthing, keeping a fair speed, cutting  
through limestone, a curious couple, unused to the heat,  
unused to the local uses of language, when to speak German  
and when to speak English, and when either would see a slammed door.  
With the help of strong thighs they entered the Alps,  
cooled tired muscles in the river at Garam,  
stopped off to see the mines at Hajnik, at Schopferstollen  
ran fingers across the silver, two Slovakian boys  
holding the lanterns, beaming at payment, then  
the cone at Schladinberg, and the burning coals  
near Dux (*Oligocene, Miocene*), burning, still  
and always burning – how he found the time to note  
the sediments, scribble down his verses on volcanoes,  
collect and store the fragments for his students –  
one thousand and fifty miles in thirty-eight days,  
Krakow to Coblenz, the legs turning, the tinkle  
of stones in the spokes, the odd whirr of wheels  
startling horses. You can never imagine a grimace,  
a face strained at a hill, but it must have been there.  
Instead there is only the thought of him smiling,  
free-wheeling past olive groves, leaning back his sun-hatted head  
and shouting to Butler in the gods: 'It is wonderful  
what amount of rock has to be cut away before  
you can make a decently artistic mountain.'

### Excursion 2: *As We Ride*

It had been her idea to cycle down the aisle,  
and Grenville, still so much her tutor, had agreed;  
it was like they'd cycled from the church and never stopped,  
honeymoon turned lifelong expedition, France, Germany,  
Poland and the Balkans, and Ireland too, her homeland  
and his home. What he made of rocks she made of people:  
cold and brittle, overwhelming, or, uniquely interesting,

made with the sort of edge that will take three years to understand, such time to stop not known on their itinerary.

Sometimes they grew tired.

There is a photograph of her, circa 1900, sheltering beneath a tree, her head resting in her hands, fed up, watching her husband pull off his boot, their bikes stacked on the verge. But she fell in love with Orahova, and so did he, the small town deep between iced mountains, the name they chose for their home in Carrickmines.

### Excursion 3: Ireland Student Trip 1903

*Dalradian, Silurian, Carboniferous.*

It was an unknown language for the west, a queer way to talk of Mayo, the gristly bogs of Galway. The boys made notes studiously, and one stopped to snap the teacher's 'Roadster' beneath Croagh Patrick, or maybe he snapped it himself, the tool of the new evangelism, funded by the State, peddling talk of millions east through Omagh, under Slieve Gallion to the Antrim Plateau – *gneissic, Tertiary, Cretaceous*. They rooted around in Kilroot for salts from the Triassic, then belted down to Belfast to chip off basalt from Cave Hill, and on the last day, up at the crack of dawn, they scaled Slieve Donard, watched the light moving barren and brown across the Mourne.

Oh for a last free-wheel, he thought, his legs beginning to seize, his hands locked tight on the bars, (the funding stopped).

Oh for another hundred million years of cycling!

A zip down mountains with the wind moaning softly in the pass.

### Still Life with Five Nests

*I sent a basket containing birds' nests to your address today. I have some in my own studio too. They are nests of the thrush, the blackbird, the golden oriole, the wren and the finch. I hope they will arrive safe and sound.*

Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Anthon van Rappard, 1885.

*When we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world.*

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

They are a pallet of pastels: mauve, pink,  
a tiny speck of rouge. Fluttery, flighty,  
my fingers pulled the knot out of the string,  
unpicked the gum, let the brown paper fall,  
revealing them, cuckolded in their square nest,  
a selection of wild birds, a coterie of houses.  
How must he have held them in his hands,  
cupped them close and listened  
for some noise of life beneath the shell,  
a heartbeat nurtured by the warmth  
of matted feathers. And the cleverness  
of nests, the toil of days of labouring  
at twigs and roots, this one a grassy cup,  
and this a ball of leaves, its strength the folly  
in its disrepair. This one would be high  
in the forks of slender trees, lodged fast  
to the bark in the late May winds. I can  
only just surmise what is hidden in their  
tight warmth, a narrative of craftsmanship  
and brood, daily attachment. A song thrush  
smashing snail shells for the flesh,  
a blackbird darting full tilt from the cat.  
Boys paid fifty cents to prise them  
from the bushes and the trees, an artist  
who would collect them, paint them,  
summon up the birds careering round  
the cornfields, hold them in his hands  
against the black canvas: whole, flightless.



## The Granite State

New Hampshire, 1845. The Ammonoosuc River tumbles white and grey below Mount Washington, where, like factory-carts in the black pits of the north, they spill towards the summit.

Eight horses, heavy laden with buckets, satchels, notebooks and knives, navigating through boulders on the well-worn path, a stodgy mule taking the rear, hooves cracking on dark flints.

Lyell, the geologist, a butterfly-net pendulating from his saddle like a metronome as they pitch up-hill, hoiks a piece of rock from the tundra and scrapes the lichen delicately onto a glass.

He loves these moments when he gets into the field, caresses the elements, lets his mind feed. He notes how the cloud-shadows unveil the banded colours of the trees, and the lakes shining like silver.

Yesterday, with the kind guidance of locals, he stood in the clearing at Crawford's Notch, where the land slipped one afternoon and crushed the Willey family without a moment's notice –

all nine out with the crops, or painting the white fences, thoughts on the evening meal, they turned to see the mountain fall and could not run. They left life in the sudden shift, the glacial past.

Arctic plants and hemlock. Balsam fir, white pine and spruce. He breathes wide mountain air. *Still young*, he thinks, eyeing the valley, *still young enough to change the world again*.

He thinks mountains and landscape and lineage. He thinks granite. He is thinking of the Highlands he walked in his youth, of the island of Arran. He sees in the granite the kindred thing.

## Reprieve

For the sake of recovery: the county of chalk.  
Wind in one furious push at West Kennett  
Long Barrow, the river green below and flooded.  
Inside, stone laid heavily on stone and recent  
offerings: flowers, feathers, marbles, a dead mouse.

We return to light. The horizontal rain ochres  
the hay-bales, and sarsens loom like strangers  
on the hillside. A smell of hash kicks the air  
and disappears. They're tying ribbons to the trees.  
The valley is still. That nothing changed

in a thousand years, heads and parts of bodies  
placed here in the darkness, a ritual never  
written down or carved in rock, while fields  
stayed green and water ran its course, is alien to us.  
We alter daily, and find our histories malleable.

## At Last

there is some colour in the house.  
Quite amazing, how these four daffodils  
have made this room so bright, made the blank walls  
painted, the light come back into the space.

It's all so simple. Pick them from the sides  
of busy roads, their petals grey with fumes.  
Then put them in a jam-jar. Now you've made  
an ornament, a pet, a fire, a home,

now an installation, a mausoleum.  
I never thought I'd love such sentiment,  
and did not think I'd dare to talk of pain.  
I didn't want to take the easy slant

on things. Did not intend. But here we are,  
a room, one window, four yellow flowers.

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