

Martin DYAR

From the collection *Maiden Names*

The Badger

Go out, good son, traipse off across the hill,
in glowing hood, with lewd nocturnal eye.

Go out and slouch across the walls of dawn,
all aptitude and bluebell pride and tooth.

Go out, my son, and stave a whitethorn beast
by ancestral grin and doggedness in rain.

Defy, my son, the pasture, the imperial sheds;
with nettle mind, defy the piercing town.

And when by farming, son, the farms are lost,
and tangled night becomes a badger throne,

then restore, my fattened son, the digging way,
unlatch the earth, release your father's bones.

The Joy of Cards

I'm ninety-four, but I tend to say
that I am younger by ten years.
It quells the astonishment of some.

Twice every week, I travel by bus
to play cards in Cricklewood.
I wouldn't have this rhythm questioned

and I don't like being reminded
that perhaps I should be frailer than I am.
If doubt occurs, I picture time.

Nothing surer than time's love.
In the joy of a card night, it's there:
hosts of summers summoning me still.

And, anyway, it's far too easily felt
these days that one has lived too long.
'I'm in my eighties', I say, my tone

informative, cautiously warm,
into the ear of whoever is curious,
no echo of what this world makes of life.

Doctor Foster

In your mother's time Foster was at his best.
He'd come to town, once, maybe twice a year,
a bulging, bearded figure, full of life.

He'd always been the warts and depression man,
effective with his similar approach to both.
Only in later years - market forces -

did he style himself a pregnancy guru.
It stung me, but from the gate I'd watch the clinic:
local women assembling in the sun,

and Foster there regaling them, guffawing
in shared delight when told a previous
pain had passed, performing bashfulness

if someone brought a gift. In the end, love
drove me to dream of staging a disgrace
of the man. That shrewd womb-tinkering air

would no longer leave me picturing my girls
signed up to feel the body's hold on the heart
made less in a fabulous afternoon of trust.

Independence

His mother and his sisters gave up on him
in his forties. There were admirers in the town,
opportunities in Galway and Dublin,
yet doggedly he built his vintage solitude.

And even in the years when the odd echo
of his origins could reach him still, in the dawn
of his middle-age loneliness, he persevered.
Suicide spoke, but he'd the same deafness ready.

Lately though, at night, his blood gathers itself
against that will. It ladles across his mind
an early vanity: memories of being wanted,
memories, some fictive, of being silver-tongued.
While his heart, a kind of fox, climbs down to the lake
and begs the dark to strike or bless the cottage.

Remedia Amoris

In reaching past the loss of love,
both hands play their part;
one to jettison old hope,
one to close the heart.

Death and the Post Office

The job they're given is fairly simple.
Find the place,
go in for half an hour and discuss the settlement.
Consider, if it's appropriate,
the few antiques: the safe,
the signs, the switchboard.
Glance at the books, the electrics.
Perhaps fill out some forms.
But these aul' ones, these Cathleens, these Annies,
they can be fierce long-winded.
For some of our lads their ways
are just too compelling.

Some accept a drink, some'll have lunch.
We'd a Polish guy who took
a ninety-two-year-old out in the van.
She showed him a ball alley.
Fair enough: dozens of ghosts
and no graffiti. But if you're not direct
about the job? You understand,
we've had to weed out the dreamers.
Immunity to stories, I find,
is the primary quality.
You don't want to be sitting at an old table,
under a clock that strikes you

as fabulously loud.
Or find yourself cradled by the past,
thinking a man need venture
no further west than the brink he meets
in a mouthful of milky tea.
If the archive-harboured frailty
of the postmistress soothes you;
if her wit grants you the lost farm
and maternity of the world;
if her isolated, dwindling village, a place
without a pub or a shop,
whose nearest decent

sized town is itself desperately quiet -
if these things move you ...
What I mean is, if you can't meet
a forgotten countryside
head on, and calmly dismantle her,
fold her up, carry her out,
and ship her back
to Head Office, however ambiguous,
however heavy-handed or fateful,
however bloody poignant
the whole affair might seem to you;
if you can't stand your ground

when a steep moment
of hospitable chat and reminiscence
might tempt you to put
your mobile phone on silent,
or worse, blinded by plates of fruit cake,
to switch it off completely;
if you cannot accompany
an inevitable change, knowing
you did not cause these people, these ways, to vanish,
and if you will not sign off
on expired things for us,
then, I'm sorry, but you are not our man.

Local Knowledge

You'll be hearing about me when you visit.
In town they'll describe me as mad in the head.
And I suppose I might've earned that judgment.
Yes, I stole the sign for Cloonygowan Stone Fort
three times, battling for years with the Council

and never once replying to them. But your friends
the gossipers cannot imagine my contentment,
up there for hours, preening the fort, weeding her,
sunk in energetic silence, fixing the pathways
the tourists won't use. How could those people
having branded me a queerhawk, a bollocks
or a looney, how could they come to appreciate
my good days, the changeable weather lighting
my work, my afternoons shielded and primed
by limestone time sealed in yet still affirming
a misanthropic wealth at the heart of things?
Dear visitor, when your hosts point me out,
as you drive down one of our several hundred
remarkable boreens, if I'm there with my collies,
on the glossy verge, in sunlight, scythe in hand,
framed by thorns and flowers, as I mostly am,
and if the stories told serve to quicken the thrum
of Ireland on your nerves, leaving you unable
to tune in to sounds beyond the voice of the town
conveying with cold humour the quizzical threat
of a solitary farmer, a loveless man who had only
his mother, all his faceless sisters dead in Leeds,
if they speak of the last time I was seen jarred,
getting into bother, two years ago, on Fair Day,
my stoical dogs at the copshop gate next morning -
well, my friend, you're welcome to the legend
and to your slant on the pain and the peace behind it.
But if I don't salute you as you pass, minding
my step, as your jeep berates the trickling ditches
and you travel into Callow, Lismorane, Toomore
and Renbrack (I'll meet no other traffic that day)
and if, as I vanish, you're rooting for your camera
convinced my face like nothing else bespeaks
old Mayo - if I'm your bog icon, then good luck.
Your towney guides are leading you astray.

In There

The swollen mare, an animate hillside dolmen,
was the warmest thing in the field.
In the rain we approached her
with the vet who would insert his arm
into the tight cave of her life,
under her tail, in there, where I imagined
tongues of Braille-flesh spoke things on his hand
that my parents paid him to translate.

And I could not imagine her insides as dark.
I thought there had to be something there,
clearer than daylight, the stuff and the place
so profound to be said of, *life comes from*.
She groaned but stood still, an inconvenienced
yet tolerant oracle in our inquiring midst.

Sunk to his shoulder in hot equine withinness,
the vet fixed his eye on the distance and read.
And then, the check-up complete, his sheathed arm
glistening with the grease of horse health,
he smoked and spoke to my parents.

With the sight of the mare's soaked oak neck,
big veins there like suede worms,
my eight year old mind pulsed,
her mane of treacle laces, her bulbous inky eyes,
maternal in ways that made me feel safe and sad.

Drizzle drifted through
where steam from her body met
our visible breaths,
two clouds of creaturely presence
diffusing together in February light.

Pleased, we descended the hill,
my ankles weak upon the hoof craters,
the Lilliputian castles of manure
unmade by Mayo weather; the rain
falling steadily upon
the ocean of sympathy that was
that sacred word, *foal*.

Wild Salmon

Wild salmon, that's what Michael used to call the Charlestown girls,
the few that would appear in the small pub a few times a year.
And just as we couldn't keep up with him in his swift drinking,

we could never hope to match his handling of these visitors.
The clear-headed lust, the primal strategy when two high heels
approached the bar to order drinks. Not physically 'handling' them,

never that, though his face offered an unkind hunger, part heartbreak,
part loquacious, vaguely forgivable lechery. But handling them
with congeniality, with cheeky, aimless friendship. And they'd respond,

smiling the smiles of women who've never dreamed so much craic
could be stirred by their arrival. The smile of unaccustomed glamour.
Thick make-up glowed in the glare of Michael's wit and his implication,

somehow sharper in the act of rolling a cigarette while talking: 'Listen girl,
a man has chosen you from the gaggle that climbed from that taxi
in the eternal rain of a dying town an hour ago. You've earned his heat,

his admiration. And you can glance back at your friends all you like
instead of replying; but I have you, haven't I? While the younger lads here,
your shyers, more likely wooers, skull pints in the shadow of my craft.'

Equine Therapy

Sam's father keeps gin in his car.
He has an eye on the riding lesson
but mostly he reads his paper and drinks.
His daughter is struggling. She doesn't
absorb what we pretend we're offering:
a second mind, a supplementary life-force.

The illness perched in Sam's personality
outmanoeuvres the games we play in the saddle.
It blanks the vast neutrality gathered
in the being of the horse. After the class
tonight I told her dad that my mares,
my ladies, are focussed, that they're mute

professionals of the highest order.
His face showed calm inconsolability
and he spoke from his place in life, ward
of this mordantly promiscuous girl,
unreachable in the backseat of his car,
compliant this time, but not content,

plainly immune to novel interventions.
I wanted to say the horses will nail it,
in time, that this is only the second week.
We should trust the grey. She's begun
to intuit the constriction, the hampered light
in the core of the cowed young rider.

I know by her. Tonight, as she feeds
she'll be hoping her new client's brain
will decelerate, lulled by a presence
unrousable without trotting. I could've

said: the burdens that burn us are contrived
by the cosmos to draw us here, into the clinic

of the wild. But lately I don't believe it,
although I'm fond of saying it, and though
a jargony, more detached version of that credo
is what seals my trickle of State funding.
How could I say that I've seen too many
like him, that my expert work is improvised,

subtle, impacting, and heartening as it is,
that there are days I seek to cut with my love alone
the unkind roots that live in these children,
or that there are nights I go to the stables,
view my glowing team where they rest,
and deem them cruel for wasting their boundless hearts.
