

**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.

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