

## Siobhan Ni Shíthigh

### Texts and poetry

#### The village was small

The village was small, its back to the mountains and its face to the great ocean and the horizon far beyond .It lay in a hollow and the road which ran twisting and bending through it rose to greet the mountains and the rising sun,A river ran at its foot where eels slid between boulders showing their silver white bellies in the dark water. Stepping stones took one across and then on to the path to the next village and through a field to an ancient place marked by crosses and a font and where roses grew out of the long grass. It was a time of ruin in the village, the remains of houses were standing silent, gables triangular, small windows framed the sea,nettles grew in fireplaces and briars covered lintels. My friend lived in a whitewashed house , its green paint-blistered door everopen , its floor sanded, its turf fire whiteashed,fragrant. From the up-stairs window of our house I watched the sun set and colour the sky ,I watched clouds darken,strengthen and move high, I waited for the first drops to spatter on the pane and I listened for the wind. I learned to gauge its timbre,its pitch and in a storm its moment of rest. From the front door I looked straight at the great purple cliffs of Ceann Sibéal and wondered at their changing notation in response to sea and sky , sun and cloud. Then there was the everpraying sighing sea,the roll, the cliff-echo ,the dying hiss and moan of wave,the down-beat of oar,the up-pull of wood on water,the song of the naomhóg,the speech of the men,rising and falling like the wave, its cadence clear over water. Close by was the lowing of cattle, the clang of bucket,the trundle of cart,at twilight the shouts of children at play rising higher and higher, the jangle of harness as a horse is loosened,weary –eyed hens roost, a grey goose shifts in her nest,now evening descends,the great sky covering all, gable , bothán and thorn, the jack-snipe calls from the reeds by the river, there the stepping-stones darken in the darker water and the white bellied eels know no rest, I crouch and hide,the stone is cold, I am three or four who knows, the stone is cold, the hair blown face of the cloud –hurrying sky looks down, I crouch and shift, the jack-snipe calls its goat-filled call, hurrying, scurrying,rushing of air,I am found. I am carried all the winding way home, straw showing gold at the edge of doors,and I am safe from the dog-barking night, the prow of the fox,the scurrying moon and the sigh and sough of the wind in the reeds by the river.

**Passage Two.** Above the darkening river lights look out from the hill  
 and we pass and away to the south Mount Leinster stands snow-capped,  
 fullmoon veiled, glistening, remote, in silent under the milky-way crossed sky,  
 and we reach the place  
 the town stands rooted, castle ruined,river-clung, street-creeping ancient-walled spired,  
 surprise of light-shafted chimney stacks,  
 roofs glowing purple after rain,  
 studded evening streams through castellation,  
 under bridge all is darkness,

willows sigh with the hiss of pain,  
 swans tread water ,  
 and the falls fall  
 stream strength of water,  
 this cacteracting town,  
 shafted down-wards  
 tilt of light gleam,  
 street-light pooling, pooling amber.

And the night calls from this  
 ramparted town,  
 King James sheltering,  
 stabling,hay marketing coal-carting, garrisoned  
 piked and baynotted town,  
 the night calls from her cassocked streets  
   streets falling and bending to the river  
   turning and rising to the hill,  
 night calls and trees stand  
 ever-embracing  
 shadowing ancient doorways  
 foot-worn granite slabs  
 and we pass  
 and the town mumbles in its sleep  
 night calls stretching and shifting  
 in lane and alley  
   mumbling words without re-call  
   remains of the past  
 going no-where die  
 with a dieing fall.  
 Day has dawned  
   sun-streaming Granby Row lifts

her face and the hill  
calling green green  
beechwood wooing ,blackbird knowing,  
strawberrybedded shines  
Cathedral tower pales  
and the rivers face shines like a Poor Clares.

They have ploughed the hill-field,  
I can follow each dark furrow  
skirting stone and thorn  
to its conclusion,  
Light streams through cloud  
and all is pattern now  
    lending shade to shadow  
should you return  
I'd walk this ground again.

I searched for honeysuckle;  
You know where the road dips  
and the horizon is lost,  
The way demands its own.

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### Swallows

On the breath of morning  
The swallows came  
from the plains of Egypt,  
as sapphire flying  
over bright sundrenched cities,  
taking rest in bazzars,  
under castle walls,  
dipping wing in the Seine.  
They came,blades of light,  
darting green in the yard,

to nest under tin.  
The young who twittered  
impatiently in the nests  
now sweep the sky  
with red eye and blue wing,  
daughters of the sun,  
knights of the air,  
who will bring summer  
to me again without fail.

*Translated from the Gaelic by the author.*

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### **In Clarendon Street Chapel.**

In Clarendon Street Chapel  
I watch light glow  
on a gilt candle stick  
and come slanting  
over the sanctuary rail  
to the marble hands of a saint  
and I think of you,  
a Mass being said for dead Carmelites,  
the prayer continues for them  
and I follow you to the kitchen's end  
where I feel the wind  
come under the door  
and I watch you and hear  
the sound of soap on board  
turn and turn about  
as it deadens in the cloth.  
You fold and I fold with you,  
I understand the order;  
the steeping overnight,  
the second wash in the morning,  
the wringing, the spreading  
on the lawn where sharp light  
will bleach.

The prayers move slowly,  
Hand in hand we go  
through the garden,  
around the haystacks,  
around and around  
and down the passage  
beside the wall,  
You raise me up,  
and up again,  
I see the little wren  
in its nest,  
Your tale of her old so old.  
As you lower me down,  
I see the dark purple patches  
on the back of your hand.

The morning you were ill  
I would not go into the room,  
and I return now to the  
place on the road  
at the gap in the Field of the Path,  
The prayer stops  
and I get word that you have passed.

*Translated from the Gaelic by Pádraig O'Snodaigh*

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### **Flight EI139 ( from Bucharest to Ireland)**

You speak of deceit  
in the cement cities  
of the Soviet Republic  
and my eye observes your head,  
the unyielding brow  
and the red shock of hair,  
telling of a race  
who lived free on the plains,

who believed the spirit  
returned incarnate again and again,  
and who called their river  
after the goddess Danu.

You speak of hunger  
and I trace your cheekbones,  
I count the shifts that  
define your jaw  
from chin to ear.  
You tell of a time  
(when free to travel)  
spent labouring in Holland  
and how the North Wing  
flayed your body.

How refined your hands!  
Are you Van Gogh incarnate  
come back to suffer  
again and again?

The seas are high  
this day in January 2008  
and the waves shot with green light,  
We prepare for landing  
anxiety a tremor in your eyes,  
our belts fastened  
we land,  
and from my heart  
I wish you well,  
I feel so helpless.

In the baggage hall  
I catch a glimpse of you,  
your frayed jacket,  
your small bag,  
then you are gone.

**I've had an end of it!**

You gave me flowers  
one morning,  
-red dahlias-  
I saw the larvae  
in the petal folds,  
returning after school  
they lay in tatters  
on the road.

You sent me for a message,  
returning at dusk  
a dog ran at me  
and I threw the satchel down.

I've had an end of it,  
I go down the centre  
of town today  
in summer frock,  
Tall, slim, dark,  
A secret wind  
directs me,  
I don't look back,  
I recognise the gods.

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**Tears**

Long long ago,  
bright welcome at the door  
long time since  
meeting greeting  
forever one thought  
tears come unbidden dear heart.

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**Surprise.**

She sees the sun  
on a bird's breast,  
a little leap from heart to heart,  
an echo  
of a wonder that once was  
but now far off,  
far off, my love.

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**In the Bank of Ireland**

Modes of language divide us  
and you remain one with your visions,  
living in narrow rooms  
in the grey black houses  
shadowed by the castle's ruins.  
The moon a silver coin  
shedding light through trees  
and you remain in possession of dreams.  
Your sacrifice to be seen  
in freezing weather  
on the roofs of buildings  
securing nails,  
the cross beams in place.  
Your testimony becomes a wonder  
in the Bank of Ireland  
on a Friday afternoon.  
I observe one of you  
in the queue,  
cement dust on your boots,  
a payslip in your hand,  
you take a photograph  
from the top pocket  
of your short jacket.  
I see a woman, three children  
and a touch of sky



over Vilnius? Sofia?  
 Istanbul? Warsaw? Budapest?  
 The line extends through  
 the porch in one body  
 to Court Place,  
 this Friday afternoon in Carlow,  
 No earth quakes,  
 No rock splits  
 and I understand your language.

Translated from the Gaelic by Pádraig O'Snodaigh

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### From THE WHITE-FLAGGED STONES

A LONGING FOR A BERRY POSSESSED HER  
 No stir of the hand  
 To ease the track  
 Of tears, to clear  
 My cheeks of grief:  
 In this kitchen,  
 A sudden death  
 Of morning.  
 I shove aside each vessel,  
 Each bitter mould of sour milk.  
 Light falls upon my table,  
 A blackbird escapes  
 Beneath leaves –  
 I grasp at the poem:  
 I, the bird, the bough.

Turn to me,  
 Turn to me,  
 My darling brother,  
 Turn to me  
 With your verbs,  
 Sweet as honey, seductive.

In the cry that trembles  
Each wall,  
Come to me in the wind,  
Dew-light kisses on my lips,  
Light as branches  
In the wind  
Of a water-meadow.

Bring me the tide entire,  
The sorrowing, aquamarine tide,  
Filling and ebbing  
In the pulse of night  
And night possesses you  
From the tombs of the sea,  
I carried in the round coffin:  
You the great tide  
On the white strand  
Of my desires.

I saw you beneath rowan,  
Your eyes speared  
To my own heart.  
Honey came in torrents  
From Lee blossom;  
And my herds rested  
In the shelter of green.  
I see you again  
Beneath that mountain tree:  
*Above all the stream,*  
*Your teeth pearl white,*  
*Your jet-black curls.*  
*On the highlands*  
*Of your comforting eyes*  
*I see herds of livestock.*  
*In the valleys of Ireland,*  
*Resting herds,*  
*A world of grass*  
*Heavy with morning dew,*  
*A confluence of trees and hill*  
*Where the river bends.*

*I saw you at cuckoo-call,*  
*A cuckoo called*

*And the blackbird followed  
With incessant piping  
In its hidden grove,  
Where the whitened flags  
Were deaf as stone.*

*Desire of my breast,  
Across the land of Ireland  
I meet you still.  
I become bright morning  
That possesses the poem,  
The white mare  
Upon a tilled field;  
I, the mare; I, the field.*

#### WATER DOES NOT DROWN

Muadhán my name:  
Water cannot drown me,  
Nor fire finish me:  
It is I who dressed the lovers' bed,  
Gráinne and Diarmuid.  
I'm the one with the holly-berry  
On a hook, the salmon on a spit.  
I am not contrite.  
Bitter wind is my companion  
As I move back and forth  
Across the stream:  
One tongue and one country  
For us alone;  
In no epoch  
Were we otherwise.  
In the heart of the oak wood  
We had wisdom, fierce knowledge:  
I surrender to my soul,  
To the mystery therein.  
I honour earth's image  
In the face of a flower,

Each bough of a tree,  
Each grassy mound,  
Beside lakes,  
Beside the waterfall,  
Beside bogland,  
Beneath the cliff,  
Over hill and knoll.

I surrender to family,  
Chiefs of Ir and Eibhir,  
The seven generations,  
Fair-haired, heroic,  
The dark-haired,  
The brown-eyed,  
The soft-skinned,  
The crimson-cheeked,  
The red tribe  
Who cross over water  
In first dawn-light,  
The sweet-speaking tribe  
On agile mounts upon grass.  
Muadhán my name, servant  
Of history.  
I do not repent.  
It is I who carried the lover  
And she grown weary,  
On my back over Sliabh Luachra,  
Over birch and putrid rushes.  
It is I who struggled,  
Her weight on my back, my shoulder.  
I do not repent.

## BY THE LENGTH OF NINE WAVES

I wished to be faithful  
As night blew  
The moon my way,  
Moonlight on tide  
As you sailed your boat  
To a hidden harbour.  
I watched the tide for you,  
With fullness of oil, with fire;  
The table dressed for you,  
Essence of herb and wine.  
At night's end,  
A voice in silence:  
The silence spoke  
And we were saved.

I would be faithful  
When the sun rose for me  
Over crested waves.  
Morning opened in streams  
Of light  
On fertile field and garden,  
Laughing with joy  
Over tops of trees,  
Speeding to my door,  
A door I could never close  
Against you.  
Do not feel offended  
By my pride in you,  
My boastful walk  
In the heart of Munster.  
With you  
I would cross the ocean  
Through winter storms  
And foul winds;  
But my promise was a lie  
As the soft ripe moon  
Caressed my fingertips.  
It was I lay on the tide,  
Ebbing and flowing,  
Flowing and ebbing:

A ship at anchor,  
You let me sink,  
You let me sink,  
Me fettered and bound.  
Pity me here, suffering!  
In my village  
There is grief and lamentation,  
And White Stones unhearing.

*Co-Translated from the Gaelic with Thomas McCarthy (IWP 1978, 1980)*

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