

The Turnip-Snedder

For Hughie O'Donoghue

In an age of bare hands
and cast iron,

the clamp-on meat-mincer,
the double flywheeled water-pump,

it dug its heels in among wooden tubs
and troughs of slops,

hotter than body heat
in summertime, cold in winter

as winter's body armour,
a barrel-chested breast-plate

standing guard
on four braced greaves.

"This is the way that God sees life,"
it said, "from seedling-braird to snedder,"

as the handle turned
and turnip-heads were let fall and fed

to the juiced-up inner blades,
"This is the turnip-cycle,"

as it dropped its raw sliced mess,
bucketful by glistening bucketful.

A Shiver

The way you had to stand to swing the sledge,
Your two knees locked, your lower back shock-fast
As shields in a testudo, spine and waist
A pivot for the tight-braced, tilting rib-cage;
The way its iron head planted the sledge
Unyieldingly as a club-footed last;
The way you had to heft and then half-rest
Its gathered force like a long-nursed rage
About to be let fly: does it do you good
To have known it in your bones, directable,
Withholdable at will,
A first blow that could make air of a wall,
A last one so unanswerably landed
The staked earth quailed and shivered in the handle?

Polish Sleepers

Once they'd been block-built criss-cross and four-squared
We lived with them and breathed pure creosote
Until they were laid and landscaped in a kerb,
A moulded verge, half-skirting, half-stockade,
Soon fringed with hardy ground-cover and grass.
But as that bulwark bleached in sun and rain
And the washed gravel pathway showed no stain,
Under its parched riverbed
Flinch and crunch I imagined tarry pus
Accruing, bearing forward to the garden
Wafts of what conspired when I'd lie
Listening for the goods from Castledawson...
Each languid, clanking wagon,
And afterwards, *rust, thistles, silence, sky.*

Anahorish 1944

“We were killing pigs when the Americans arrived.
A Tuesday morning, sunlight and gutter-blood
Outside the slaughterhouse. From the main road
They would have heard the squealing,
Then heard it stop and had a view of us
In our gloves and aprons coming down the hill.
Two lines of them, guns on their shoulders, marching.
Armoured cars and tanks and open jeeps.
Sunburnt hands and arms. Unknown, unnamed,
Hosting for Normandy.

Not that we knew then
Where they were headed, standing there like youngsters
As they tossed us gum and tubes of coloured sweets.”

To Mick Joyce in Heaven by Seamus Heaney

1.

Kit-bag to tool-bag,
Warshirt to workshirt —
Out of your element
Among farmer in-laws,
The way you tied sheaves
The talk of the country,
But out on your own
When skylined on scaffolds —
A demobbed Achilles
Who was never a killer,
The strongest instead
Of the world's stretcher-bearers,
Turning your hand
To the bricklaying trade.

2.

Prince of the sandpiles,
Hod-hoplite commander
Watching the wall,
Plumbing and pointing
From pegged-out foundation
To first course to cornice,
Keeping an eye
On the eye in the level
Before the cement set:
Medical orderly,
Bedpanner, bandager
Transferred to the home front,

(missing ending)

Rilke: After the Fire

Early autumn morning hesitated,
Shying at newness, an emptiness behind
Scorched linden trees still crowding in around
The moorland house, now just one more wallstead

Where youngsters gathered up from god knows hwere
Hunted and yelled and ran wild in a pack.
Yet all of them fell silent when he appeared,
The sons of the place, and with a long forked stick

Dragged an out-of-shape old can or kettle
From under hot, half burnt away house-beams;
And then, like one with a doubtful tale to tell,
Turned to the others present, at great pains

To make them realize what had stood so.
For now that it was gone, it all seemed
Fat stranger: more fantastical than Pharaoh.
And he was changed: a foreigner among them.

The Aerodrome

First it went back to grass, then after that
To warehouses and brickfields (designated
The Creagh Meadows Industrial Estate),
Its wartime grey control tower blanched and glazed

Into a hard-edged CEO style villa:
Toome Aerodrome had turned to local history.
Barn Loaning, name and laneway,
Disappeared. And the meadows too

Where no man need appear who couldn't mow
His acre between dawn and dailigone.
Hangars, bomb stores, nissen huts, the line
Of perimeter barbed wire, forgotten and gone.

But not the smell of daisies and hot tar
On a newly surfaced cart-road, Easter Monday,
1944. And not, two miles away,
The annual bright booths of the fair at Toome,

All the brighter for having been denied.
No catchpenny stalls for us, no
Awnings, bonnets, or beribboned gauds:
Wherever the world was, we were somewhere else,

Had been and would be. Sparrows might fall,
B-26 Marauders not return, but the sky above
That land usurped by a compulsory order
Watched and waited – like me and her that day

Watching and waiting by the perimeter,
Snapped in black and white, a torn print,
As if the sky were riven, as if already
The light itself could be no longer trusted.

A fear crossed over then came like the fly-by-night
And sun-repellent wing that flies by day
Invisibly above: would she rise and go
With the airman under his nose-up Thunderbolt

Offering her a free seat in his cockpit?
But for her part, in response, only the slightest
Back-stiffening and standing of her ground
As her hand reached down and tightened round my hand.

If self is a location, so is love:
Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,
Options, obstinacies, dug heels and distance,
Here and there and now and then, a stance.

Anything Can Happen

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head
Before he hurls the lightning? Well just now
He galloped his thunder cart and his horses

Across a clear blue sky.. It shook the earth
and the clogged underearth, the River Styx,
the winding streams, the Atlantic shore itself.
Anything can happen, the tallest towers

Be overturned, those in high places daunted,
Those overlooked regarded. Stopped-beak Fortune
Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,
Setting it down bleeding on the next.

Ground gives. The heaven's weight
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.
Capstones shift. Nothing resettles right.
Telluric ash and fire-spores boil away.

Out of Shot

November morning sunshine on my back
This bell-clear Sunday, elbows lodged strut-firm
On the unseasonably warm
Top bar of a gate, inspecting livestock,
Catching gleams of the distant Viking vik
Of Wicklow Bay; thinking scriptorium
Norse raids, night-dreads and that 'fierce warriors' poem

About storm on the Irish Sea - so no attack
In the small hours or next morning; thinking shock
Out of the blue or blackout, the staggered walk
Of a donkey on the TV news last night -
Loosed from a cart that had loosed five mortar shells
In the bazaar district, wandering out of shot
Lost to its owner, lost for its sunlit hills

District and Circle

Tunes from a tin whistle underground
Curled up to a corridor I'd be walking down
To where I knew I was always going to find
My watcher on the tiles, cap by his side,
His fingers perked, his two eyes eyeing me
In an unaccusing look I'd not avoid,
Or not just yet, since both were out to see
For themselves.

As the music larked and capered
I'd trigger and untrigger a hot coin
Held at the ready, but now my gaze was lowered
For was our traffic not in recognition?
Accorded passage, I would re-pocket and nod,
And he, still eyeing me, would also nod.

Posted, eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts
Of escalators ascending and descending
To a monotonous slight rocking in the works,
We were moved along, upstanding.
Elsewhere, underneath, an engine powered,
Rumbled, quickened, evened, quieted.
The white tiles gleamed. In passages that flowed
With draughts from cooler tunnels, I missed the light
Of all-overing, long since mysterious day,
Parks at lunchtime where the summer lay
On a body-heated mown grass regardless,
A resurrection scene minutes before
The resurrection, habitués
Of their garden of delights, of staggered summer.

Another level down, the platform thronged.
I re-entered the safety of numbers, a crowd half straggle-ravelled
and half strung
Like a human chain, the pushy newcomers
Jostling and purling underneath the vault,
On their marks to be first through the doors,
Street-loud, then succumbing to herd-quiet...
Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?
Always new to me, always familiar,
This unrepentant, now repentant turn
As I stood waiting, glad of a first tremor,
Then caught up in the now-or-never whelm
Of one and all the full length of the train.

So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging,
My lofted arm a-swivel like a flail,
My father's glazed face in my own waning
And craning...

Again the growl
Of shutting doors, the jolt and one-off treble
Of iron on iron, then a long centrifugal
Haulage of speed through every dragging socket.

And so by night and day to be transported
Through galleried earth when them, the only relict
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
By blasted weeping rock-walls.

Flicker-lit

Wordsworth's Skates

Star in the window.

Slate scrape.

Bird or branch?

Or the whet and scud of steel on placid ice?

Not the bootless runners lying toppled

In dust in a display case,

Their bindings perished,

But the reel of them on frozen Windermere

As he flashed from the clutch of earth along its curve

And left it scored.

To George Seferis in the Underworld

The men began arguing about the spiky bushes that were in brilliant yellow bloom on the slopes: were they caltrop or gorse? . . . "That reminds me of something", said Geroge. "I don't know. . ."

That greeny stuff about your feet
is asphodel and rightly so
but why do I think seggans?

And of a spring day
in your days of '71: Poseidon
making waves in sea and air
around Cape Sounion, its very name
all ozone-breeze and cavern-boom,
too utterly this-worldly, George, for you
intent upon an otherworldly scene
somewhere just beyond
the summit ridge, the cutting edge
of not remembering.

The bloody light. To hell with it.
Close eyes and concentrate.
Not crown of thorns, not sceptre reed
or Herod's court, but ha!
you had it! A harrowing, yes, in hell:
the hackle-spikes
that Plato told of, the tyrant's fate
in a passage you would quote:
"They bound him hand and foot,
they flung him down and flayed him,
gashing his flesh on thorny aspalathoi
and threw him into Tartarus, torn to shreds."

As was only right
for a tyrant. But maybe,
dare I say it, George, for you
too much I' the right,
if still your chance to strike
against his ilk,
a last word meant to break
your elected silence.

And for me a chance to test the edge
Of a word like seggans, smuggle it back in
like a dialect blade, hoar and harder
than what it has turned into
these latter days:
sedge, marshmallow, rubber-dagger stuff.

Höfn

The three-tongued glacier has begun to melt.
What will we do, they ask, when boulder-milt
Comes wallowing across the delta flats

And the miles-deep shag ice makes its move?
I saw it, ridged and rock-set, from above,
Undead grey-gristed earth-pelt, aeon-scruff,

And feared its coldness that still seemed enough
To iceblock the plane window dimmed with breath,
Deepfreeze the seep of adamantine tilth

And every warm, mouthwatering word of mouth.

Poet to Blacksmith

Seamus, make me a side-arm to take on the earth,
A suitable tool for digging and grubbing the ground,
Lightsome and pleasant to lean on or cut with or lift,
Tastily finished and trim and right for the hand.

No trace of the hammer to show on the sheen of the blade,
The thing to have purchase and spring and be fit for the
strain,
The shaft to be socketed in dead true and dead straight,
And I'll work with the gang till I drop dead and never
complain.

The plate and the edge of it not to be wrinkly or crooked-
I see it well shaped from the anvil and sharp from the file,
The grain of the wood and the line of the shaft nicely fitted,
And best thing of all, the ring of it, sweet as a bell.

The Nod

Saturday evenings we would stand in line
In Loudan's butcher shop. Red beef, white string,
Brown paper ripped straight off for parcelling
Along the counter edge. Rib roast and shin
Plonked down, wrapped up, and bow-tied neat and clean
But seeping blood. Like dead weight in a sling,
Heavier far than I had been expecting
While my father shelled out for it, coin by coin.

Saturday evenings too the local B-Men,
Unbuttoned but on duty, thronged the town,
Neighbours with guns, parading up and down,
Some nodding at my father almost past him
As if deliberately they'd aimed and missed him
Or couldn't seem to place him, not just then.

A Clip

Harry Boyle's one-room, one-chimney house
With its settle bed was our first barber shop.
We'd go not for a haircut but "a clip":
Cold smooth creeping steel and snicking scissors,
The strong-armed chair, the plain mysteriousness
Of your sheeted self inside that neck-tied cope —
Half sleeveless surplice, half hoodless Ku Klux cape.
Harry Boyle's one-roomed, old bog-road house
Near enough to home but unfamiliar:
What was it happened there?
Weeds shoulder-high up to the open door,
Harry not shaved, close breathing in your ear,
Loose hair in windfalls blown across the floor
Under the collie's nose. The collie's stare.

Edward Thomas on the Lagans Road

He's not in view but I can hear a step
On the grass-crowned road, the whip of daisy heads
On the toes of boots.

Behind the hedge

Eamon Murphy and Teresa Brennan -
Fully clothed, strong-arming each other -
Have sensed him and gone quiet. I keep on watching
As they rise and go.

And now the road is empty.

Nothing but air and light between their love-nest
And the bracken hillside where I lie alone.

Utter evening, as it was in the beginning,

Until the remembered come and go of lovers
Brings on his long-legged self on the Lagans Road -
Edward Thomas in his khaki tunic
Like one of the Evans brothers out of Leitrim,
Demobbed, 'not much changed', sandy moustached and
freckled
From being, they said, with Monty in the desert.

The Tollund Man in Springtime

Into your virtual city I'll have passed
Unregistered by scans, screens, hidden eyes,
Lapping time in myself, an absorbed face
Coming and going, neither god nor ghost,
Not at odds or at one, but simply lost
To you and yours, out under seeding grass
And trickles of kesh water, sphagnum moss,
Dead bracken on the spreadfield, red as rust.
I reawoke to revel in the spirit
They strengthened when they chose to put me down
For their own good. And to a sixth-sensed threat:
Panicked snipe offshooting into twilight,
Then going awry, larks quietened in the sun,
Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain.

"The soul exceeds its circumstances". Yes.
History not to be granted the last word
Or the first claim ... In the end I gathered
From the display-case peat my staying powers,
Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,
My old uncalled hands to be young sward,
The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored
By telling myself this. Late as it was,
The early bird still sang, the meadow hay
Still buttercupped and daisied, sky was new.
I smelled the air, exhaust fumes, silage reek,
Heard from my heather bed the thickened traffic
Swarm at a roundabout five fields away
And transatlantic flights stacked in the blue.

Through every check and scan I carried with me
A bunch of Tollund rushes — roots and all —
Bagged in their own bog-damp. In an old stairwell
Broom cupboard where I had hoped they'd stay
Damp until transplanted, they went musty.
Every green-skinned stalk turned friable,
The drowned-mouse fibres dried up and the whole
Limp, soggy cluster lost its bouquet
Of weed leaf and turf mould. Dust in my palm
And in my nostrils dust, should I shake it off
Or mix it in with spit in pollen's name
And my own? As a man would, cutting turf,
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit
And spirited myself into the street.

The Blackbird of Glanmore

On the grass when I arrive,
Filling the stillness with life,
But ready to scare off
At the very first wrong move,
In the ivy when I leave,

It's you, blackbird, I love.

I park, pause, take heed.
Breathe. Just breathe and sit
And lines I once translated
Come back: 'I want away
To the house of death, to my father

Under the low clay roof.'

And I think of one gone to him,
A little stillness dancer -
Haunter-son, lost brother -
Cavorting through the yard,
So glad to see me home,

My homesick first term over.

And think of a neighbour's words
Long after the accident;
'Yon bird on the shed roof,
Up on the ridge for weeks -
I said nothing at the time

But I never liked yon bird'

The automatic lock
Clunks shut, the blackbird's panic
Is shortlived, for a second
I've a bird's eye view of myself,
A shadow on raked gravel

In front of my house of life.

Hedge-hop, I am absolute
For you, your ready talkback,
Your each stand-offish comeback,
Your picky, nervy goldbeak -
On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave.