

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

The Harrow-Pin

We'd be told, 'If you don't behave
There'll be nothing in your Christmas stocking for you
But an old kale stalk.' And we would believe him.

But if kale meant admonition, a harrow pin
Was correction's veriest unit..
Head-banged spike, forged fang, a true dead ringer

Out of a harder time, it was a stake
He'd drive through aspiration and pretence
For our instruction.

Let there once be any talk of decoration,
A shelf for knick-knacks, a picture-hook or -rail,
And the retort was instant: 'Drive a harrow-pin.'

Brute-forced, rusted, haphazardly set pins
From harrows wrecked by horse-power over stones
Lodged in the stable wall and on them hung

Horses' collars lined with sweat-veined ticking,
Old cobwebbed reins and hames and eye-patched winkers,
The tackle of the mighty, simple dead.

Out there, in musts of bedding cut with piss
He put all to the test. Inside, in the house,
Ungulled, irreconcilable

And horse-sensed as the travelled Gulliver,
What virtue he approved (and would assay)
Was in hammered iron.

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 George. "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,

Senior Infants

1 The Sally Rod

On **the** main street of Granard I met Duffy
Whom I had known before **the** age of reason
In short trousers in **the** Senior Infants' room
Where once upon a winter's day Miss Walls
Lost her head **and** cut **the** legs off us
For dirty talk we didn't think she'd hear.
'Well, for Jesus' sake,' cried Duffy, coming at me
With his stick in **the** air **and** two wide open arms,
'For Jesus' sake! D'you mind **the** sally rod?'

2 A Chow

I'm staring at **the** freshly scratched initials
Of Robert Donnelly in **the** sandstone coping
Of Anahorish Bridge, with Robert Donnelly
Beside me, also staring at them.

'Here,' he says,
'Have a chow of this stuff,' stripping a dulse-thin film
Off **the** unwrapped ounce of Warhorse Plug –
Bog-bank brown, embossed, forbidden man-fruit
He's just been sent to buy for his father, Jock.

The roof of my mouth is thatch set fire to
At **the** burning-out of a neighbour, I want to lick
Bran from a bucket, grit off **the** coping stone.
'You have to spit,' says Robert, 'a chow's no good
Unless you spit like hell,' his ginger calf's lick
Like a scorch of flame, his quid-spurt fulgent.

3 One Christmas Day in the Morning

Tommy Evans must be sixty now as well. The last time I saw him was at the height of the Troubles, in Phil McKeever's pub in Castledawson, the first time we'd met since Anahorish School. I felt as free as a bird, a Catholic at large in Tommy's airspace.

Yet something small prevailed. My father balked at a word like 'Catholic' being used in company. Phil asked if we were OK. Tommy's crowd fenced him with 'What are you having, Tommy?'

I was blabbing on about guns, how they weren't a Catholic thing, how the sight of the one in his house had always scared me, how our very toys at Christmas proved my point – when his eye upon me narrowed.

I remembered his air-gun broken over his forearm, my envy of the polished hardwood stock, him thumbing the pellets into their aperture. The snick of the thing then as he clipped it shut and danced with his eye on the sights through a quick-quick angle of ninety degrees and back, then drilled the pair of us left-right to the back of the house.

The Evans' chicken coop was the shape of a sentry-box, walls and gable of weathered tongue-and-groove, the roofing-felt plied tight and tacked to the eaves. And there above the neat-hinged door, balanced on the very tip of the apex, was Tommy's target: the chrome lid of the bell of his father's bike. Whose little zings fairly brought me to my senses.

THE LIFT

A first green braird: the hawthorn half in leaf.
Her funeral filled the road
And could have stepped from some old photograph

Of a Breton pardon, remote
Familiar women and men in caps
Walking four abreast, soon falling quiet.

Then came the throttle and articulated whops
Of a helicopter crossing, and afterwards
Awareness of the sound of our own footsteps,

Of open air, and the life behind those words
"Open" and "air". I remembered her aghast,
Foetal, shaking, sweating, shrunk, wet-haired,

A beaten breath, a misting mask, the flash
Of one wild glance, like ghost surveillance
From behind a gleam of helicopter glass.

A lifetime, then the deathtime: reticence
Keeping us together when together,
All declaration deemed outspokenness.

Favourite aunt, good sister, faithful daughter,
Delicate since childhood, tough alloy
Of disapproval, kindness and hauteur,

She took the risk, at last, of certain joys -
Her birdtable and jubilating birds,
The "fashion" in her wardrobe and her tallboy.

Weather, in the end, would say our say.
Reprise of griefs in summer's clearest mornings,
Children's deaths in snowdrops and the may,

Whole requiems at the sight of plants and gardens....
They bore her lightly on the bier. Four women,
Four friends - she would have called them girls -
stepped in

And claimed the final lift beneath the hawthorn.
- Seamus Heaney