

THE T. S. ELIOT PRIZE IN POETRY

This is not a critique of the prizefication of the poetry world nor is it a commentary on the desirability or otherwise thereof. Yes, prizes are subjective, superficial and partisan; often making impoverished poets part with "reading fees" they can ill afford. Such awards frequently seem to reward what is popular rather than original and are, by their very nature, extremely reductive. Yes, such prizes are also a vital part of the contemporary po-biz; they provoke debate and draw attention and, possibly most importantly, financially support creative endeavor. This argument will rumble on as long as there are poets and honors. Rather than rehash that old chestnut, it is my intention here to consider the winning entries of just one of the many available accolades: the British T. S. Eliot Prize in Poetry (Not to be confused with Truman State University's confusingly and identically named prize celebrating the native Missourian.)

This award was established in 1993 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the British Poetry Book Society, and named to honor its founder. It is bestowed upon which the panel of expert judges determines to be the best collection of poetry published in the UK in that given year. Since its inception only two American poets—Mark Doty and Sharon Olds—have won the Eliot. "Foul play!" goes up the cry, surely indicative of a British bias against Creative Writing programs in general and the very idea of "workshopping" one's poems in particular; but this anomaly is far more a function of the vagaries of publishing than any bias on the part of the judges. Only British publishing houses can submit for the Eliot. Consideration, therefore, is limited to the kind of heavy-hitting and already well-known American poets who can secure a UK publisher.

Certainly the transatlantic remit of the Eliot accords well with his own, very well-known poetic career, which I will rehearse here but briefly. Born in St Louis in 1888 and educated at Harvard University, Eliot first came to the UK to conduct graduate work at Oxford in 1914. The outbreak of the First World War prevented Eliot returning across

perilous Atlantic waters to Harvard to defend his PhD thesis. While in the UK he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood. In her preface to Eliot's first volume of letters, Eliot's second wife Valerie quotes from private correspondence of Eliot's where he commented on his disastrous first marriage: "I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivienne simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England." Eliot eventually renounced his American citizenship and became a British citizen at the age of 39, abandoning the Unitarianism of his upbringing and embracing the high Anglicanism that inspired *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. After a stint as a banker at Lloyd's in the City of London he worked for Faber & Faber in Russell Square in Bloomsbury. In that capacity he did much to shape the poetic landscape of mid-twentieth-century British poetry and the careers several of the UK's best-known poets—including W. H. Auden, Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin—were nurtured under his watch.¹

Eliot died in London in 1965 and his ashes are interned in the church at East Coker, the small Somerset village from which his ancestors set out to the New World in 1669. The circle is complete. His recursive epitaph conflates the first and last lines of the "East Coker" section of *Four Quartets*: "in my beginning is my end, in my end my beginning." Another fitting epitaph could be taken from Joseph Brodsky's "Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot." Originally written in Russian while Brodsky was still in exile, the poem is patterned on Auden's great transatlantic elegy for Yeats. Brodsky imagines a consolatory tableau with the nations of his birth and death united in their grief:

America, where he was born and raised,
and England, where he died—they both incline
their somber faces as they stand, bereft,
on either side of his enormous grave.

1. I used to walk past his old Faber office on Russell Square every day on my way to class as an undergraduate in the 1990s. The building, now a part of the University of London, is adorned with a plaque celebrating his work there. One day I plucked up the courage to go in and ask to see his office. The security officer opened his large building directory, leafed through it, slammed it shut and announced, "Sorry miss, no one of that name works here."

Eliot, then, is the perfect "genius of the shore" of transatlantic poetry; a talisman for the interdependence and cross-pollination of the American and British poetic worlds considered in this book.

Of all the baubles available in, at least, the British poetry world, the Eliot is one of the most sought-after and highly regarded. One of the completely unavoidable though totally reductive metrics to measure significance is, of course, money. The £20,000 bestowed upon the Eliot winner is, though, relatively and transatlantically speaking, small potatoes. It is certainly not as lucrative as the biennial Bollingen Poetry Prize, which at \$150,000 is one of the best-remunerated awards; but the Bollingen is only open to American authors, whereas the Eliot allows for any poet published in the UK during that prize year. The Eliot is not as well-known as the eye-wateringly generous MacArthur "Genius" Award, but this too is only awarded to American citizens and residents. The MacArthur at \$625,000 over five years is only beaten in terms of total amount by the Nobel Prize for Literature, which currently approaches nearly a million dollars in Swedish Krona. However, both the Nobel and the MacArthur are for authors in general and not, specifically, poets (though, of course, many poets have won). This is also the case with the \$150,000 Lannan Foundation Award, which, like the Nobel and MacArthur, does not accept external nominations. It does, however, consider the work of non-U.S. residents. The Ruth Lilly prize for poetry, administered by the Poetry Foundation, comes next with a not-too-shabby \$100,000 awarded to the poet for outstanding achievement, but that poet has to be an American.² The Academy of American Poets' Wallace Stevens Award also weighs in at \$100,000, as does the mid-career Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Again, those two require U.S. citizenship or permanent residence. The Pulitzer Prize for

2. The philanthropist Ruth Lilly had submitted several poems to *Poetry* magazine prior to her death in November 2002, none of which were ever accepted. Perhaps impressed with that esteemed organ's editorial integrity, she left them a \$100 million bequest on her death, leading to the establishment of the cultural behemoth that is now the Poetry Foundation. I was writing a series of reviews for *Poetry* at the time and called the office in Chicago the day they learned of the gift. They were beside themselves with shock and delight. I think someone was squealing with glee in the background. It was one of the most cheering phone conversations of my life.

Poetry is a relatively measly \$15,000 (five of these get doled out per annum however) and, again a closed shop for Brits. Ditto the \$10,000 National Book Award for Poetry. The Guggenheim is a fellowship for ongoing creative endeavor rather than an award for published work and, again, Limeys need not apply. Of all the major U.S. poetry prizes, only the Lannan and the National Book Critics Circle Award are open to poets published in the U.S. but regardless of nationality or residence. Possibly the most egalitarian of the prizes, unsurprisingly, is based out of Canada. The C\$65,000 Griffin Prize, "the world's largest prize for a first edition single collection of poetry in English ... or translated into English, by a poet/translator from any part of the world," to which they touchingly and modestly add, "including Canada."

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the many and seemingly ever-proliferating poetry accolades, but it does illustrate the difference of what is at stake between the U.S. and the UK and how British poets are, for the most part, cut out of the American competitive circuit. This, perhaps, accounts for some of the Eliot's luster, even given the relatively small amount of the prize money compared to those top-level prizes awarded in the U.S. In the first line of Lowell's "Words for Hart Crane" the poet laments the Pulitzers "showered on some dope." This is even all the more fitting when we learn from the notes Frank Bidart's compendious *Collected* that Lowell had originally entitled the poem "An Englishman Abroad." Better throw oneself on the tender mercies of the Canadians.

In the UK the only prize that approaches the Eliot in terms of illustriousness is the Forward prize. Established a year before the Eliot, the Forward Foundation offers an award of £10,000 for the best book published that year which, like the Eliot, is open to submissions from American poets too. (The Forward too, has its fair share of American winners, including Jorie Graham, Claudia Rankine and two transatlantic poets: Michael Donaghy, an American in London, and Thom Gunn, a Brit in San Francisco). The major difference between the Eliot and the Forward is that the judging panel of the former always consists solely of other poets. This is unusual (in an informal poll of my colleagues we could only come up with relatively

minor awards, such as the \$3,000 Poets' Prize or the \$5,000 James Laughlin Award for a second book, that function in a similar manner) and further complicates matters when it comes to accusations of favoritism, back-scratching and bias. The prospective judging pool, when reduced down to fellow poets, can scarcely fail to be unhealthily small. There were dark mutterings the year the Eliot was awarded to David Harsent in 2014 for *Fire Songs*. Fiona Sampson, his colleague at the University of Roehampton, was one of the judges and had positively reviewed that and other of his collections previously. She was also one of the judges on the panel when Harsent got the Griffin from the lovely Canadians for *Night* in 2012.... Small world.

Certainly, the Eliot has attracted its fair share of controversy. In 2011 Alice Oswald and John Kinsella both withdrew their collections from consideration for the prize to protest the struggling Poetry Society accepting sponsorship from Aurum Funds, a British hedge fund. Oswald explained, "I think poetry should be questioning not endorsing such institutions and for that reason I'm withdrawing from the Eliot shortlist." The Poetry Book Society was subsequently wound up due to its financial difficulties and taken over by the deep pockets of the T. S. Eliot Society (huzzah, as Michael Caines, my old colleague at the *TLS* points out, for Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*!). Recently a brouhaha erupted over Cambridge University research fellow Sarah Howe's debut collection *Loop of Jade* winning in 2015. The UK's *Guardian* newspaper asked if Howe was "too young, beautiful—and Chinese?" after a snide anonymous piece in the satirical *Private Eye* magazine that asserted that Howe had won due to "extra-poetic reasons." A patronizing interview with Oliver Thring in *The Sunday Times* only inflamed matters further, provoking a full-on Twitter storm in reaction to such insights as, "her verse pummels the reader with allusion, scholarship and a brusque, six-formy [i.e., high-school] emphasis on her own intelligence." One wonders if he would've said the same of her colleague, the Cambridge don J. H. Prynne. Called upon to defend his views, the maligned Thring lamented, "This gentle interview with a leading young poet has led various deranged

poetesses to call me thick, sexist etc.” A diverting afternoon may be had by looking at the #derangedpoetess responses on Twitter. This is, though, nothing approaching the furor that ensued after the inaugural Bollingen in 1948 was awarded to Ezra Pound for the *Pisan Cantos*. The scandal was such that the awarding powers were snatched from the voting Fellows of American Literature at the Library of Congress and given, instead, to a panel of judges at the Yale University Library. Everything, including scandal, is bigger in America.

So with all due caveats, contingencies, allowances, excuses and apologies in place I would like to present, for your delectation and consideration, this series of entirely subjective micro-reviews of all of the past Eliot winners.

1. 1993, Ciarán Carson, *First Language: Poems*

This is an exhaustive and exhausting read; a vast, cacophonous referential array. The title points to Carson’s already much-discussed fascination with language and sonic devices (try to find another poet audacious enough to rhyme “triskaidekaphobia” with “Wachovia”). His was one of the only families in Belfast to speak Irish as their own first language (his parents had actually met at Gaelic classes) and the collection echoes with Irish (the collection has an Irish epigraph and starts with a poem in Irish), English, Latin and so on. There are a series of translations of parts of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and poems after Rimbaud and Baudelaire. However, little critical attention has been paid to that “first” part of the title and Carson repeatedly dwells upon primacy and the nature of the subordination of the secondary. “Second Language” (there’s also a poem entitled “Second Nature”) might as well be the collection’s title poem, which starts with the birth into language of the baby Carson (shades of the start of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) in which we read of the “Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices, / unskeletoned from laminate geology,” of the Book of Kells. All of the switching between 1s and 2s makes one think of binary computer language and Carson seems fascinated between the synaptic leap and the boundary (the oft-visited “checkpoint” between Northern and Southern Ireland) between

things and in particular language and experience. In the case of the former, its inherent slipperiness (he uses the idea of Babel six times in the collection), and in the case of the latter, the comforting idea of affixing experience. For all of its polyglot welter the collection brims with images of fixity: the repeated images of stars by which to navigate, the clocks that tick, measuring time, throughout, the abecedaries that contain the mess of the spoken word; the comforting limit of (the 58) “Heinz Varieties”; and Bertrand Russell’s “R-Set,” which consists of all items “describable in exactly eleven English words”

The closest I can find to any clue in the collection as to how one might read it is in a poem titled “Latitude 38°S.” In which we read of one “Fletcher” (traditionally an arrow maker, here fashioning a writing quill) who cut his finger sharpening his quill while “trying to copy the *Inquit* page off the Book of Kells, as if it were a series of ‘unquotes’.” The way you’d disengage / The lashes of a feather, then try and put them back together.” The idea of the quill is profoundly significant for Carson, akin to Heaney’s pen in “Digging.” The quill stands for the Daedalean task of writing (“A Daedalus was herring-boning feathers into wings, I was / The sticky, thumby wax with which he oozed the quills together”) and images of quills feature as hederæ in “Opus 14” and “Tak, Tak.” This idea of “unquotes” also accords with the manner in which Carson approaches form. For example, the atomized “Four Sonnets” where each of the fourteen lines is a discrete “lash” that reads like one of Wallace Steven’s “Adagia.” But unlike the Fibonacci-perfect smoothness of the easy-to-reunite hooks on the quill it is nearly impossible to zip language up together again once unpicked. We are left like the hapless Fletcher trying to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

2. 1994, Paul Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*

Another Ulsterman! Okay, I’m going to lay a completely crackpot theory on you here. I bet Muldoon and Carson were in cahoots and in conversation in these two Eliot winners. Not, you understand, plotting over the prize itself; rather that these two collections, composed at roughly the same time or thereabouts have so many

uncanny correspondences that one can read them as companion pieces. Muldoon and Carson are, after all, close friends who once performed together in a band called "Upstairs in a Tent." The usual party line on *The Annals of Chile* goes something like this: the entire collection is "ludic"; "Incantata" = magisterial elegy and "Yarrow" = critics performing mathematical gymnastics to make the 100-page-or-so poem fit with Muldoon's own provocative definition of the poem as an "exploded sestina."

So let's get the obvious echoes out the way, the (to be expected) references to the Book of Kells and the translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Neither man can resist the idea of the "ultrasonic scan." We also find the same "black blotting paper" used by the Queen ("so nobody can read the mirror image of Her private / correspondence" in Carson, while Muldoon writes of "a Queen whose very blotting-paper / was black, black with so much blood on her hands.") Now on to the more enlightening correspondences. So, the arrow / quill fashioned by Fletcher pierces to the heart of this collection obsession with direction. Indeed, it is even verbally and visually embedded in the "Yarrow" of the collection's main poem. Muldoon loves a riddle (cf. "Why Brownlee Left"), and *The Annals of Chile* reads like a crossword puzzle where the solution is teasingly just beyond the reader's apprehension. The clue is set at the close of the second poem, "Brazil," where we read of how "it was O'Higgins who // duly had the term 'widdershins' [the unlucky counterclockwise direction] / and 'deasil' [the lucky clockwise] expunged from the annals of Chile." We have seen this idea of erasure before with Carson's repeated consideration of "Tipp-ex" in *First Language*. In Muldoon this straight downward pull is used to extrapolate how they must be in Brazil or "if not Uruguay, then Ecuador," for, "it must be somewhere on or near the equator // given how water plunged headlong into water."

The collection's final line describes another plunge headlong into water: that of a "trireme, laden with ravensara / that was lost with all hands between Ireland and Montevideo," in an ill-fated widdershins direction, westerly across the Atlantic. Carson, with his numbering compulsion, has already written of "some Byzantine trireme" and

"an Ark or quinquere." In Carson these vessels are metaphors for the human brain and Babel, but here in Muldoon, their freight is a healing balm. The ship is lost on its way to the New World on the 38th parallel, off the coast of South America that Carson wrote of, and it is here where Muldoon's hapless crew realize too late: "we'd rounded not the Cape of Good Hope but Cape Horn." In this way the *Annals of Chile* provides the reader with the conclusion that so evades the reader of *First Language*.

I rest my case, your honor.

3. 1995, Mark Doty, *My Alexandria*

Doty's third book of poetry was the first of his to also be published in the UK. *My Alexandria* was published in the US in 1993 and dedicated to his partner, Wally, who died from the complications of AIDS in 1994. Many of the poems in this collection (one of my very favorites in this list; in fact, scratch that: one of my favorites ever) are elegies for those already lost to the disease (such as "Bill's Story," about a very early AIDS patient) and grapple preemptively with, at least at that time, the fairly inevitable specter of approaching death in the wake of Wally's illness.

One of the poems I have taught the most in my career as a poetry professor is "Fog," a dazzling meditation in unrhymed couplets upon the blurring of the boundaries of personhood, of the breaking down of the divisions between self and other, effected by the AIDS diagnosis of the other half of the couple. He considers of how "blood is utterly without // an outside, can't be seen except out of context, / the wrong color in alien air, no longer itself." The collection throngs with these indefinite images of fogging, blurring and bleeding, and yet also shimmers with gloriously precise and ornate imagery, and "all the sheen artifice / is capable of" ("Chanteuse"). Doty's baroque tendencies are oft criticized but I delight in his poems' lacquered brilliance. In fact, one may find an excellent example of this in a poem entitled "Brilliance" about a dying man's goldfish: "bronze chrysanthemums, // copper leaf, hurried darting, / doubloons, icon-coloured fins / troubling the water."

Doty also interrogates our conventional modes of consolation and commemoration—such as elegies and monuments—finding them wanting and inadequate to the task of celebrating those killed by AIDS. His poem “The Wings,” about the AIDS memorial quilt, often fashioned from fabric taken from the clothes of the dead, proffers an image of a far more homely and humane kind of public commemoration and therefore more powerfully affective. He reflects:

An empty pair of pants
is mortality's severest evidence.
Embroidered mottoes blend

Into something elegiac but remote.
One can't look past
the sleeves where two arms pushed
against a seam, and someone knew exactly

how the stitches pressed against skin
that can't be generalized but was,
irretrievably, you, or yours.

The last word of this collection is “inconsolable,” and yet, at his best here Doty generates considerable consolatory power in his albeit contingent flashes of insight into the nature of life and loss. *My Alexandria* demonstrates the importance of moments of beauty wrought by music (Chet Baker's trumpet in “Almost Blue,” a church organ overheard in “Lament Heaven”), art (“The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers and Fruit, Harvard Museum”) and, of course, poetry itself. For, he asks, aren't “such moments” “answering the little human cry / at the heart of the elegy, / *Oh why aren't I what I wanted to be, // exempt from history?*” Doty demonstrates in *My Alexandria* that the gorgeous can be at least a temporary bulwark against unavoidable loss.

4. 1996, Les Murray, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*

In one of the rapturous blurbs that adorn the cover of this collection, Andrew Motion fawns: “praising Les Murray is as hard as praising

Seamus Heaney.” I'd say I find it much harder to praise Murray, and qualify that with a confession: I have never liked his verse. The screeds of admiring criticism heaped on Murray's Australian *oeuvre*, frankly, baffle me. I find the experience of reading his poetry akin to being forced to spend the weekend looking after one's curmudgeonly, xenophobic, argumentative and understandably unmarried elderly uncle who sulks around in a undershirt. Murray is not oblivious to this, of course, hence the title of the collection. Self-knowledge doesn't make that poetic persona any more personable though. Reading this collection for the first time for this overview was, I admit, a struggle. In a profile of Murray in *The New Yorker*, Dan Chiasson identifies some of the poems in this collection (such as “Rock Music”) as “Rant Poems,” and argues that Murray's work has become more empathetic since a near-death encounter with a chicken bone in 1996. I do hope so.

The best poems in this collection are those that turn away from Murray's hectoring tendencies and toward depictions of his native outback landscape, as in “Dead Trees in the Dam,” where, “a misty candelabrum / of egrets lambent before Saint Sleep—/ who gutter awake and balance stiffly off” (I must admit a mild fondness for other of Murray's poems of the natural world such as his excellent stretched sonnet “The Strangler Fig”). These are heavily outweighed by censorious poems like “A Brief History” though, in which Murray, once again, diagnoses “cultural cringe” (an Australian form of a cultural inferiority complex) and anatomizes, once again, “tall poppy syndrome” (an Australian impulse to knock down the successful): “We are the Australians. Our history is short. / This makes pastry chefs snotty and racehorses snort. / It makes pride a bloody poppy and work an export / and bars our trained minds from original thought.”

I guess it rather depends on what you want from your poetry. As you can see from my rapturous review of the Doty, above, I'm a fan of the transcendent and redemptive. I love a bit of the elliptical and evasive (see Carson and Muldoon above too). I'm not even averse to outrage (for example, the work of Paul Monette) or even artful malice (cf. my esteemed colleague at the University of Houston, the wonderful Tony

Hoagland) but there has to be some sort of compensatory quality, aesthetic or moral or otherwise, so that the poem exceeds its initial motive force. Murray's poems fail in this and seem to dead-end into their own disgust, and his rage seems all the more unpleasant due to its impotence. Compare, for example Murray's "Corniche," with Philip Larkin's "Aubade," both poems of stewing in insomniac dread in the face of one's own mortality. In fact, Murray expressly encourages you to do so, as he echoes Larkin's "I work all day and get half drunk at night," in the first line of his poem: "I work all day and hardly drink at all." Give me the Larkin rather than the larrikin any day and while you're at it give Murray a drink.

5. 1997, Don Paterson, *God's Gift to Women*

This is a surprisingly charming read for a collection that wields together motifs as disparate as a train obsession with frequent acts of masturbation. It's also often laugh-out loud hilarious. Paterson manages to combine his unmistakable poetic voice with a remarkable range of registers. The full poetic regalia appended to this poem—epigraphs, prologue, envoi and notes—often seem to function like the emperor's new clothes as Paterson wryly undermines any inclination to the high falutin'. The epigraphs, one from a child's book and one from the notes from an abridged version of St Augustine's *City of God*, reveal a fine appreciation of the unintentionally ludicrous at both ends of the spectrum. The collection's "Prologue" further establishes this tension between the sublime and the ridiculous. The poet in the persona of the "cantor" loftily instructs his congregation, "Be upstanding. Now: let us raise the fucking *tone*.... My little church is neither high nor broad, / so get your head down. Let us pray. Oh God." That unpunctuated "Oh God" is definitely far more an ejaculation than an invocation.

The notes are as evasive as they are enlightening; we learn that "some of the poems take their titles from the stations of the old Dundee-Newtyle railway" in his native Scotland, but no elucidation or rationale is given about the timetable times attached to those station poems. Is the collection meant to be akin to a railway journey, with the poems between station poems the scenery flashing past? This

seems to be what Paterson suggests in the "The Alexandrian Library; Part II: The Return of the Book"

The new poem is coming along like a dream:
this is the big one, the one that will finally
consolidate everything. It is the usual,
but different: a series of localized, badly-lit,
paradigmatic atrocities seen from a train.

Trains careen around his poems operating on a number of imaginative levels; in "01:00: Rosemill" we read, nearly inevitably, of "my cock / the train," but Paterson is not unaware of the pervasiveness of this tick, acknowledging, "The ghost of your hangover thunders away / (like a train; this should go without saying)."

Though Paterson writes beautifully about longing he is far more a lust poet than a love poet. The sexual encounters in these poems (such as in "Buggery" and "Imperial") have little to do with emotion other than the clear-eyed understanding that desire is a state of diminishing returns. His poems are particularly compelling when he uses a kind of Scottish magical realism that dislocates time and imagines various miraculous materializations, such as in "The Chartres of Gowrie," where a Cathedral appears out of the blue in a field; the residents "stand dumb in their doorframes, all agog at the black ship moored in the sea of corn." Some of my very favorite poems in this collection—"Homesick Paterson, Live at the Blue Bannock, Thurso" and "Postmodern"—are in a deliciously expressive Scottish idiom conjuring up overheard conversations at a smoky evening at a ceilidh. The latter, in particular, made me cackle with laughter. I won't spoil the glorious punch line but I can say the title is unexpectedly apposite.

6. 1998, Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*

Of all of the collections on this list Hughes's *Birthday Letters* is probably the one that has garnered the most public attention. It was published in early 1998 before Hughes died of cancer later in that year and consists of a series of poems composed over thirty-five years, addressed to his dead wife Sylvia Plath. It was a sensation the likes of

which is rarely seen in the literary world of the UK; it was, literally, front-page news.

The tragic facts of Hughes's personally disastrous but poetically inspiring marriage to Plath are well known: his infidelity; their separation in the fall of 1962; Plath abandoned in a bitterly cold flat in London with their two small children; all of these circumstances along with a life-long struggle with mental health issues leading to her suicide in February 1963. Though Hughes maintained a stoic silence about her death, he was frequently blamed for it, his readings disrupted by shouts of "murderer!" and his surname repeatedly chipped off her gravestone in Heptonstall (this event is recounted in here in "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother"). Some took his silence to be a mark of the callous indifference with which they felt he'd treated Plath in life, so the publication of *Birthday Letters* was, in many ways, a revelation. Controversy raged: was this collection the self-pitying justification of a dying man? Though an utterly fascinating insight into Hughes and Plath's fraught relationship, were the poems, in fact, any good? Did it deserve all of the awards heaped on it (along with the Eliot, the Forward, the Whitbread and the British Book of the year)? Was the entire endeavor mawkish and in bad taste? Should Hughes ever have let these poems be published?

The poems cover their entire relationship in roughly chronological order: from the moment he set eyes on "A picture of that year's intake / Of Fulbright Scholars" (of which Plath was one), to the decades-long aftermath of her suicide. These apostrophes and epistles to Plath are often affectionate but also, sometimes, chiding and reproachful. Hughes casts himself as a helpless acolyte, drawn inexorably into Plath's self-mythologizing, "I did not know I was being auditioned / For the male lead in your drama." Hughes frequently stresses the fatedness of their union; on their first meeting at a party at "St Botolph's" he writes, "That day the solar system married us / Whether we knew it or not." Critics such as Marjorie Perloff have demonstrated how, in the immediate wake of her death, Hughes (in his capacity as literary executor) manipulated the poem order of Plath's posthumously published collection *Ariel* to make her suicide

appear nearly inevitable. In Plath's original schema the collection ends hopefully on the word "love." In Hughes's reworked order it closes with the ominous and seemingly inescapable certainty that "fixed stars govern a life." Here Hughes still harps on those "fixed stars." "The Bee God" (a symbol for Plath's father) is "Deaf to your pleas as the fixed stars / At the bottom of the well," while in "A Dream" Hughes writes that the phrase was originally his not hers, "Not dreams, I had said, but fixed stars / Govern a life." In *Birthday Letters* Hughes does not give Plath the last word but the conversation conducted in these poems is, on balance, redemptive to them both. Though some of the poems wallow in wounded exculpation, for example Hughes's belief that "Your real target / Hid behind me. Your Daddy" ("The Shot"), he does eventually admit "I failed" ("Epiphany"). At their best the poems of *Birthday Letters* tenderly celebrate Plath's life and work and leave us in no doubt as to the profundity of Hughes's grief at her loss.

7. 1999, Hugo Williams, *Billy's Rain*

I have a first edition of Williams' *Collected Poems* from 2002 in which he has inscribed, "To Sally ... In memory of our night of sin." Such an event, I can assure the kind reader, never occurred. Yet, given Williams' rakish reputation after the publication of *Billy's Rain*, it seemed entirely plausible at the time of scrawling since at the time he was the Lothario of literary London.

The collection is a verse diary in fifty-one poems of an extra-marital affair with a younger woman called "Carolyn." Williams freely acknowledges that the events described are based on real life and, in an interview, recounted his saintly wife Hermine's reaction to reading the book (they've been together since 1964): "She read it through in half an hour and laughed at one point.... And then at the end she said, 'Five years work, eh,' as though I'd been slacking somewhat." One marvels at her forbearance. The poems are a series of acutely observed vignettes that capture the progress of the affair, tracing the heady initial excitement of their first illicit encounters, the gradual souring of the novelty, and Williams' despair at their break-up when Carolyn becomes involved in a relationship with her boss.

One of the collection's most compelling aspects is how funny Williams' deftly amusing ironic touch can be. One cannot help joining Hermine in her chuckles and then feeling immediately ashamed for indulging and excusing the awfulness. The roguish protagonist of these poems is a self-indulgent, self-pitying peacock of a man yet is endearingly aware of his own vanity and frailty. The pose reminds me very much of Jules Laforgue, the late-nineteenth-century French poet probably best known now for his influence on T. S. Eliot, and, in particular, the persona of one J. Alfred Prufrock. Unlike Prufrock, Williams doesn't agonize over if he should eat the peach, but like Prufrock he is extremely fretful about his "Haircut," which had been supervised by Carolyn, and now, he envies its obliviousness to their subsequent break-up "its innocence, its happiness, its peace."

Shades of the flâneur too in the friable artifice of poems like "Silver Paper Men:"

Regency bucks and belles,
they appear out of nowhere, for no reason,
leaning by a bridge or balustrade,
admiring a willow tree.
Given over to reflection,
they do nothing for a season, in pairs,
while a butterfly waits in mid-air.
That impossible basket of flowers
says all there is to say about love
in their shiny black world.

Vanity abounds in the collection's repeated images of mirrors and reflections, and formally too in Williams' repeated use of poems of two mirrored stanzas of equal length. This extended reflection on reflections reaches its apogee and is shattered in "Mirror History" when Williams admits, "Round about here I become aware of your / existence for the first time, that you might even / be alive, in the sense that I am alive, / walking around having thoughts about everything, / but keeping a pleasant expression on your face." This reminds me very much of Iris Murdoch's observation that "Love is the extremely

difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality." Ultimately, this is the collection's greatest strength. For all of his infuriating yet disarming self-indulgence Williams reveals the reality of love that exists beyond selfish self-regard.

8. 2000, Michael Longley, *The Weather in Japan*

Longley broods out from his author photo on the cover of my Wake Forest edition of *The Weather in Japan* like the winner of the year 2000 Ernest Hemingway look-alike contest. The poetic persona of the Northern Irish poet too, shares something with Papa: the clarity of diction, simplicity of style and interest in subjects such as war and beasts. The collection's title is the first line of the brief but evocative title poem "The Weather in Japan / Makes bead curtains of the rain, / Of the mist a paper screen." Longley invokes comparisons between that small rainy island and his own, for example in "Birds & Flowers," "Two inky smiles on handkerchiefs tied for luck like dolls / Flapping where the window should be, in Ireland and Japan."

Longley predisposes toward brief forms (he's particularly adept with the sonnet). We find this tendency to the attenuated particularly in the collection's first part that considers creatures and their environments. These are austere, graceful nature poems in the (extremely popular) mode of Mary Oliver. Instead, however, of her redemptive and radiant moments of transcendence won from communing with nature, Longley inclines to the Lawrentian, where such encounters reveal the human in the equation to be wanting, for example in an encounter with a otter we read of Longley's "unforgivable shadow on the sand—."

The best poems in the collection are about the First World War. Longley's own father, born in 1896, fought in that conflict and he describes him and his brothers-in-arms in the heart-rending poem "The Moustache": "My father, aged twenty, in command of a company / Who, because most of them shaved only once a week / And some not at all, were known as Longley's Babies." Many of these are powerfully horrifying poems call to mind Wilfred Owen's famous

observation: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. / The Poetry is in the pity," such as when we read in "The Horse," of the poor beasts, "Shell-shocked, tripping up over their own intestines."

The most abiding motif in the collection is that of quilts. These are not the gorgeous and ornamental "Cloths of Heaven" that Yeats writes of, "Enwrought with golden and silver light, / The blue and the dim and the dark cloths / Of night and light and the half-light." Rather, these are stitched from a darker thread, and Longley seemingly asks the shade of Yeats in "The Design," "How do you sew the night?" In "The Quilt" we read of the "tears in the quilt pattern repeating" in the quilt in Emily Dickinson's bedroom in Amherst (another fan of the brief and brittle). The homograph "tear," may be read both ways here (Elizabeth Bishop uses this word to similarly great effect in her "Sestina.") Of course, the initial reading will probably be lachrymal, and that fits with the elegiac tone of much of the collection, but the more significant, I think, is that of rending and mending. In this manner the quilts blanketing this collection function like a metaphor for Longley's work. His work structurally embraces small scraps, but these are all part of a piece that he invites us imaginatively to stitch together in one of the collection's last poems "The Waterfall," "If you were to read my poems, all of them, I mean, / My life's work, at the one sitting, in the one place, Let it be here by this half-hearted waterfall... / Leave them here, on the page, in your mind's eye, lit / Like the fireflies at the waterfall, a wall of stars."

9. 2001, Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*

One of the slightly more humiliating of the many embarrassing moments of my life came in 2001 while I was working as an Editorial Assistant at the *Times Literary Supplement* in London. The poetry editor, the wonderful Mick Imlah, instructed me to contact the poet Peter Reading about a possible review. I felt awful, having just read Reading's *C*, a traumatic recounting of the experience of terminal cancer, since I was the one who had to inform Imlah of his old chum Reading's recent demise. Mick was extremely surprised and amused by this news, for Peter was extremely hale and hearty: his "illness"

was artful fiction. You know, poetic license and all. So much for the intentional fallacy and my academic qualifications.

Like Reading's *C*, Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*, blurs the border of poet and persona in this portrayal of a decades-long faithless marriage. Carson's invention of a "tango" formally affirms the question Yeats poses in "Among Schoolchildren": "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" The more interesting question, though, is that which Carson poses twice; which dancer in the tango gets to take the lead and "How do people / get power over one another?"

The collection shifts unsettlingly from a first-person confessional mode in the first third to the third-person character of the beleaguered "wife" and undermines the very idea of the fiction the title asserts, "Fiction forms what streams in us / Naturally it is suspect." This dissembling is fitting for what amounts to a poetic treatise on, and interrogation of, truth. The most important relationship in this collection is not, however, between the poetic interlocutor and the faithless husband of the title, but rather Carson and the shade of John Keats.

Quotes from Keats provide each "tango" with an interleaved epigraph and Carson is particularly keen to grapple with the Keats of that deathless equation, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Can one exist without the other? Carson tests Keats's hypothesis by making beauty a lying bastard. A mendacious plagiarist who "lied when it was not necessary to lie. / He lied when it wasn't even convenient. / He lied when he knew they knew he was lying." She also considers Keats's theory of negative capability (or as Carson has it in the title of Tango XVII "MAKING UP ONE'S MIND ABOUT NOTHING") asking what happens when uncertainty is bowdlerized: "You know Nahum Tate rewrote *King Lear* in 1681 and his improvements took the form (besides a happy ending) of reducing occurrences of the word *if* from 247 to 33." Contingency too in Carson's repeated revisiting of Keats's self-dictated epitaph with images of writing on glass and water; for example, our moral history is, "almost neat as mathematical / propositions except written on water." In the end this

collection demonstrates that, "Love is not conditional / Living is very conditional."

10. 2002, Alice Oswald, *Dart*

In this collection Alice Oswald traces the flow of the River Dart in Devon from where it bubbles up in a marshy spring high up on a remote part Dartmoor until in floods into the sea, freshwater mingling with salt, at the estuary's end at Dartmouth, "where my name disappears and the sea slides in to replace it." The poem takes the form of "water's soliloquy," as Oswald formally and verbally recreates the river as it eddies down its course, its various sumps, boils and turbulent caldrons.

This is, however, not just the singular voice of the Dart alone, others become intermingled with it over its course, for as Oswald explains in her preface, "There are indications in the margin where one voice changes into another. These do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions. All voices should be read as the river's mutterings." This aqueous chorus contains the voices of the drowned, most notably the "Jan Coo" of Devonshire legend who haunts the river. Present too are the voices that make their (legal and illegal) livings from the water: the poachers, the wool makers that use the river's water to dye the pelts, the sewage worker, the stonewallers and tinnerns that their materials from the Dart; the ferryman and fishermen; along with the voices of other people and creatures that live along its banks. Oswald conducted recorded interviews with the denizens of area (the acknowledgements lists, for example, "3 anonymous poachers"). Though Oswald stresses their fictiveness these passages ring with verisimilitude and, often, humor. A woolworker ruefully comments about the filthy state of raw wool, "Unfortunately sheep don't use looppaper," or, for example, this delightful exchange, "We're fisherman, Matt, we won't starve / Sid, we're allergic / to fish."

Oswald writes with amazing onomatopoeic vigor; the wool-spinning machine, "knocking throbbing bobbinning hubbub," and the hurdling river a "jostling procession of waters, its man strands overclambering one another ... all these scrambled and screw-like

currents / and knotty altercations of torrents." Her descriptions of the natural world are often quite stunning; a dragonfly becomes a "gypsy-coloured engines on my hand" while a swimmer dives down "underwater" which "is all nectarine, nacreous." We also come across gorgeous juicy Devonshire dialect words begging to be adopted like "slammicking" (ungainly), "shrammed" (cold), "bivvering" (shaking) and "spickety" (spotted).

Oswald's training is as a Classicist (her excellent 2011 collection *Monument* distills *The Iliad* down into its deaths and epic metaphors) and *Dart* features the expected Naiads and water nymphs. The most intriguing classical dimension that Oswald brings to bear on the Devonshire countryside, however, is her incorporation of the myth that Brutus founded Britain. John Milton had toyed with the idea of writing an epic *Brutiad* about exactly this subject before settling on the subject matter of *Paradise Lost*; in *Dart*, Oswald locates their landing place at Dartmouth: "There a goddess calls them, / Take aim, take heart, / Trojans, you've got to sail / till the sea meets the Dart." Thus the end of the Dart becomes the source of British nationhood. That is not all we have to give thanks to the river for, though, Oswald gives it a voice and in doing so reminds us of the awesome, "force that orders the world's fields / and sets all cities is in their sites, this nomad / pulling the sun and moon, placeless in all places."

11. 2003, Don Paterson, *Landing Light*

Donald does it again! Thus far he's the only poet to have snagged the Eliot twice, and deservedly so. This is far more serious collection than the delightful *God's Gift to Women*, which won six years previously. This collection does speak to his earlier ones though as it picks up on his epic sequence "The Alexandrian Library" (part I in *Nil Nil* (1993) is concerned with a quest to a massive shop selling obsolete texts; part II, in *God's Gift* the writer in the library struggles with his postmodern epic and returns home defeated). Here in the third installment we read of the long dark night of the poet's soul and the onset of dawn where, "the twins are still sleeping, since this is a poem."

The dark night is of midlife Paterson *nel mezzo del cammin di*

nostra vita. Dante's dark wood echoes throughout. There is, for example, an interpretation of Canto XIII of the *Inferno* where the Paterson personaggio encounters the Forest of the Suicides, Pier delle Vigne transmuted into an unnamed Sylvia Plath here (her "Winter Trees" provides the epigraph to the poem, and, as we shall see she is a perfect interlocutor due to her obsessions with twins and twinning). The main movement of this collection however, is not into the depths and darkness of judgment and uncertainty but rather into the "clear air" and speculation and flight. Paterson repeatedly uses the Scots word "lift" for sky and this exactly captures the feeling in many of these poems that dwell on, play with and redouble concepts pertaining to the airborne. This interest is, of course, indicated in the book's title, and we find poems of aviation, such as "The Black Box" and "The Landing." Flight is not just limited to planes, though, and we also find the angelic in "The Long Story," and the avian, such as the poor doomed fulmars of "St Brides: Sea Mail," their flammable secretions as valuable as Moby Dick's tallow.

In his *ars poetica* poem "A Talking Book" (the poem's couplets functioning like the recto and verso of the book) the book rebuts: "the Academy's swift and unannounced inspection: / this page knows nothing of its self-reflexion, / its author-death, or its mise en abîme. / Relax! Things are exactly as they seem." One would do well to ignore the book's advice since the unifying themes of the collection are exactly those of implied authorial death, repeated reflections, and an eternity of endless mirroring and twinning. There are Paterson's own twins, Jamie and Russell, the addressees of a pair of fine sonnets, "Waking with Russell" and "The Thread." Twins too in Zeus's "Letter to the Twins," Romulus and Remus, the paired "Twinfloer," and a twin parallel earth in "A Talking Book" though, the book warns, "You never meet your underself, other / than in dreams and sickness." Yet Paterson seems to confront his underself repeatedly here; for example, in "The Hunt," in which, when he finally confronts his quarry, revealed to be his own mirror self, "my hand hit the glass." The collection ends with Paterson aloft in "The Landing," where he "saw the complex upper light / divide the middle tread, / then to my left,

the darker flight / that fell back to the dead." In the "early morning sun" Paterson realizes he doesn't have to choose between the dark wood and the landing light: "No singer of the day or night / is as lucky as I am / the dark my sounding-board, the light / my auditorium."

12. 2004, George Szirtes, *Reel*

One of the most substantial (in every sense) of the Eliot prizewinners, Szirtes's *Reel* is an impressive and extended contemplation of memory and loss. In particular, the poet probes how poetic form can be used to capture and commune with past experience and lost people and places. Szirtes came to England at the age of eight after his family was forced to flee their native Hungary in 1956, an event he describes in "My father carries me across a field": "Lost figures who leave only a blank page / Behind them." Many of the poems in this lengthy collection attempt to recapture his lost Budapest. The poet dedicates the collection "To the ghost of a childhood and the body of the adult," and *Reel* considers, if, as Wordsworth says, "The Child is father of the Man."

Szirtes has a commanding grasp of fixed forms and, especially, rhyme, which is used to great effect here as the city spools out in front of us in *terza rima*. This form is extremely difficult to execute in English (due to the relative scarcity of end rhymes compared to its Italian native habitat) but Szirtes's rhymes never seem forced or infelicitous. *Terza rima* is, in keeping with the collection's title and repeated references to films and filming, the most cinematic of forms, each interlocking stanza like a series of connected film frames. Of particular note among these engrossing tercets is "Meeting Austerlitz," in memory of W. G. Sebald. The dead writer takes on the persona of his own fictional creation in the poem, Austerlitz, the exiled orphan, who, like Szirtes, is looking for his identity.

Szirtes excels (much to my delight as a lover of formal poetry) in other fixed forms too: sonnets both English and Italian standing alone and in sequences, a sestina ("Elephant," in which Szirtes picks some fiendishly difficult end words to work around) and "Winter Wings," a concrete poem that inverts the effect of George Herbert's "Easter

Wings." The effect of so much formal ingenuity makes one aware of the solidity and substance of the verse in contrast to the often fleeting and vague subject matter of lost memories and locations. Early on in the collection Szirtes asks, "What hope for rhyme when even childhood calls / on fiction for an echo"? He answers this throughout *Reel* with resounding affirmation on rhyme's part. For rhyme is essential to recollection, as Szirtes so impressively demonstrates in "Mnemon," where memory dead-ends into the poem's couplets, which pair the same words together. Rhyme and meter recreate not only memory but the experience of time too, enabling one to recapture and contain the fleeting moment, for as Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote, "The sonnet is a moment's monument." *Reel* is full of such monuments and the final sonnet of the sequence, "Turquoise," brilliantly demonstrates the temporal effects of poetry that the sonnet itself describes. For, Szirtes writes, "The Shakespearian ending which turns round / to claim your immortality in words / performs a gesture." That gesture is a stay against, and answer to, the onslaught of time.

13. 2005, Carol Ann Duffy, *Rapture*

After reading the first few poems I thought, perhaps, this collection of love poems charting the course of a doomed affair might just not be quite my cup of tea. After all, I've made a career of writing about poetry concerned with death, not love, but as I read on I became convinced of its awfulness. Duffy is currently the British Poet Laureate and, as I have discussed elsewhere in this book, that chore can have a deadening effect on any poet's output. However this collection was published years before she ascended to that particular throne, and, is, in my humble professional opinion, tedious dross. It's almost hard to criticize since there's very little of significance or importance to unpick and unpack. As Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, "there is no there there."

The poems are stunning in their mediocrity and their capacity for uninspired cliché. It's a lesson in how tepid hyperbole can be; a nursing home for dog-eared diction ("my soul swoop[s]," "the trees wept and threw away their leaves"), exhausted metaphors ("my heart

/ soft mulch / for a red, red rose"), and tired rhymes (light / night is repeated throughout; compare this with Szirtes's night / ammonite). This frequent recourse to an extremely limited palette of poetic devices is cloying, and at times Duffy is so hackneyed she seems close to parodying herself in these moon-lit, star-studded, river-banked, tree-shaded poems, in which all that is precious becomes transmuted into "gold" (I counted eleven separate instances before giving up). Even when Duffy strikes upon a moderately original image she can't help flogging it to death. In "Haworth" we read of, "The bleached dip in a creature's bone's your throat" and then a few poems later in "Elegy" we find, "this bone here / that swoops away from your throat." Her tick of trite repetition rings particularly hollow; in "Hour" "Time hates love, wants love poor, / but love spins gold, gold, gold from straw"; in "Snow" "light, light"; in "Answer" "yes, yes"; in "Write" "love love love," etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

About a third of the mercifully brief collection is framed in sonnets and sonnet-shaped fourteen-line forms. Indeed, Duffy unwisely encourages comparison to previous love sonnets in a series of strikingly obvious allusions. Here is Keats's "Bright star" in her "December"; here Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "let me count the ways" and Donne's "O America" in "The Love Poem"; and here, inevitably, Shakespeare, the mistress's eyes of Sonnet 130 making a repeat appearance in "Whatever" and "The Love Poem." One might hope this familiarity with the greatest hits of sonneteering might've helped Duffy construct her own but to no avail. In "Art" we read of how love on its expiration is consigned to "art's long illness," enshrined in paintings or "fizzled into poems." Quite.

Duffy got in hot water in 2011 with Geoffrey Hill, the then Oxford Professor of Poetry, after she opined in an interview in the *Guardian* newspaper that "poems are a form of texting.... it's the original text." Hill disagrees, saying that he "would not agree that texting is a saying of more with less, and that it in this respect works as a poem." Yet this is exactly the trap that these poems fall into. They rarely amount to more than the sum of their extremely limited and meager parts.

14. 2006, Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*

As a Londoner who used to take the green and yellow District and Circle Line each day to go work at the *Times Literary Supplement* offices in Wapping, it had never occurred to me how evocative the name of an Underground line could be. Of course there is precedence in John Betjeman's poems of Metroland, but that is to be expected from the quintessential poet of middle England and suburbia. What is the great Irish bard doing on such quotidian and British turf?

Perhaps Heaney was drawn to take his title from the line, since its combined colors are close to those that make up the Irish tricolor flag. Certainly the Underground cannot fail to suggest the chthonic and there is catabasis in "To George Seferis in the Underworld." More likely, though, is the fittingness of the circular and recursive route that the Circle Tube line takes and the idea of place denoted by the District Line, for the poems here are located, for the most part (with brief jaunts to Iowa and Iceland), in the landscape of Heaney's childhood. The only poem set in London is the title poem itself, a series of five meditative sonnets on a Tube ride that perfectly captures the experience, "As sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me. / I was on my way, well girded, yet on edge, / Spot-rooted, buoyed, aloof." The word "district" features solely in "Tall Dames" a prose poem detailing the travelling "gypsies" that would land "in the district" of Heaney's home in Mossbawn.

Far more significant to Heaney, then, is the Circle of the title. Circularity is structurally apparent as Heaney revisits the loci of his youth (for example in "The Aerodrome") and characters from his schooldays ("Senior Infants"). Circularity too in revisiting poetic subjects: the anvil of *Door into the Dark* (1969) in "Midnight Anvil" and we revisit "The Tollund Man in Springtime," in which Heaney describes himself "Lapping myself in time" as he revisits this figure from *Wintering Out* (1972). Most poignantly, the final poem of the collection "The Blackbird of Glanmore" revisits the subject of his four-year-old brother Christopher's death (the subject of "Mid-term Break" from his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966).

This poem exemplifies the kind of completion brought about by the recursive action of the poems in this collection. Of course the

place is extremely familiar, and the collection is dedicated to Ann Saddlemyer, who rented and then sold the cottage at Glanmore, described here as "my house of life," to the Heaneys. We've seen the blackbird before in Heaney's work in "Kevin and the Blackbird." Here, the bird, singing on the lawn when Heaney arrives at Glanmore, is a consoling presence, its song bringing Christopher to mind, "A little stillness dancer— / Haunter-son, lost brother—/ Cavorting through the yard, / So glad to see me home." The poem recounts how one of the Heaneys' neighbors had taken a blackbird hanging around the family farm to be an ill omen before his little brother's death. Here the bird is rehabilitated and celebrated, a symbol of circularity and the power to be had in returning to the source:

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.

15. 2007, Sean O'Brien, *The Drowned Book*

This is only one of two books to win both Eliot and the Forward prizes for poetry for the same collection (the former is announced first in January, and the latter in September). The title comes from Prospero's promise to, "drown my books," and though we can find saturated tomes ("English poets, all gone damp / With good intentions, never read") and frequent images of drowning, this is a work that owes far more to *King Lear* than *The Tempest* (see Jen Hadfield's collection below for the latter). We join O'Brien on a bleak and blasted heath here, both pre- and post- apocalyptic, perched on the abyss between World Wars II and III.

Now, I like to wallow in a bit of gloom as much as the next scholar that specializes in elegy, but I found *The Drowned Book* a bit too crepuscular and nihilistic even for my morbid tastes. The

collection's first half is completely sodden with poems about various bodies of inland water: rivers, estuaries, meres, drains. The great post-industrial rivers of Britain take on a particularly ominous cast, the Tyne becomes, "where the world / / Is beginning and ending," the Ouseburn at Newcastle (where O'Brien teaches at the university) becomes a "curdled trench," while the River Hull is full of "drowned dogs, drowned tramps." At the start of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow muses, "nothing is easier . . . than to evoke the great spirit of the past on the lower reaches of the Thames." It might be easy but O'Brien doesn't indulge in it; rather, he evokes the decay of Britain's nineteenth century industrial legacy (the sewer system, the railways) and the terrible promise of the future on the reaches of the rivers of the North. The effect is intentionally oppressive.

The gloom is not entirely unrelenting; there are occasional moments of levity such as "Of Rural Life," but even here humor is extremely black. The poem in its entirety reads: "Pigs. Chickens. Incest. Murder. Boredom. Pigs." The best poems in the collection are those that harness O'Brien's polemical and diagnostic leanings to dystopian ends. For example, "Song: Habeas Corpus" is about thought crimes, "for in our time the future tense / will be the major threat." "Timor Mortis" is a rollicking catalogue of death, framed in the manic couplets of Louis MacNeice's "Bagpipe Music" (in which O'Brien audaciously rhymes "tits" with "Clausewitz"). The lament here is not confined solely to the makers, as in William Dunbar's great fifteenth-century poem, and the living and the dead are slung alike into death's gaping maw: "Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, / Madonna and the Duke of Earl." Clearly the fear of death doesn't confound O'Brien; rather, it compels him as he invites us, "Come now, and board his empty ark—/ What need of poems in the dark?" O'Brien is particularly good in a poem on the legacy of Communism, "Proposal for a Monument to the Third International," in which we find, "Putin in his sheet-steel chariot," "brandishing a grail of blood and vlaast." One wonders if O'Brien in 2007 would've suspected Putin would still be at it eleven years later. His poem on Thatcher "Valedictory" is excellent too, an anti-elegy that speaks ill of the dead, of the "true blue Clausewitz," who, "Let the

General Belgrano, / S[i]nk to save our sheep, our guano" in the 1982 Falklands War with Argentina.

Perhaps O'Brien is much possessed by death because, as he writes in "Transport: after Stefan George," "Friends' faces, that greeted me lately, / Are gone into the dark." There are several excellent elegies for poets, including ones for Barry MacSweeney, Ken Smith, Michael Donaghy and Julia Darling. Particularly fine is a sonnet for my beloved "Thom Gunn," in which O'Brien writes of how, "We loved and feared your eager solitude, / The city as a man-made absolute, / A sunset grid of immanent desire." The collection lightens somewhat toward the end (Rilke's angels make an appearance) and we end in "Arcadia." However, the world of this poem is far from Sidney's utopia. Rather, the protagonist is condemned to be cast adrift on the "black waters of the lake" in, "an iron coffin," endlessly. I imagine the sensation must be akin to reading this collection repeatedly.

16. 2008, Jen Hadfield, *Nigh-No-Place*

The title poem of this ludic collection takes Caliban's drunken entreaty to Stephano and Trinculo to follow him to Prospero's island in *The Tempest* as its epigraph. Like Prospero's, Jen Hadfield's isle is full of noises too. These poems are set in an array of remote locales: Alberta, Manitoba and, further north, Arctic Canada. Hadfield's poetic voice really comes into its own, however, when contained by small islands, specifically the Shetland Islands (where she lives), rather than the vast expanses of the tundra.

These poems are full of whimsy and surprise; snapshots of Hadfield's life on the distant, rainiest fringe of the British Isles. The poet isolates and heightens her keenly observed vignettes with a painterly precision. For example in "Still Life With the Very Devil," plates are "stacked like vertebra. / Under the broiler, / turned sausages ejaculate." Acute attentiveness too in "Ladies and Gentlemen This Is a Horse as Magritte Might Paint Him," "from the creased Jupiter of his arse / to the spotted dominoes of his teeth." There's particularly something magical about the manner in which Hadfield conjures up her visions of her home islands, compared to the "Narnia No Moose"

of Canada, which proves sadly devoid of Elizabeth Bishop's sacred beast, "Alberta's a miserable monochrome—/ a bootcamp of little brown birds, / no moose, / the grey, grey grass of home."

Like Bishop, Hadfield's considerable descriptive powers, and her talent for apt and original metaphor, are at their sharpest when writing about animals and the collection abounds with beasts. In "Canis Minor," a dog's tongue "spools out his head like magma." The "Prenatal Polar Bear" is suspended in his formaldehyde jar "like a softmint or astronaut / dreaming in his moonsuit— / a creased, white world. // His paws are opalescent and dented with seedclaws." A hedgehog drunkenly picked up by Hadfield is like, "a kidney flinching on a hot griddle, or a very small Hell's Angel." My favorite, though, the limpet of "*Denouement*" that, "budges / a devastating millimetre."

There is something sacred in these observations of animals and, indeed, this collection does have a distinctly reverential dimension to it. This is particularly fitting for poems that are born out of the Shetland landscape since the remote islands of the UK—like Lindisfarne and Iona—have, traditionally always been sacred spaces. Hadfield frequently borrows from the language of worship (cadences of prayer and the Bible echo through "Thou Shalt Want Want Want") and the various characters and stories of world religions. Krishna makes an appearance as do Adam and Eve, while Buddha's lotus is transformed on the Shetland Isles into a "Cabbage," "cool leaves creaking—a Northern Lotus." However, these are profoundly secular poems. "Nearly a Sonnet" uses the first line from Edwin Morgan's assertion in "London," "There is no other life / and this is it," as its epigraph and redoubles the message by shouting it in all caps in the poem: "THERE IS NO OTHER LIFE. / It is in heaven as it is on earth." But be not afeard, for Hadfield shows us such a glorious vision of the Shetlands that we don't yearn for a prelapsarian state or heavenly reward, wonders enough are to be found here.

17. 2009, Philip Gross, *The Water Table*

The Eliot judges, though comprised of a different panel of poets every year, seem inordinately fond of collections based in, on or around

water. In this case it is the broad Severn estuary that separates England from Wales (where Gross lives) that provides this collection's central image. Of the other collections that take the fluid as their overarching theme, this is, in my opinion, the best of the watery bunch.

The title is characteristic, and O'Brien brings a series of epistemological musings to bear on the vocabulary of the fluid, the resonances and philosophical possibilities of concepts such as "watershed," "catchment," and "meander." Like Seamus Heaney, Gross is fascinated by the concept of the "offing" which he explores in a series of interpolated poems titled "Between Land" He's particularly interested in the strange visual effects and disruptions that occur around and on water, for example "The Moveable Island," which "keeps its distances. Its reticence. Whichever / shore you look from, it seems to closer to the other." Heaneyian too is O'Brien's "Ice Man Dreaming." Like Heaney's bog people, he is a "befitting emblem of adversity," or rather stupidity in this case, his "grand slow downhill slalom," accelerated by climate change, "Old leathery foetus, // he's hundreds of years before term."

Gross's liquid vision in *The Water Table* is far more extensive than those of Oswald in *Dart* (circumscribed by the course of but one river) or O'Brien in *The Drowned Book* (circumscribed by noisome post-industrial dread). Gross takes the Severn estuary as a starting point (not naming it, though, until the final poem "Severn Song"), but widens his perspective to encompass the many and varied possible manifestations of the water that is central to our very existence. Most obviously (and unlike Oswald and O'Brien), Gross imaginatively sails beyond the mouth of the Severn to consider the sea that covers some seventy-one percent of our globe. "Atlantis World" considers what would happen if one day the "The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea," of Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite: Continued," just decided it's had quite enough of humanity and retreated, "like an Ice Age instituted overnight." He envisages the international fracas that would ensue as nations struggled to mark their borders without the sea to define their boundaries. Gross's nightmarish vision of an "Elderly Iceberg off the Esplanade," presents us with the horrifying prospect of a globally warmed iceberg floating

inland after it “jumped ship from the loosening Atlantic.” Though this “wasn’t the last,” O’Brien warns us, the elderly Iceberg is, “a message from last-ness, a crumpled / brown parcel from an unsuspected / awful aunt who might // just turn up any day to stay.”

Most compelling, though, are Gross’s repeated interrogations of the idea of the “body of water: water’s body” (“Betweenland I”). Unlike Oswald’s polyvocal and haunted River Dart, or O’Brien’s stinking Northern trenches that run like scars across his dystopian landscapes, here Gross personifies water and anatomizes its parts, its “mouth” that “debouches—all our secrets” (Betweenland IV) and, then, in “Betweenland VII” “not a mouth but an ear, / / the estuary’s battered pewter hearing-trumpet / amplifying distance.” He reminds us too, that we are writ in water, the bead of sweat that runs “from the corner of the eye down my cheek / to the tip of my tongue, just a drip // of the litres per day that rain down through us” (“Salt”) and of how our fingerprints are “like tiny anticyclones, / googled in off the Atlantic.” Water memory may be physically impossible, but the concrete poem “Amphora” reveals the power of the memory of water functions homeopathically in our imaginations. How, like human memory, the wine seeping out of the sunken vessels, grows “by absence” and dilution “till each last molecule / in the ocean *knows / Itself* as Homer’s / wine dark sea.”

18. 2010, Derek Walcott, *White Egrets*

The Eliot was awarded to Walcott for this collection the year after a scandal broke out over appointment of the Oxford University Poetry Professor Chair. Rumor had it that the Eliot was awarded as a consolation prize (it was up against Seamus Heaney’s excellent *Human Chain*).³ This, however, does Walcott’s elegiac and elegant collection, which was to prove his last prior to his death in 2017, a great disservice.

3. Walcott had been a frontrunner but was forced to withdraw himself from consideration after damaging allegations of sexual harassment of students by Walcott circulated in the media (it should be noted that these allegations had first been published in Billie Wright Dziech and Linda Weiner’s 1990 book *The Lecherous Professor: Sexual Harassment on Campus*.)

White Egrets repeatedly returns to Walcott’s Ithaca—St Lucia—and the motif of those rangy, graceful birds resonates throughout, “prompting the last word.” He invites us to:

Watch these egrets
stalk the lawn in a disheveled troop, white banners
forlornly trailing their flags; they are the bleached regrets
of an old man’s memoirs, their unwritten stanzas.
Pages gusting like wings on the lawn, wide open secrets.

The rhyme of “egret” with “regret” sets the tone of these poems, preoccupied with aging, errors, failing powers, dead friends and lost loves; his fears of “my gift abandon[ing] me like the woman I was too old for.” The idea of memoir is apposite too: after the 1992 Nobel Prize a certain *froideur* descended upon his work; but here, aside from occasional lapses into the refuge of the third person, Walcott is remarkably confiding and direct. Those flags are characteristic of this work too and frequently appear as indicators of the ambitions of empire. Also apparent here, one of this collection’s only weaknesses: Walcott’s love of a metaphor that takes the act of writing as its vehicle. He drives that one into the ground.

As is often the case in Walcott’s *oeuvre*, the collection take the form of a numbered sequences, with subsequences (“suites” and “series”) within. The effect is of a complex formal armillary, worlds within worlds. The first sphere for Walcott, though, is always the Ithaca of his beloved St. Lucia, where he is, “content as [Patrick] Kavanagh with his few acres” in Ireland. Walcott reflects on the significance of his island’s namesake, “patron saint of isles and eyes, for my lack of vision!” Walcott repeatedly writes of his aging: of his diabetes and the blindness born of it, of how he’s now racked, “by a whimsical bladder and terrible phlegm,” a ludicrous Quixote figure tilting at lovers, trying to be, “Superman at seventy-seven.” Walcott undertakes a pilgrimage to Sicily, the place of St. Lucy’s birth, but instead of the saint’s aegis he seeks a young woman with whom he, “a grizzled satyr” has become obsessed. The adoration is unrequited and unconsummated, “there was no ‘affair,’ it was all one-sided,” but this adoration enables Walcott

to both regret his past failings ("I treated all of them badly, my three wives") and exercise his considerable poetic powers.

The pilgrimage to Sicily prompts thoughts of another former resident, "the Sonnets and Petrarch," but these poems always seem to be just slightly too short or slightly too long to attain the comfort of sonnet status as they chafe against the imperialism of form. The poems are self-reflexive too in their treatment of elegy. The bougainvillea, "whiten and freak like Queen Anne's lace" a polarized image of the "pansy freaked with jet" in Milton's "Lycidas." Walcott worries that unlike the "pastures new" that Milton's monody promises, his "monody ... might deaden endeavor and envy." However, this collection abundantly proves that concern is unfounded. In this glorious swan song, rather than the bone-whiteness of Sylvia Plath (always a harbinger of abjection and erasure) here the whiteness of Walcott's regretful egrets is a reminder of possibility and forgiveness.

19. 2011, John Burnside, *Black Cat Bone*

This, along with O'Brien's *The Drowned Book*, are the only collections thus far to win both the Eliot and the Forward Prizes. I prefer it to the O'Brien, but I still don't think these dual winners are, by any the stretch, the strongest on this list. Like O'Brien, Burnside drags us into a profoundly unsettling and uncanny world. Perhaps I just don't like being perturbed in this manner.

Black Cat Bone is an immersive and subversive work that casts a dark spell as looks at primal, formative experiences and "the legends we made" to explain them. Burnside considers not only how fairy tales, old wives tales, parables and the Bible shape on our subconscious (how we are "HansChristianAndersened"); but also how we crave these tales to make sense of our emotions and order our experiences, thus enabling us to confront, "the grief / our stories prepared us for." The collection makes repeated references to Christian scripture; taking epigraphs from the Psalms, the Book of Judges, and the Gospel according to Matthew. We read of how if, "Go far enough, they say, / ... some hideous god / will meet you, like a shadow on the road; / go further still, and scripture closes in"

("Faith"). This is not the scripture of hope and consolation, however, but rather a hollow "Blunt Hosanna" and a "tatter of Hallejullah."

O'Brien frequently returns us to an infantile state here, recreating the childhood panic of being lost and to confront the bogeyman in the closets of various poems. In the first poem, "The Fair Chase," the young protagonist hunts a mythical beast in a wood, killing it, not heeding the folk wisdom that, "Everyone becomes / the thing he kills /—or so the children whisper." There is black magic afoot here too. Burnside's notes inform us that his collection takes its name from "a powerful hoodoo talisman," and the poem in which that bone is embedded—"Hurts me Too"—explores the connection between *eros* and *thanatos*, for when "*I love my love with an X*," the kiss of love is also the X of obliteration. Love and death too in "The Day of the Dead," the "corpse-groom" and his "moth-eaten bride."

Burnside is particularly good at casting a dream-like spell in these poems (indeed, in one of his epigraphs, Franz Kafka says "*Bitte betrachten Sie mich als einen Traum!*" "please consider me a dream!"). His language has the associative logic of reverie, and many of these poems take place in the chimerical haze of the witching hours. One image to which we are continually returned in these moments is that of drowning. "Down By the River" is a poem from the perspective of a murderer drowning a woman, "She dies is a local flurry of dismay / as kittens do, held steady in a pail / of icy water." The epigraph of the title section picks up on a thought expressed in the first poem in the collection about, "the curious pleasure of the doomed, as they go under." Here Burnside quotes from Leopardi's poem "L'infinito," "*E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare*," ("drowning in this sea is sweet to me"). In poems such as "Fair Hunt" and "Pieter Brueghel: *Winter Landscape With Skater and a Bird Trap*, 1565," Burnside disconcertingly reveals us to be close to being dragged under, since we are skating over the surface of our life on very thin ice, "It seems a fable and perhaps it is: / We live in peril, die from happenstance, / a casual slip, a fault line in the ice."

20. 2012, Sharon Olds, *Stags Leap*

In this collection Olds plumbs the shallows of her misery. It charts the course of her separation from her husband who, “had come, in private, to / feel he was dying, with me,” and leaves her for another woman, in etiolated detail. One is rather astonished to discover that there was anything “private” at all in the marriage, for, as Olds admits in “Left-Wife Bop,” “he did not give / his secrets to his patients, but I gave my secrets / to you, dear strangers, and his too—/ unlike the warbling of coming, I sang / for two.” One feels rather sorry for Dr. Olds.

The fundamental issue for the critic is that these aren’t really poems. Rather one is dealing with relatively unmediated jottings that never climb clear of the wreckage of Olds’s misfortune. They are embarrassing in their self-indulgence and, consequently, attempting to criticize these writings feels far too personal. Olds occasionally manages to aestheticize herself out of awfulness; “Left-Wife Goose” is a valiant stab at a nursery rhyme scheme. “Tiny Siren,” this collection’s best poem, recounts discovering a photo of husband’s mistress in the laundry, “the photograph of a woman, slightly / shaped over the contours of a damp towel. / I drew it out—radiant square / from some other world.”

These occasionally brighter spots, however, in no way compensate for the rest, which are, quite frankly, very bad. Some examples: in “Something That Keeps” we read of, “One two three / four five six seven eight nine ten eleven / thirty-two heads on the succulent throstle.” In “The Easel” of Olds, “dis- / assembling one of the things my ex / left when he left right left,” as if she’s just learned about enjambment. Then there’s the poetic diction so clotted as to be utterly risible, the, “Girdle of curdled pubic roots, / lumped breasts, husk-spouted nipples, / eyeballs with iris gone bazooka medusa.” Generally, when the collection aspires to slightly more sophisticated poetic device, it is of the most obvious and overused sort, for example here in, “On the Hearth of the Broken Home,” where she deploys the dreaded verbing the noun cliché, “jessed with its jesses, limed / with its radiant lime.”

I was tempted to plead the Fifth over the whole sorry mess, recusing myself on the grounds of taste and decency, leaving this review unwritten, but then Olds did something so ghastly that I felt I had to say something: she appropriates 9/11 as an objective correlative for her pain. Of course, much critical ink has been spilled over Sylvia Plath’s appropriation of holocaust imagery in “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus.” In the case of Plath, the counterargument goes, the aesthetic pay-off justifies the terrible cost (I’m inclined to agree in the case of “Daddy” but not in “Lady Lazarus”). Olds plunders 9/11 here with abandon and without even attempting to balance the books. In “Last Look,” perhaps aware of her own awfulness, she places this act in the mouth of “a friend” who likens her need to see her husband a final time as in some way similar to, “*the families of / those who died in the Towers—that need to see / the body, no longer inhabited / by what made them the one we loved.*” This would be appalling at best, but it becomes unforgivable in “September 2001 New York City,” when she describes the day of her divorce at an office in the Chrysler Building. She’s provocatively titled her poem to bring to mind the tragic events that took place that month, and then subsumes what happened into her own self-interested cause, describing, “the intact beauty of its lobby around us / like a king’s tomb, on the ceiling the little / painted plane, in the mural flying.” It’s utterly disgusting to take the horrific deaths of thousands to stand for a symbol of one’s minor, insignificant despair.

21. 2013, Sinéad Morrissey, *Parallax*

James Joyce used the idea of the parallax to frame the Circe section of *Ulysses*; Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus’s dual and differing perspectives of their shenanigans in Nighttown intersect at various points in the narrative. Here, Morrissey’s intent differs. She’s interested in her own singular position and triangulates that according the acuteness of the angle at which one looks at events. Morrissey quotes from an early *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “parallax” (where the emphasis is on a singular, rather than, as in later editions, dual perspective) as her epigraph to underscore this,

"apparent displacement ... of an object, caused by actual change (or difference) of position of the point of observation." The only time the word is used in the entire collection is in relation to a singular point of observation in "Lighthouse," where she describes the "swingball of its beam," of how "it stands to catch / then hurls it out again beyond its parallax." Like that lighthouse and Emily Dickinson, she's interested telling the truth but most interested in telling it slant. In fact, in most instances here, that slant is the truth.

Morrissey's method is to take isolated moments—fixed in aesthetic aspic by photography, film, history, tapestry, painting and Mutoscope—and view them afresh from her perspective. She pays particular attention to parallax error, its tricks of distancing and foreshortening, with how it's "A Lie," "That their days were not like our days, / the different people who lived in sepia." She looks at this lie embedded in a variety of forms of representation—from puzzles and jigsaws to blogs—always digging away at the distance between verity and falsity. For example, in "The Doctors," she considers how photographs were doctored in Soviet-era Russia, of how "In this country / they are desecrating photographs—/ those that tell the truth of their own flown moment." This is particularly effective in the ekphrastic poems here that dwell on works of art that rely on the very idea of the slant as their central conceit: in this case Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* and Powell and Pressburger's film *A Matter of Life and Death*. I must admit bias at this point. The former, which resides in the National Portrait Gallery in London is one of my favorite paintings. The latter, one of my very favorite films. I am greatly indebted to Morrissey for revealing the fundamental correspondences between the two in, respectively, "Fur" and "A Matter of Life and Death."

In the glorious "Fur" Morrissey contemplates Holbein's masterpiece of the young (to our twentieth-first century eyes at least) ambassadors. By the standards of the era, however,

they haven't got long to go:
the pox, the plague, the ague, a splinter
in the finger, a scratch at the back of the throat

or an infection set into the shoulder joint
might carry them off, in a matter of writhing
hours, at any instant—

Rather than telling the truth straight and casting a "white skull straight," Holbein casts a skull obliquely in anamorphic perspective across their image as a *memento mori*, one that seems premature to our perspective but must've seemed imminently prophetic to his. Here Morrissey redoubles the parallax perspective—hers and Holbein's—and she does in "A Matter of Life and Death." The poem recounts her labor with her second child while, "the light is slant and filled // with running gold," spliced with scenes from the 1946 film. Powell and Pressburger were, like, Holbein, masters of perspective. As in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) the shift in perspective is indicated through color, but whereas in *Oz*, "when / Dorothy / opens her dull / cabin door // and what happens outside is Technicolor" ("The Coal Jetty"), in *A Matter of Life and Death* heaven is a "monochrome: an anachronistic afterlife in grey," whereas life is in Technicolor. What connects the two realms together in the film is the slant of "a magical marble escalator—the original stairway to heaven." As Dickinson knew, "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—" The slanting truth of Morrissey's *Parallax* is gradual and subtle and it is, undoubtedly, dazzling.

22. 2014, David Harsent, *Fire Songs*

This collection speaks to the main poetic preoccupations of Eliot himself, unlike any of the others on this list. It also reads like a counterpoint to Gross's *The Water Table*, that stresses the centrality of this particular element to our carbon-based lives, on a planet with a molten core, entirely reliant on the energy of the sun for our existence. This is *The Waste Land* for a post-Hiroshima world where "The Fire Sermon" takes on new and ominous significance. Harsent undoubtedly agrees with Robert Frost's appraisal in "Fire and Ice": "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice. / From what I've tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire."

Eliotic too are this collection's cast of characters; Harsent draws on mythical archetypes such as the witch (shades of Madame Sosostri) and the wise fool (who functions here much like Tiresias). We are also definitely in "rats' alley," where, in *The Waste Land*, "the dead men lost their bones." Rats multiply like, well, rats here in "Sang the Rat" and "Rat Again," for, as Harsent notes "the rat is ineradicable" and will survive, "the infinite rapture of the megaton strike, its head / slick with what it burrowed through, what fell, what kept it fed," while "You and I will close and fuse, bone seared to bone, flesh folded in" ("M.A.D. 1971 (Rat Run)"). There's even the brief, calm interlude of a "Death by Water" in "Dive." However, on reflection the incarnation of Eliot that most profoundly informs this collection is that of *The Four Quartets* in which:

The dove descending breaks the air
 With flame of incandescent terror
 Of which the tongues declare
 The one discharge from sin and error.
 The only hope, or else despair
 Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre—
 To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Fire Songs riffs on and between these impossible dichotomies: between good fire and bad fire; fire at the beginning of the world and at the end; firelight and firestorm; regenerative fire or fatal fire; bonfire or pyre.

Harsent starts *Fire Songs* with the stunning "*Fire: a song for Mistress Askew*," which combines the collection's major theme with its defining form. Song, after all, is extremely apt for a collection dedicated to the British composer, Harrison Birtwistle, that set Harsent's "Songs from the Same Earth" (included here) to music. Indeed this is a collection of poems so beautifully euphonious that on several occasions I found myself unwittingly reading them aloud. Anne Askew was a Protestant martyr tortured and then put to death at the stake in 1546. The poem recounts her silence under torture and depicts her horrific execution at Smithfield in shockingly vivid detail:

... that low rumble her blood at a rolling boil;
 and what she screams from the centre, now, as her hair
 goes up in a rush, as her fingers char,
 as the spit on her tongue bubbles and froths, as she browns from heel
 to head, as she cracks and splits, as she renders to spoil:
 the only thing she can get to me through the furnace, as I lean
 in to her, is *yes, it will be fire it will be fire it will be fire ...*

Mistress's Askew tongue declares and repeats that message throughout *Fire Songs* like the "Burning, burning, burning, burning" of the compound figure of St Augustine and Buddha in "The Fire Sermon." Harsent sets and feeds fires in our fevered imaginations. He takes us unblinkingly from *auto da fé* to atomic apocalypse until we reach the point of all-consuming imaginative flashover.

23. 2015, Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade*

In *Loop of Jade* Howe considers "the obligation to return" physically and imaginatively to Hong Kong, the place of her birth, which she left along with her Chinese mother and English father before the British handed the overseas territory back to China in 1997. This is an unequivocally spectacular debut collection, full of glorious inventiveness and evocative detail, in which a dirty painter's palette becomes a "chewy rainbow, blistered jewels."

The epigraph is taken from Jorge Luis Borges's fictional encyclopedia *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* by one "Dr. Franz Kuhn" that creates an absurd classification system for various types of beasts including, "belonging to the Emperor," "drawn with a very fine camelhair brush," and "having just broken the water pitcher." The quote is probably best known for Foucault's amused reaction to first reading it that he recounts in the preface to *The Order of Things*: "That passage from Borges kept me laughing for a long time though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off." The unease stems from how the ridiculous any attempt to categorize, "the wild profusion of existing things." Howe uses this ludicrous taxonomy like an Oulipolian constraint and the

collection features poems (among others) that take their titles from this list.

As previously discussed, it was, in some cases, Howe's very erudition that rattled some of those reviewing her work. This is condescending nonsense. She is a scholar-poet who wears her learning lightly but never pretends it doesn't exist. Why should she? She could be considered to be part of the Chinese scholar-poet tradition and she writes of this very lineage in "(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush," which details how the Jesuits who first came to China believed the painted logogrammatic language to be "the lost language of Eden" and all the mistranslations and misunderstandings that ensued. For, like Borges's silly system, these slippages reveal "words' tenuous moorings" in reality. This is exactly what Howe explores in her poem "(e) Sirens" about her misunderstanding of the word "pickerel" in Theodore Roethke's "Elegy for Jane," taking it to mean a fish rather than a bird. Generative confusion too in "(h) The present classification" where the Sphinx's "riddle" also becomes "riddled," as in pierced and perforated. "(m) Having just broken the water pitcher," details how such homographs are enormously useful in circumventing censorship in present day China. We read of how the "anonymous blogger," "ponders how strange it is (how useful ...) / that *I beg you for the truth* is pronounced / the same as *I beg you, Elephant of Truth!* // Or that *sensitive words* (as in filters, / crackdowns) sounds exactly like *breakable porcelain*."

"The Loop of Jade" of the title poem is a baby bracelet a "pendent / ring of milky jade," that was given to Howe as an infant to protect her; and that qualifying adjective of imperfection is important. As sharp as her poems are, Howe is fascinated with the effect of blurring and obfuscating the boundaries, just as Borges and Foucault were. She repeatedly revisits what happens when the surface of language becomes "scumbled" ("Banderole"), to interrogate the relationship of language and meaning and to attempt to trace and make sense of her own Anglo-Chinese heritage, her "personal Babel: a muddle. A Mendel" ("(l) Others").

24. 2016, Jacob Polley, *Jackself*

What a delightfully transporting read this was. Polley and I are of the same vintage of Britishness and many aspects of the fantastical world of *Jackself* are recognizably that of 1980s England; a land of lime cordial, baked beans, digestive biscuits and, school lunches of, "cartilage stew and spreadable carrots / the flavor of warm steel tins" ("Lessons"). These elements from Polley's Cumbrian childhood are woven together with the otherworldly in this magical collection, which inhabits an uncanny alternative existence spun together from fragments of English folklore and myth. In particular the proliferating protagonist, the adolescent and protean Jackself, is the everyboy of English nursery rhyme, a place-holder name for endless versions of selves: Jack Sprat, Jack Frost, Jack O'Lantern and Jack O'Bedlam among other coinages and kennings such as Jackdaw, applejack, jackshit, Jackspan and skipjack.

The epigraphs (one from Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet "My own heart let me more have pity on," from which Polley takes the name of the title, and a quote from the anonymous poor "Tom O'Bedlam" mad song) point not only toward the collection's wandering quest-like structure to confront "The Misery," but also to its robust language and frequently atavistic and incantatory forms. Though the muscularity of Polley's language is, undoubtedly, influenced by Hopkins, his is a distinctly direct and northern voice that owes much to Basil Bunting and Ted Hughes too, "Jackself stamps his foot / and all the carp and sticklebacks, the perch and pike and bream / are shaken out / of their gullible, muddy-minded dream." After the inaugural poem, "The House that Jack Built," sets the stage for this particular realm by placing it in the context of arboreal time ("the first trees were felled / and sailed in, wrecked, then slept / an age in the northern sun"), a narrative sequence ensues.

This collection describes the relationship between Jackself and his best mate Jeremy Wren (apparently a descendant of Christopher, since he claims "his granddad built the southern domes") and the aftermath of Wren's suicide (who "choked his way into a box"). Wren and Jackself knock around "Lamanby" (an ancient Cumbrian place name that

functions as a *locus amoenus*, like Basil Bunting's Briggflatts), getting into teenage trouble, "way out among the hedgerows, Jackself / and Jeremy Wren, drunk / on white cider and Malibu, / are kicking up dust, the froth / of the cow-parsley spunk" ("Les Symbolistes"). The conversations between the two often share the hilarious verve of John Berryman's Henry and Mr. Bones dialogues. In particular Wren ribs Jackself for his writerly pretensions: "A POEM! Wren roars / you're as creepy as a two-headed calf." As he comfortingly rubs the vomiting, alcohol-poisoned Jackself on the back he comments, "that's a proper poem for you / agony to bring up, / with real carrots in it." Those carrots from the authentically grim school lunch make me think of Marianne Moore's formulation for poetry, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." The creation of an utterly compelling imaginary garden with "Jackself in his toadskin hat" is one of Polley's greatest achievements here.

After Jackself slays "The Misery" that consumes him after his friend's death, he strikes "The Comeback Deal," and pays "The Tithe" of language in a poem of erasure and redaction to enable him to reincarnate Wren (but he warns his dead friend that "it's not as if this is a Jesus-type / comeback deal ... this is not a resurrection situation"). We end with the wandering Bedlamite Tom (the name Bedlam hospital a bastardization of Bethlehem) of the epigraph becoming "Jack O'Bedlam" in the collection's final poem, an incantatory spell of reanimation and rebirth:

I'm in the house of Bethlehem
 lying in a manger
 it's my turn then
 to turn again
 And meet myself a stranger

* * *

So there you have it, folks; every one of the twenty-four winners of the Eliot since the prize was established in 1993. A bit of a curate's egg with some outstandingly awful collections (I'm looking at you, Olds

and Duffy) and some resoundingly marvelous ones (the Connolly Prize would go to Morrissey first, then Doty, then Howe). As partial, reductive and political as such awards are, they are nevertheless a necessary evil in the world of poetry. For anything which makes people pay attention to what Auden in "The Cave of Making" termed an "unpopular art," one which "cannot be turned into / background noise for study / or hung as a status trophy by rising executives, / cannot be 'done' like Venice / or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly still insists upon / being read or ignored," is surely a very good thing.

THE IRISH-ENGLISH

Interviewer: "*Vous êtes Anglais Monsieur Beckett?*"

Samuel Beckett: "*Au contraire.*"

I've always loved Samuel Beckett's definition of Irishness as being contrary to Englishness but I'm also at odds with it. This is because I am both Irish and English and, consequently, more conflicted than contrary. I also have the added complication of expatriation since I moved to America in 2004.

I should clarify early on exactly what I mean by my coinage "Irish-English." Of course, the usual formulation is Anglo-Irish but I wish to indicate something other. In particular, I chose to use "English" rather than "Anglo" to connote a linguistic heritage rather than religious affiliation. Prior to the time of Irish independence the Anglo-Irish were a distinct ruling class in Ireland that were brought in to govern after the Protestant Ascendancy into the seventeenth century. They governed until the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. Under their rule using the Irish Gaelic language was strongly discouraged and pushed right to the remotest fringes of the island (the "Gaeltacht") while the practice of Catholicism was forbidden under the Penal Laws. Anglo-Irish literature has typically been defined as those works written in the English language produced by members of that Protestant ruling elite during that period, including, for example, Maria Edgeworth, William Carelton, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Sheridan, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde. My use of the term Irish-English, though, refers to those who primarily identify with the Irish part of their hybrid and hyphenated selves after the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. I use "English" throughout this essay in the sense far more of the language than the place (after all, England is but one of the four countries that make up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

Let us consider the Irish identities of the first three of the four Irish winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature after the award's inception in 1901 (the Prize was suspended for the duration of both

World Wars): W. B. Yeats in 1923 (born in Dublin 1865, died on the French Riviera 1939); George Bernard Shaw in 1925 (born in Dublin 1856, died in Hertfordshire, England 1950); and Samuel Beckett in 1969 (born in Dublin 1906, died in Paris 1989). Anglo-Irish all, all born into various flavors of Protestant families of varying degrees of illustriousness, all were born in the Irish capital and died away from their native land, having expatriated themselves from Ireland. Compare the trajectory of these writers' careers to that of the most recent Irish Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, who was awarded the prize in 1995. Heaney is the only one of these winners to have been born outside of the Irish Republic. He was born to a Catholic family 1939 in British-controlled Derry in Northern Ireland and was educated there at Queens University (named after the British monarch of course). Yet, he is the only one of these individuals who became Irish by choice rather than birth, surrendering his blue British passport up and taking Irish citizenship on moving south of the border in 1972. Most interestingly for my expatriated purposes, he spent much of the latter part of his career in America, returning to Ireland from 2006 until his death in the summer of 2013. Though Heaney would always identify himself as Irish he is the perfect example of what I would consider to be an Irish-English poet.

* * *

So am I Anglo-Irish or Irish-English? The latter, I'd say. I have an Irish last name and one of my distant relatives according to family lore, James Connolly, was among the "certain men / the English shot" that W. B. Yeats wrote of in "Easter 1916." I hold an Irish passport, and, I am told, look about as Irish as it's possible to. Certainly the genetic test I took out of a fit of curiosity bears that out: my phenotype is entirely Celtic, mostly Irish, a bit Scottish and Breton with a smidge of Iberian thrown in for good measure. My black hair and green eyes certainly fit with the myth of the "Black Irish": those Irish descended from Spanish Armada sailors shipwrecked on the wild western coast of Ireland in the sixteenth century. I was, however, born in the United Kingdom just north of London to an Irish Catholic father and a Protestant English

mother of mostly Scottish descent. Their families were horrified by the union and it was only when my mother informed her parents that she was going to run off with her Italian musician boyfriend to entertain at the court of the Shah of Iran that my British grandmother relented and decided my Irish father was the lesser of the two possible evils. Their marriage in 1970 did little, however, to heal the family schism; "I simply can't understand how any rational and sane person could not be a Catholic," my Irish grandmother would helpfully opine to my nominally Anglican mother. Putting aside the rationality of Marian dogmas and the finer points of transubstantiation, her position, was, perhaps, understandable given the fact that she came from a proudly Fenian Wexford family and her brother, Tommy KIELTY, had fought for the Irish Republican Army against the English during the Irish Civil War. The English then repaid him by interning him in the remotest Scottish Highlands.

My birth in 1976 precipitated a full-scale family crisis. Into which faith was I to be baptized? My parents, by that point disabused of any affinity with organized religion after a stint as hippies on an Israeli kibbutz, suggested that if I had to be christened it should be at whichever religious establishment was closest to St. Albans City Hospital. My grandmother, fueled with the sort of zeal one can only muster when saving someone's immortal soul, paced out the distances to all nearby places of worship. She triumphed by discovering that the Maryland Rest Home on an obscure unpaved road near the hospital was also, technically, a Catholic convent. Her victory, though, was short-lived. I remain a heathen. She died just before I was due to get dunked.

Would I feel more Irish if Granny had prevailed and I'd been a Catholic? Along with my Irish passport I also hold a British one that asserts that I am protected by the formidable powers of "her Britannic Majesty." I attended school and university in the United Kingdom and speak with a clipped English accent. That accent would, however, mellow into a brogue over the long happy summers I spent in Ireland with my grandparents at the family home, Sweetmount. When in Ireland the local kids thought of my brother and me as "the English"

(this was definitely not a good thing in Wexford, where Oliver Cromwell massacred hundreds of the native people in 1649). When in England I was considered Irish (this was definitely not a good thing in my hometown of St Albans, which the terrorist provisional IRA had attacked in 1991 during their devastating campaign of bombings of British civilian targets).

I grew up at a time in a country where Gerry Adams (the president of the Irish Sinn Féin political party since 1983) was thought to be such a dangerous political presence that his voice was never broadcast on British television; his words were dubbed, instead, by an actor, as if his very voice was enough to incite rabid Irish Nationalist fervor in anyone who might be happening to be listening. Times have changed, of course; the Easter Peace Accords of 1998 have ushered in a far less violent era and an end to most of "The Troubles," while Adams and Sinn Féin have been welcomed into the political fold. However, to say I was culturally confused growing up would be an understatement, yet, as much as my Irishness was reviled in the UK and vice versa, I was to discover that the condition of Irish-Englishness also holds a strange power.

For my father, though, being purely Irish in the mid-twentieth century held little allure. He was born to a Catholic family in Bridgetown, Wexford, the fourth of five children, the year the Second World War ended. At that time the family farm had no electricity or running water. Though Irish and therefore not subject to conscription like a British citizen his father, Denis, had signed up for the British Navy; like W. B. Yeats's Irish Airman "no law or duty" bade him fight the Germans (though, of course, that Airman was Major Robert Gregory, killed in action in World War One, who came from a prominent Anglo-Irish family.) He served as an able seaman on HMS *Bellona*, and undertook several perilous Arctic convoys to besieged cities on the Baltic. He fought alongside the Americans off Arromanches between the Gold and Omaha beach landings; the USS *Texas*, which is now docked next to the San Jacinto monument only a few miles from my adopted home here in Houston, floated alongside the *Bellona*, strafing the German gun positions concealed in the white chalk cliffs behind canvas screens. Upon returning to Ireland he found

not only the usual general state of penury but now the added insult of being treated like a traitor for fighting for the British, so he left, taking a job as a construction foreman on the massive rebuilding projects that were rising out of the smoking ruins of London.

In the late 1940s, the Connolly family took the boat train from Fishguard on the Welsh coast to the London terminus of Paddington Station. The area around the station at the time was almost entirely Irish. Apparently so wearied by the trip from the Old Country, they fell off the trains into the first rooming houses that would have them. This, remember, was at a time where lodgings would hang signs reading "No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish" on the door. With his decent job Denis was able to secure one of the flats carved out of a prewar house that had survived the Blitz on Cambridge Square. There is, remarkably, film footage of my father from around this time. He's one of the street urchins in shorts lurking insalubriously around in the background in the Dirk Bogarde movie *The Blue Lamp* (1950), a police drama based at Paddington Green Station. Dad and his grimy band were paid for their work as extras with orange soda, an unimaginably exciting elixir in post-war London, where sugar, along with most everything else, was strictly rationed. When not providing background color for films, Dad and his gang spent most of their time running wild around the dangerous bombsites left by the aerial attacks on London, smashing up anything left behind that Hitler hadn't managed to annihilate already.

Though born in Ireland Dad felt mostly English with his London accent in contrast to the lilting Irish accents of his elder siblings. Certainly none of the neighbors made any attempt to conceal their distain for this little English boy when he returned "home" to Ireland (no matter how far or long you've been away it's always "home" in conversation with your Irish family and friends). Dad only got around to acquiring a British passport in 1979 in disgust at the provisional IRA's assassination of Lord Mountbatten; the last Viceroy of India was blown up by a bomb while on vacation along with members of his family on a boat off the coast of County Sligo, Ireland, while tending to the family lobster pots.

My father lost his Irish accent over the years but retains an Irish way of speaking. Sometimes it's Irish words and sounds: a "yoke" could mean any mechanical thing, from a wheelbarrow to a Boeing 747, and rather than ever being so bold as to agree with an outright "yes," he affirms things with a sharp intake of air as if he's just been winded. Most of all though it's this whimsical way of phrasing things that, somehow, owes something to the inflections of the Gaelic language that he never learned to speak, its trace absorbed by some strange sort of linguistic osmosis. This, of course, is the predicament that James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus finds himself in chapter five of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he considers his difficult relationship with the English language compared with the ease with which English Jesuit Dean of Studies at University College Dublin wields it:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words HOME, CHRIST, ALE, MASTER, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

It's that fretting, that unrest of spirit, I think, that makes the Irish and, *particularly*, Irish-English such forces in the world of letters. Julian Moynahan argues in relation to the enduring appeal of Anglo-Irish writers that: "They may answer to our contemporary feeling of being at a loss in the world, of wanting more than anything to feel at home, while knowing our fate is homelessness. This appeal is to a very strange kind of nostalgia but not the less powerful for being so strange."

Yet this alienation is redoubled in the fate of the Irish-English. The nostalgia they have is for the very homeland they are already in. They are displaced by history, not space, and are often more dexterous with their adopted language than those that forced it on them. Yet, as we will see, the transatlantic passage often seems to cleanse the expatriate of the linguistic anxiety that so beleaguered Stephen Dedalus. This is very

different from the loss of the Irish language in the American diaspora that Geraldine Connolly (no relation) writes of in "Our Mother Tongue," of how the Irish language became as transitory as snow, "the words / melting as they touched / the hard ground of a new land."

* * *

This Anglo-Irish / Irish-English division can also be illustrated in the world of American politics. All of the presidents of Irish extraction prior to John F. Kennedy's election to the office in 1961 were Protestant Anglo-Irish (or Scots-Irish, the term preferred in America since it was used to distinguish those earlier settlers from the waves of Catholic immigration in the wake of the Irish famines of the mid-nineteenth century). Kennedy was the first Irish Catholic. His family came during that period from Duganstown, Wexford, only 25 miles or so away as the crow flies from my family's place in Bridgetown. I was fascinated, upon coming to America as a Kennedy Scholar at Harvard University, with quite how differently being Irish is perceived in America, which, I think, is thanks in large part to the Kennedy family and their legacy.

The Kennedy Scholarship, established in 1965, is the British Government's living memorial to the memory of the assassinated president. Up to ten British students are year are awarded it in order to enable them to study at Harvard or MIT. I arrived at Logan airport in the summer of 2004 into the arms of my Irish relatives in Boston. Two of my grandfather's sisters had left impoverished Ireland for jobs in domestic service and the cotton mills of Massachusetts at about the same time as he left for London in the 1940s. Their families, now white-collar college-educated third-generation immigrants, generously welcomed me into their homes and lives. My own generation of cousins took me out drinking to the Irish pubs of Southie and Somerville and told me of their plans to return to live and work Ireland. I was perplexed. Why on earth would they leave all of the possibilities for advancement in America to go back to Ireland?

The last time I'd spent any time there, when I was a teenager in the early 1990s, it had been a miserable place: unemployment was running at about 16%, and many of my childhood friends

already had unplanned kids thanks to the impossibility of acquiring contraception. At the time the only place to buy condoms in the entire country if you were under the age of 17 or unmarried was Richard Branson's Virgin Record Store in Dublin. The Irish government fined the company for doing so. Condoms were only made fully legal in Ireland in 1993, a full twelve years into the global AIDS epidemic. Most of my Irish cousins had fled the wretched place, scattering to the four corners of the world. This is why the IRA medals of Dennis Connolly, another great-uncle who fought against the British during the Irish war of Independence, came to be displayed in pride of place on an apartment wall in Bangkok. Since most of my family are in construction, many of them headed to Hong Kong to capitalize on the '90s building boom; Irish boys erecting bamboo scaffolding for enormous skyscrapers far higher than any buildings that existed in their native land. There is now a whole clan of Irish-Cantonese Connollys. By 2004, when my American cousins were considering moving back to the Old Country, the erstwhile "Celtic Tiger" economic boom that fueled growth due to foreign investment from the mid-90s was already cooling, and the bubble completely burst in 2008, casting Ireland's economy back to much the same terrible state it was in the early '90s. Those that ventured back to Ireland have now all returned to America, disillusioned.

My time in Boston was the first time I'd encountered the idea of Ireland and of being Irish as something appealing. This allure of Irishness is borne out by recent census data: those who claim Irish descent in America (34.5 million; and a further 5 million claim Scots-Irish roots) is seven times larger than the actual population of Ireland. Some of this, of course, is due to the huge waves of emigration from Ireland during the nineteenth-century famines and the mid-twentieth-century poverty, so harrowingly depicted in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, that pushed my family out. Some of that number, however, must in part be due to a certain attraction to claiming an Irish identity. The Irish generally seem bemused by the tenuous claims to Irishness of the green beer-loving "plastic paddies" and are certainly grateful for the tourist dollars.

* * *

Far more than by my graduate research at Harvard, my American family seemed most excited by my new connection to the adored Kennedy clan that, I was to learn, had near-divine status in Boston. Teddy Kennedy was, prior to his death in 2009, much involved with the Kennedy scholarship and he invited each year's batch down to the Kennedy compound on the Cape. We arrived on a bright morning in May (it was my 29th birthday) to have a lobster lunch with the Senator and his wife Vicki before Teddy took all of the girls in the group (along with a malodorous Portuguese water spaniel called Splash, and contrary to the advice of parents everywhere) in his blue convertible into Hyannis to go look at the Kennedy Museum. People's reactions to him were extraordinary. One woman burst into hysterical tears lamenting the assassinations of Jack and Bobby. Teddy patiently consoled her on the death of his own brothers. This was as nothing compared to the reaction he would elicit when he showed us around Washington, D.C., over the Memorial Day weekend. He took us around the Senate and received us in his private offices, where he showed us an extraordinary Sectarian chessboard, divided up into green Nationalist and orange Loyalist squares. Carved political figures from both sides of the divide made up the pieces on the board. Later he took us to Arlington cemetery. We stood with him in front of his brothers' graves as crowds gathered and goggled aghast at the sight. It was a completely surreal and extremely moving experience.

My time at Harvard also afforded me the opportunity to meet Seamus Heaney, who was Ralph Waldo Emerson Poet-in-Residence there at the time. I was writing a chapter about the great man's elegies for other poets, and it was with enormous trembling trepidation that I knocked on his office door in the Barker Center. That anxiety was immediately dispelled by Heaney, whose demeanor was more that of a favorite Irish uncle than an imperious Nobel Laureate. Over the coming months he let me interview him multiple times, gave me draft versions and signed copies of his poems and paid for rounds of Guinness at the Plough and Stars on Massachusetts Avenue. One

of the high points of my entire life was the Halloween evening that he gave a reading of his elegies for poets at the Harvard Advocate building, since, as he explained to the audience, they were much on his mind due to all my badgering. After the reading was finished we engaged in that most American of activities: carving pumpkin jack-o'-lanterns.

So how does America feature in poetic Heaney's Irish-Anglo imagination? The answer would appear to be very little. Despite spending a large part of the year in the States from 1979 to 2006, there are very few that directly address his American experience. "Bogland" (composed in 1968 before his first trip to the U.S. in 1969) is one of his first poems to include America, specifically the expanses of the vast West, in order to define Ireland by comparison: "We have no prairies here," "They'll never dig coal here." The poem ends with an image of "pioneers" but instead of the Western direction of manifest destiny or the transatlantic passage that preceded it, here their direction is downward as in "Digging" in the manifesto poem that he starts his debut collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, with:

Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

In *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) Jahan Ramazani seeks to deconstruct the "provincial" and "rooted" qualities usually ascribed to Irish poetry; those qualities so amusingly parodied in Billy Collins' "Irish Poetry" (I heard the ghost-clink of milk bottle / on the rough threshold / and understood the meadow-bells / that trembled over a nimbus of ragwort— / the whole afternoon lambent, corrugated, puddle-mad.) Ramazani argues that "postwar Irish poetry frequently transnationalizes the local.... the imaginative topography of Heaney's poetry is an intercultural space, a layered geography"; he is correct

about the various layers of cultural accretion in Heaney's verse but it seems to me that the most fundamental layer, the bedrock of his imagination, is, always, Irish. Even in some of his most explicitly American poems America becomes the locus for reveries and nostalgia about Ireland. In "Westerling: In California" we read of how Heaney "Recall[s] the last night / In Donegal, my shadow / Neat upon the whitewash" while in "Remembering Malibu" the "cold ascetic" of the Pacific is in "no way" as powerful as that of "our monk-fished, snowed-into Atlantic / no beehive hut for you / on the abstract sands of Malibu."

Images of traveling through snowy conditions feature frequently in Heaney's American poems. "In Iowa" Heaney travels through "a slathering blizzard, conveyed all afternoon / Through sleet-glitter pelting hard against the windscreen," while in his first (unpublished) American poem "In an Airport Coach," Heaney writes of "The mouths of tunnels, / Fanged with icicles." Though undoubtedly America has more than its fair share of inclement weather it seems that the "snowed-into Atlantic" of Heaney's imagination is not that of the transatlantic trip to America but rather the one of return to Ireland, since the image powerfully resonates with the closing lines of James Joyce's "The Dead." The snow tapping on the window elicits an understanding in Gabriel Conroy that, "the time had come for him to set out on his journey westward." The snow that is "general all over Ireland," connects the civilized world of Dublin to the wilds of the west across the central "Bog of Allen and, father westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves."

Heaney's American imagination is often circumscribed by form as if to contain the experience of place. His progress through "the Badlands of New Jersey," in the poem "In an Airport Coach," are measured by an *aabccb* sextilla. "In Iowa" Heaney is contained both by the state and by the sonnet form (indeed, Iowa is a squarish sonnet-shaped state), while his "Villanelle for an Anniversary" (on the occasion of Harvard's 350th commencement) crams the references to the enormity of America advances and developments over the past four centuries or so—the expansion West, the Manhattan project,

the moon landings—into Harvard Yard and the villanelle form. Contained thus America seems imaginatively and formally cordoned off from Heaney's Irish turf.

What of other recent transatlantic poetic traffic between Ireland and America? Certainly one can easily come up with several instances of American poets in Ireland: Robert Lowell living at the great Guinness mansion Castletown House in Kildare with his third wife Caroline Blackwood. He once hosted Seamus Heaney there, an event recalled in Heaney's "Pit Stop Near Castletown." The two poets "made our pit stop about half a mile / From the demesne gates, pissing like men / Together and apart against the wall." Also, John Berryman in Ireland on his 1966 Guggenheim scrawling *Dream Songs* in the pubs of Dublin to "have it out" with the shade of Yeats (according to *Dream Song* 312). I was delighted to learn that Berryman's frequent drinking companion was the singer Ronnie Drew of the Dubliners; surely the owners of two of the most resplendent and booze-soaked beards of the mid-twentieth century. More recently there has been an influx of extremely popular American poets into Ireland—including Billy Collins and Thomas Lynch—some of whom, one might imagine, may be attracted not only by the glorious landscape but also the Irish government's glorious tax exemption on monies earned from creative endeavors.

Though no tax relief for poets from the IRS, university posts are drawing the Irish to America: of course Heaney at Harvard, but also Paul Muldoon at Princeton, Thomas Kinsella at Temple, Seamus Deane at Berkeley, Greg Delanty at Saint Michael's College, and Eavan Boland at Stanford. What happens to the poetry of these deracinated poets? In particular, how do they fit with Derek Mahon's consideration of the difference between exile and expatriation: "It seems to me that an Englishman in France is an expat, but an Irishman is an exile"? Certainly this tension between expatriation and exile is what Boland is exploring in "Becoming Ann Bradstreet, 'An Irish poet watching an English woman / Becoming an American poet.'" Muldoon, too, uses the test case of W. H. Auden, an English poet becoming American, in "7 Middagh Street"; but what of Irish poets becoming American?

Earlier Irish writers like Beckett and Joyce thought of themselves as aesthetic exiles. Indeed, Joyce concludes his great Dublin-based prose epic, *Ulysses* (1922) with an assertion of his own rootlessness in the hyphenated and peripatetic signoff on the final page "Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914–1921." Yet the Irish writer is not exiled in the manner, for example, of a political exile like Joseph Brodsky. The exile may be aesthetic or economic but there is always a homeland to which one might return. It seems also, increasingly, in our age of easy and relatively cheap transatlantic travel, that the idea of the exiled Irish writer can no longer hold up. Indeed, Heaney writes of exactly this ease of passage between the two places in "The Flight Path:"

Jet-sitting next. Across and across and across.
Westering, eastering, the jumbo a school bus
'The Yard' a cross between the farm and campus,

A holding pattern and a tautening purchase—

I think it's that "tautening purchase" that we see increasingly in the poetry of the expatriated Irish in America: "purchase" suggesting both the hold and allure of the new world and the economic inducements for poets and academics to stay there. As Auden has it in his poem about American air travel "On the Circuit": "God bless the USA, so large / So friendly and so rich." There's also another sort of "purchase" going on: a linguist one whose hold operates differently between the Irish and the Irish-English.

* * *

I found myself at one of the most important outposts for Irish writing in America when I became Visiting Professor of British Literature at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 2006. For it is through the university press there that, as Helen Vendler explains, "Ireland comes to America." I was delighted to count two excellent contemporary Irish poets—Vona Groarke and Conor O'Callaghan—among my colleagues. I'll end now by considering the first of two poems entitled "Away" from Groarke's 2006 collection

Spindrift, for though Groarke is entirely Irish, her poems resonate profoundly with my own expatriated Irish-English experience.

The very idea of being “Away,” of course, suggests a kind of temporary expatriation where the homeland is always implied by being physically away from it. Whereas in Heaney’s work being in America prompts reveries of Ireland, for Groarke a different dynamic is at play, as Ireland becomes Americanized. In the first stanza of her “Away” poem, her home in Winston-Salem is defined by its very un-Irishness; the thatch and whitewash of Irish cliché replaced with American architectural features such as a “crawl space” and a “stoop.” Her description of her commute, “flitting through every amber / between Gales and Drumcliffe Road” seemed, on first reading, almost too serendipitous to be true. I certainly couldn’t recall a “Drumcliffe Road” after spending two years living in Winston-Salem prior to moving to Houston in 2008. Yet there it is on the map. Drumcliffe, of course, is the name of the cemetery in which W. B. Yeats is buried in County Sligo in the west of Ireland. Yeats described his own gravesite and dictated his own epitaph in “Under Ben Bulbin,” leaving behind the imperious instructions, “Irish poets learn your trade / Sing whatever is well made” so “That we in coming days may be / Still the indomitable Irishry.” Here Groarke, plying her trade in America, has found this most Irish of place names replanted on North Carolinian soil; no longer an end point but a way through.

Other images of Americanized Irishness appear. She paints her house’s woodwork “the exact azure / of a wave’s flipside / out the back of Spiddal pier,” while morning pins a “swatch of sunlight / to my purple shamrock plant.” The very emblem of Irishness—the shamrock—a different color here and bathed in unaccustomed light. The green of the shamrock is to be found not in her garden but embedded, instead, in the ubiquitous name of a pharmacy:

Yesterday
I answered in a class of Irish
at the checkout of Walgreen’s.

I walk through the day-to-day
as if ferrying a pint glass
filled to the brim with water

that spills into my own accent:
pewtered, dim, far-reaching
lost for words.

She’s not teaching “a class of Irish” to her students at Wake Forest; rather her Americanized and diluted accent has become a new “class of Irish” accent. For the Irish-English, conflicted and confused in Ireland or Britain, there is strange solace to be had in this. The linguistic anxiety that Groarke seems to feel in relation to the encroachment and dilution of her own Irishness is a comfort to the “inner émigré” status of Irish-Englishness that Heaney interrogates in his poem “Exposure.”

Heaney expanded upon his well-known formulation in a 1998 interview with George Morgan, explaining: “When I said ‘inner émigré,’ I meant to suggest a state of poetic stand-off, as it were, a state where you have slipped out of your usual social persona and have entered more creatively and fluently into your inner being.” Heaney achieved this initially with his move to Ireland, by becoming Irish-English. The American expatriation of the “inner émigré” enables that poetic stand-off yet further; enabling one to slip the bonds of being contrary and conflicted, and finding oneself afresh in the “holding pattern and a tautening purchase” of the American experience.

* * *

I live and work in Houston, Texas, now: a town of expatriates, a twenty-first-century Ellis Island of the documented and undocumented, polyglot and immense, the most diverse city in America. People guess at my increasingly transatlantic accent all day: Australian? Scottish maybe? Nobody cares if I’m Irish or English, since most everyone is from someplace else. We are all as equally exotic and ordinary as the other. Those Iberian “black Irish” genes mean I am addressed in Spanish as frequently as I am in English. My children Elizabeth

(named after the Irish grandmother) and Seamus (named after the Irish poet) hold British and American citizenship and are listed on the Irish Leabhar Taifeadta Breitheanna Coigríche (Register of Foreign Births). They sport an extraordinary Texan drawl, vowels crammed into words, eddying like Joyce's in *Finnegans Wake*, until I can barely understand what they're saying. I'm happy here, no longer contrary or conflicted. I'm home.

AN A—Z OF SEAMUS HEANEY

Aarhaus: In his poem "The Tollund Man" (*Wintering Out*, 1972) Heaney writes, "Some day I will go to Aarhaus / To see his peat-brown head, / the mild pods of his eye-lids, / His pointed skin cap." The Tollund Man was an Iron Age human sacrifice near-perfectly preserved in the Jutland peat and subsequently excavated and studied by the Danish archeologist P. V. Glob. Heaney made the pilgrimage to Aarhaus in 1973 and came face-to-face with the Tollund Man in the Silkeborg museum along with other preserved sacrificial victims such as the Grauballe Man and the Windeby Girl. Glob's book about these finds, *The Bog People*, was profoundly influential for Heaney, for in it he found "befitting emblems of adversity" (a phrase he took from Yeats) for the sectarian and internecine violence of contemporary Northern Ireland that he was to write about in his 1975 collection *North*.

Bellaghy: location of the recently opened Seamus Heaney HomePlace museum and site of his final resting place. Heaney died in a Dublin hospital on 30 August 2013. He sent his last words (*Noli timere*—Latin for "Don't be afraid") in a text to his wife Marie. Heaney was buried in Bellaghy graveyard alongside many of his family members three days later, after a funeral service in Dublin. His epitaph reads "WALK ON AIR AGAINST YOUR BETTER JUDGMENT," a quote taken from his nostalgic and instructive poem "The Gravel Walks." It is notably far more encouraging (as epitaphs go) than W. B. Yeats's stern command to "Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death/ Horseman, pass by."

County Derry: One of Northern Ireland's six counties (the others are Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, and Tyrone) and the place of Heaney's birth on April 13, 1939 to Patrick Heaney (a farmer and cattle trader) and Margaret McCann. Unlike the other counties, Derry functions as a verbal sectarian marker between the two major political factions. Nationalists (those Catholics who wish to reunite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland) refer to the area as Derry while

*RANCHES OF
ISOLATION:*
TRANSATLANTIC POETRY

Sally Connolly



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