



Skibbereen

Poems of the Green Land

Holiday Notebook by Mike Finley

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My mother's father's surname was Mulligan -- "the slummiest
name in Dublin' (Hugh Kenner).

Emigrant Song

I fergot to take me medicine
Fergot to say me prayers
Fergot the valuable lessons
that drew me on this far

I stand at the stoop
of Lough Firney,
big toe in the stirrup
of humbled humility

Was it thus for every poet
for half a lovely hour?
Was the buzz in the bonnet
so different to the flower?

Does every Irishman suffer
the crime of his own betterment
And the lies he tastes
on his lips like peppermint.

Run away man, be
unknown to yourself,
The hurting will stop
at the pitch of the well.

Applause for Crow

I believe you are the blackest bird I ever saw,
blacker than blackbird or raven, grackle or daw.
Your wingspread blacker than onyx without flaw,
Lacquered jacket black as a chaw
of tar or ink or the mountain blueberries in your crow.
Your eye so keen there ought to be a law,
Diving down and snatching every stray gewgaw
Clutch of diamond, gum wrapper or straw,
snatched quicker than a talon or a monkey's hairy paw,
spurs remorseless as a mongoose claw.
Mightier in legend than the donkey's jaw,
from the ice of January to April's dreary thaw,
from summer's roasted pastures to autumn's hem and haw.
Your disdain for the usual forest foofraw,
your pitilessness for feathered things carried off
in a wet dog's maw,
and tendency to repeat yourself are transwoodland
topics of awe.
Over and over every morning, the first breath I draw
that voice like tearing paper, only still more raw,
the hard spank of morning cries caw

From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis

the moon is down to the cuticle now
the stars nod in and out
the night is as dark
and as deep as the hole
in the shed of the potato farm
in Michigan
that my grandfather Mulligan had,
and
then lost

The Bale-Door Ledge

This place is neither
Here nor now and
Neither are the two bare
Legs dangling from the
Bale-door or the
Congregation of
Sunflowers craning
Below for the holy
Glimpse.

Twenty years since these
Boards saw a broom, and now
The mud climbs under
The roosting beam in
Strutting sharps and
Flats.

This place that is no
Place at all is a mile
And a year from what we
Know, lifetimes of
Thought from the twitch
Of the paw of the
Injured dog lying on the
Shoulder of the high-
Way in,

Or farther on, a car
Upside down and standing
Beside it a man,
Scratching his head with
His cap.

It all dissolves, a
Dream from which the
Sleeper awakens to two

Hornets clutched and
Teetering on the wrist's
Soft skin

The Wolf House

Needing a roof on a windy night
we came upon a shack above the logging zone.
We tiptoed in the twilight,
afraid someone was inside,
and if so, what they might be.

No one was there so we made our beds
and slept. In the morning
we saw the claw marks in the wood,
and the hair in handfuls,
suddenly free, and drifting
out the door.

The Business of Bees

When prices are normal
And weather cold, bees clump
In a knot, suck sugar
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high
It's cheaper to dump them
Out of their drawers and buy
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are
Tumbling, hear: sugar
Is dear, the snow lies
Buzzing on the ground.

Molly in the Door

I went to the door and there was my daughter.
The sun was shining behind her
so I could barely make out her face
but I could see she was healthy
and strong and happy.
Hi Pops, she slugged me,
the way she always did,
and she gave me the biggest hug.
She held me in my arms and spun me slowly around,
spun her old man around,
rocking me on my feet.
I was astonished at her musculature
and the bright look in her eye,
it was joyous, and fearless
like she had been paddling a canoe in the sun
with good friends for a year.
I held on and began to cry ...

I woke up.

At first I was sad because it wasn't true,
my daughter wasn't really alive,
I would never hold her and swing her like that, again.
But then I thought this
is how she might be now,
easy and forgiving and strong as a horse,
and I began to laugh
the same way she used to laugh,
eyes closed, top teeth showing,
like a semi-moon on a starless night,
letting it out in one exhalation,
holding nothing back.

Skibbereen

*A town notorious for dying
during the great famine*

Step to, step to, Skibbereen,
don't let them know you are dreaming.

Let my hounds come lick my face
For why should friends be afeared.

Let insects play tag-the-old-man
amid the confines of his beard.

And bid the local beauties sigh,
the ones I longed to be beside.

Sheila Murphy, you knew my vow
I gave all my eyes for you.

Peggy McCarthy kick over the hearth
and prod me by that cheerful fire.

Fetch English Major General Bill
who taught me how to lie still.

Here's to patting my round torso,
Full to here with mangel-wurzel.

Now just a pint to please the host
and tap it from the neckermost.

Don't dip your finger in the soup,
you'll have it handed back to you.

O Mary Kilkenny with the lucky penny --

O my comely girl Kathleen!

I shall live and I shall die
in the happy Land of Ire

'Tis fine to be plying a ploughman's
dream in Skibbereen

My Chrestomathy

This is what I commend
to you, to make good use
of the brick-in-hand

Useful learning
weighted by wood pulp,
is what's its meaning

A poem wants to be a joke
like the Midas spud –
but I'm one to talk

But here is evidence of a crime,
my darling DNA,
I pray someone finds

Who stole the baloney
that hung curled
in the ancient balcony.

I miss that dear bird
it was my only chance
to be similarly cured.

Bells Are Ringing

I trod the air and think about the sun.
Stars for friends and supper for the grass.
Let me say how happy I am – extremely.
Peaceful like I was never born, and maybe I wasn't.
Like as if I was dead, and who's to say I'm not?

Someone popped the blister.
I was here, and poof I'm gone.
Possibly a pretzel and the salt's
Flecked off and I never was baked
or tied in a knot or ground into flour.
I'm still out there waving in a field.

Or maybe my fingers are just tiny bones,
strung on string and banging in the breeze.

Rude Country

The laws are different here
and take some getting used to;
don't expect Virgil to take you by the hand.
It isn't inhospitality
but an intuition that is law.
People want to help you but they can't.
Later on it all becomes clear,
and you slap yourself
and say of course.
Time's too short,
who can keep track of all
the things unsaid or done.
'I'm sorry' would confuse --
'You're welcome' won't be missed.
O Lover, shut up and be kissed.

The Dance of the Dog

The knees bend like spurs
Spun round from the
Rattling steps, shake off
The wood-stove fever
Stored from the
Floorboards through the
Night, race past the pump
To the edge of the
Cleanshorn field where
Only the day before an
Army of corn held sway.
Now on tiptoe, now
Trotting gingerly row to
Row, the pink tongue
Flagging, the keen eye
Swerves to the suggestion
Of movement, surveys the
Swath of harvest slack-
Jawed. The creatures of
The plain are dazed in a
Changed world, but he who
Sleeps on a burlap sack
Where the cinders spit is
Proud to the tooth: I am
I, he thinks, dog, and
This is my country, and
This the might of my
Accomplices.

Clints and Grykes

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.

The Rain Will Come

When the stain sets and sinks into the cloth
on a rag on a post on a gravelly hill
where the ants march steady in the crimson clay
The rain will come and wash it away

When there is too much to bear
and you have worn out prayer
And there is some thing that needs to be gone
the rain will come and wear it down

Though no one you know will understand
something hard to comprehend
though faith is dead and odd is even
the rain will come and rinse it clean

When the gouge is deep and the hole erodes
and scoured hollow by a stone
and the universe is as empty as a sin
the rain will come again and fill it in

When you have given up for good
And you tried everything you could
And you made arrangements with the pain
And the worm has burrowed lengthwise through the brain
The rain will come and start to fall again

Shrooms Gone Wild

the wilderness is underfoot
the mussels on the hulls

sunny caps are glad pagodas
winking in the sun

vaudevillians spin
silver plates on sticks

upturned cup deformed
like a beggar's hand

flash of tiger fishes
changing their direction

the phantom glides
from stump to stump

silver butterflies
like flying menus

tiny acorns tip their hats

Pelagius

Little is known of this man
except he refuted original sin.

Some suggest he was Irish
With a vision nightmarish:

Adam set 'a bad example'
When he bit into the apple.

And Jesus did not die for us.
Augustine railed at Ephesus

His heresy had sufficed.
To gut the crucified Christ.

To His Missus Returned from the Sea

First night she sleeps her back to me
like a semaphore signal

This vessel at anchor at last
I say missus, and that

stands for mistress,
and all that was lost in the elision

It is like master except thoroughly admiral:
"The mastress set sail on a plunging mattress"

Upright, midnight, recondite
Seamen hang listless in the rigging

Whitebacks stroke in the dinghy
Heaving their spume upon the sea

Lesser men wince because the captain is voluble:
How can you get a world in?

When edgewise is the most delicious way
Resting her harpoon against the wall,

she slips inside the stiffened sheets:
Regina! my Queequeg! my queen!

The Idea of a Boat

Whoever came up with the idea of a boat
was rowing against intuition.

The water, which seeks to envelope us
and fill our lungs with itself
and drag us down to its embrace,
could be contradicted
with a thin membrane,
a leaf, a log, a raft, a door
and we bound out on the breast of death
like anybody's business.

Beasts of The Burren

i. Ponies of the Green Road

There are twelve of them,
Shetlanders, all stunted and knobby
like Basset hounds or dwarfs,
in a paddock alongside the Green Road.

The Green Road is no road at all,
but a grassy path leading to the lip
of Black Head lookout, a monster dome
at the mouth of Galway Bay

'Tis a majestic thing to behold
and the beginning of The Burren,
a mountain of limesrone coughed up
by the sea, forever unfarmable.

But the ponies in the poaddock,
sheltered by the hedge,
have never been to the edge,
will never see the splendor.

ii. A Meditation on Scale

There is something absurd
about shrinking a horse --
when do you stop,
when it is teaspoon size?

At every diminution
it becomes less useful,
and less handsome and less healthy,

more mixed up in their muscles.

Their eyes are like teenagers,
manes in their eyes,
and the foals, staggering clumsily
in their freakish bones.

iii. Thoughts of Another Shetlander

Jackie Frame was a fiddler,
he barely came up to my chin,
but when he played it was as if
the devil had nicked off his horns

The carpal tunnel braces on his wrists
pronounced the suffering
that comes from being good
but he grimaced, as to an enemy.

And when he set down the Bushmill
his eyes spun like buttons,
he laid his brow against your breast
because a point was needing to be made,

and you could feel the alcohol
rappelling from himself to you
My bride is going to die, he wept,
her indicators are off

and there's nothing I can do
except fiddle a lonely tune
The point is that being small
makes tragedy ridiculous,

or at the very worst, poignant.

So I say rear up, ponies,
step up to the edge,
snort back at the green wide world

Knock on Wood

So a tree becomes a stump
and the microbes burrow in
until it is all lacework
a filigree of matter.

The world that seems solid
is full of holes,
holes between pores
and holes between cells,
holes between the molecules,
atoms and particles.

There are oceans of space within and between.

You could say we live in space.

'I'm not really here,'

I'm just saying I am.

We Irish

It is said we hate the body
and it's true.

It is said we punish
with silence
and we do.

It is said we sing the sweetest songs
since Rosie fingered Dawn
but then we have our
downsides, too.

The Green Land

Increasingly it becomes our own
as if we had not quit in the night
and run away

Even in memory it was always there
the green land gleaming in the dew

Until it became a way of being
but not for the sodden likes of us.

Till we felt ourselves unworthy of a home.
The son in scripture was not welcome
at first

He made several tries before getting
it right

First at the crossroads, then at the wellhead
where the women were

Finally the doorway of his father's house
and they were all there waiting,
and grinning

Eventually we are ushered in and
all is grand

what with the music, the rejoicing,
and the general carrying on.

Mulligan

Mulligan, Mulligan
when will you learn?
Your son is on fire
and your dottir's been burned

Mulligan, Mulligan
Where is your brain?
The missus has cheated
you time and again

Mulligan, Mulligan
when will you quit?
Your work has been canceled.
Your house smells of shit.

Mulligan, Mulligan
Time for a rest
The ball's in the chamber
the hammer is pressed

Mulligan, Mulligan
run away down.
The lord is demanding
his rights from now on.

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