

MEDBH MCGUCKIAN



SELECTED POETRY



The Flitting

You wouldn't believe all this house has cost me—
In body language terms, it has turned me upside down.
I've been carried from one structure to the other
On a chair of human arms, and liked the feel
Of being weightless, that fraternity of clothes?
Now my own life hits me in the throat, the bumps
And cuts of the walls as telling
As the poreholes in strawberries, tomato seeds:
I cover them for safety with these Dutch girls
Making lace, or leaning their almond faces
On their fingers with a mandolin, a dreamy
Chapelled ease abreast this other turquoise-turbanned,
Glancing over her shoulder with parted mouth.

She seems a garden escape in her unconscious
Solidarity with darkness, clove-scented
As an orchid taking fifteen years to bloom,
And turning clockwise as the honeysuckle—
Who knows what importance
She attaches to the hours?
Her narrative secretes its own values, as mine might
If I painted the half of e that welcomes death
In a faggotted dress, in a peacock chair,
No falser biography than our casual talk
Of losing a virginity, or taking a life, and
No less poignant if dying
Should consist in more than waiting.

I postpone my immortality for my children,
Little rock-roses, cushioned
In long-flowering sea-thrift and metrics,
Lacking elemental memories:
I am well-earthed here as the digital clock,
Its numbers flicking into place like overgrown farthings
On a bank where once a train
Ploughed like an emperor living out a myth
Through the cambered flesh of clover and wild carrot.

From the Dressing-Room

Left to itself, they say, every foetus
would turn female, staving in, nature
siding then with the enemy that
delicately mixes up genders. This
is an absence I have passionately sought,
brightening nevertheless my poet's attic
with my steady hands, calling him my blue
lizard till his moans might be heard
at the far end of the garden. For I like
his ways, he's light on his feet and does
not break anything, puts his entire soul
into bringing me a glass of water,

I can take anything now, even his being
away, for it always seems to me his
writing is for me, as I walk springless
from the dressing-room in a sisterly
length of flesh-coloured silk. Oh there
are moments when you think you can
give notice in a jolly, wifely tone,
tossing off a very last and sunsetty
letter of farewell, with strict injunctions
to be careful to procure his own lodgings:
that my good little room is lockable,
but shivery, I recover at the mere
sight of him propping up my pillow.

Mourning Engagement Ring

Airbrush out his cigarette
like an old black pot
put upside down in a field--

he was barley,
the heaviest grain that grows,
a bead on the larger world
from my own intimate district,

a brother or a sister creature
of its ploughing edge.

How I have thrown a year away,
smiling a look at stars
in their dullest form,

and come back with nothing,
not even a birthname,
though I took his name strongly,

I overrejoiced
in the achievement of that touch,
the toned senses of the controlled body.

It is a common word,
my very body,
my very mouth,

the same word for what is missing
or the small pieces of the field
which the plough has not touched.

I was so relieved to hear
those twelve strokes tightening
at pleasure,

the volume of conversation
in the restaurant,

I moved like string in a hem
the stiff dark clay
prevailing in my hollows,

sown only on the chance
of rain with the dead that have become
the fallen, like stones set in wire:

a boy's anklet, pulverized,
his wooden bathing shoe, that runs along
the field lightly reploughed
and stirring.

Love Affair with Firearms

From behind the moon boys' graves
bleed endlessly; from photograph
to browning photograph they blacken
headlines, stranded outside of time
at the story's frigid edge.

Though they are long buried
in French soil, we are still speaking
of trenches, of who rose, who fell,
who merely hung on. The morning drills
secretly, like an element that absorbs.

We are right back where we were
before the world turned over,
the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone
are all that Sunday means. Their North
was not 'The North that never was'.

Artemis, protector of virgins, shovels up
fresh pain with the newly-wed
long-stemmed roses, pressing two worlds
like a wedding kiss upon another Margaret:
lip-Irish and an old family ring.

It's like asking for grey
when that colour is not recognised,
or changes colour from friend to friend.
I track the muse through subwoods, curse
the roads, but cannot write the kiss.

February House

Anne-Marie's Snow
Because she just sits like that all day
Not showing any interest in anything
Except the window sills,
Reading, yet not reading, wallpaper
Pages to pieces, scenes of assorted
Misery,
Arranging dried sea-refuse Like a ship
impatient to be loaded,
I want to fuse her to the city,
Or one short little street of it,
Without that particular mother,
Without
That female two-spirit
In adjoining trances
Petted by her words
The way the deepwater controls
The weather of the inner planet
Demonstrably
By the light-coloured highlands
Of the moon. Hands holding cabbage roses,
Opening night roses, keep her fireplace
Filled, till the evenings stretch
Warm and comfortable through her hair
Caressed
On the neck. Who showed
The other side of her moon only
To Endymion, her radiant, fearful
Room, enamoured of the snow,
And its vapourisation of the existing
Rooms.

Garden Homage

Three windows are at work here, sophisticated
spaces against the day, against the light.
The sky looks as if it has been added later
to a glimpsed world as nobody saw it.

Small gaps of awkwardness between overlapping leaves
bring their time to us, as we our time
to them. The hand alone is amazing,
the skull and the owner's hand holding it,

together on a page for fifty years,
with the earliest smile. A rope vase
of flowers returns the angels
to the ground, that still beautiful brown.

Orant Figure

I am gently compressed
On my contracted eyebrows:
My eye and its satellite
Become channels of naked silver.
Examine everything with the behavior
Of well-fitting marble.

Everything the anxieties
And exertions of the sea bring forth.
Through five-fold openings
Pierced in my back.
My human inside suspends
Its human burden.

It does not cease here
But mounts up on both of us.
Two breezes blow into us
From two directions, the rainless North
And the Autumn star.
I had nearly forgotten the Nile

And thought the signs
Borne by the landscape
Were the highest illumination
And cheap as grace.
But now the river itself is suggested
By means of distinctive currents

And birds that wash unshaken
In that river's streams. The lip
Of the cup bends over
And assumes the shape of leaves
That retreat inward in a half-circle
As if giving way to each other in a dance.

I am cold as a church in mid-air.
The golden capitals on the upright
Collar of its walls, the bird
Perched in the hollow of a quince—
Yellow, short-lived anemone.
Gathering the flower's sperm.

The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter

Lordship is the same activity
Whether performed by lord or lady.
Or a lord who happens to be a lady,
All the source and all the faults.

A woman steadfast in looking is a callot,
And any woman in the wrong place
Or outside of her proper location
Is, by definition, a foolish woman.

The harlot is talkative and wandering
By the way, not bearing to be quiet,
Not able to abide still at home,
Now abroad, now in the streets,

Now lying in wait near the corners,
Her hair straying out of its wimple.
The collar of her shift and robe
Pressed one upon the other.
She goes to the green to see to her geese,
And trips to wrestling matches and taverns.
The said Margery left her home
In the parish of Bishopshill,

And went to a house, the which
The witness does not remember,
And stayed there from noon
Of that day until the darkness of night.

But a whip made of raw hippopotamus
Hide, trimmed like a corkscrew,
And anon the creature was stabled
In her wits as well as ever she was biforn,

And prayed her husband as so soon
As he came to her that she might have
The keys to her buttery
To take her meat and drink.

He should never have my good will
For to make my sister for to sell
Candle and mustard in Framlyngham,
Or fill her shopping list with crossbows,

Almonds, sugar and cloth.
The captainess, the vowess,
Must use herself to work readily
As other gentilwomen doon,

In the innermost part of her house,
In a great chamber far from the road.
So love your windows as little as you can,
For we be, either of us, weary of other.

Skirt of a Thousand Triangles

I am at present reading a fascinating book
Called “Dante n’a rien Vu”—a tortoise-shell reading.

It was minus 27. The city was drowning in flags.
We closed our still normal windows in order
Not to hear the bells. All around the Market Place,
Enormous white poles had been planted every
One and a half meters, from which fluttered
Blood-red banners many meters long, embroidered
With a white circle. That same night,
More than sixty persons were registered
As having committed suicide.

Having quickly sat down with my back
To the window, I could only count the shots,
Not the unraveled scarves. While I was binding
Bandages, with my common-or-garden nerves,
She told me how precisely to knock upon the door
When a house was “liberated.”
The first two days we spent
Sitting on our suitcases.

When the porcelain isolators spaced at intervals
Began to gleam white over the same forest-in-spring,
She suddenly stopped addressing me as “Sister,”
And looking desperately English began kissing
Both my hands alternately at high speed:
Near perfume, the flowering
Of my hands and fingers . . .

Her dress contains many skirts, one in-between skirt
Of upside-down shapes, and geometrically
Red endings—long, leafy, earthy ends.
At times she picks up to her northern shoulder
Whole armfuls of her skirt to free her feet.
Its soft, ladylike materials, its deceiving sash.

We exchanged a short, almost rough,
Kiss on the march. You have to back out
Of the cell as you leave, and tread on a rag
On the splintering floor, to draw the others after
You. To truly rebuild flowers of globe mallow,
Hands outstretched towards the camp.

The Star Parasite

My thought became a kind of algebra
Where the x sank to the bottom
As your arms submerged
Into more like a pure V.
The brown rectangle and warmer browns
Of your raised and squared-off arms,
Drenched with an inner glowing,
Reversed the typed B.

Geometric ghost, you clasped your hands
At a certain distance from my nipple
That nailed itself to your chest
As clearly as your wedded face.
The round bee-stung lips of the wine-glass
Opened their splendid dead-ends
To your black tongue's nocturnal squares
Like a shapeless town, poorly explored.

The imaginary triangle of your Ionian
Torso overlapped the real, angel-sealed
Diamond of my smaller breast,
And the almonds of your thighs
Arched me from the second foot
Into a kneeling woman, standing woman,
Crouching woman, using the same curves
To frame an arch of trees in the late forest.

Complete tree, furrowed with big veins,
I weighed you on the floor
Like the drop-leaf of a table
Before the shape is finally reached.
My breasts were repeated twice,
Once as a sloping melon slice,
An immaterial gleam of light
Whose pathway may be closed or narrowed.

And once as the brown-tipped, steeper
Cone, commonly found only
In young girls. They read to me
Like shells on an antique piano
Or a violin alongside an anchor,
Stranger to me in their nudity,
Forever decaying and undiscoverable
As the street incision and its surface.

The wall seemed to swing backwards,
Threadlike through the increasing shallowness
Of the pedestal fruitbowl, through everything
That makes a place the same place,
So what had no place
Was at home everywhere.
Your fingers deadened, one after the other,
Vivid and mingled, on your calf and kneecap.

You marked off their divisions, grouping
Their muscles and bones like banished elements,
Like teardrops repeated over and over
Or a language with only one word.
And set them on your thorax,
Abandoned, like one of your senses,
Your gaze stepping down your share
Of the house, its suggestion of hips and eyes.

The Albert Chain

Like an accomplished terrorist, the fruit hangs
from the end of a dead stem, under a tree
riddled with holes like a sieve. Breath smelling
of cinnamon retires into its dream to die there.
Fresh air blows in, morning breaks, then the mists
close in; a rivulet of burning air
pumps up the cinders from their roots,
but will not straighten in two radiant months
the twisted forest. Warm as a stable,
close to the surface of my mind,
the wild cat lies in the suppleness of life,
half-stripped of its skin, and in the square
beyond, a squirrel stoned to death
has come to rest on a lime tree.

I am going back into war, like a house
I knew when I was young: I am inside,
a thin sunshine, a night within a night,
getting used to the chalk and clay and bats
swarming in the roof. Like a dead man
attached to the soil which covers him,
I have fallen where no judgment can touch me,
its discoloured rubble has swallowed me up.
For ever and ever, I go back into myself:
I was born in little pieces, like specks of dust,
only an eye that looks in all directions can see me.
I am learning my country all over again,
how every inch of soil has been paid for
by the life of a man, the funerals of the poor.

I met someone I believed to be on the side
of the butchers, who said with tears, "This
is too much." I saw you nailed to a dry rock,
drawing after you under the earth the blue fringe
of the sea, and you cried out "Don't move!"
as if you were already damned. You are muzzled
and muted, like a cannon improvised from an iron
pipe. You write to me generally at nightfall,
careful of your hands, bruised against bars:
already, in the prime of life, you belong
to the history of my country, incapable
in this summer of treason, of deliberate treason,
charming death away with the rhythm of your arm.

As if one part of you were coming to the rescue
of the other, across the highest part of the sky,
in your memory of the straight road flying past,
I uncovered your feet as a small refuge,
damp as winter kisses in the street,
or frost-voluptuous cider
over a fire of cuttings from the vine.
Whoever goes near you is isolated
by a double row of candles. I could escape
from any other prison but my own
unjust pursuit of justice
that turns one sort of poetry into another.

Hand Reliquary, Ave Maria Lane

God knows that there is no proof
that part returns to wholeness
simply because miracles happen
at a single church-going.

Her verdant branches labelled
with the names of the five senses,
the garden not ours, she prayed
for her illness to last beyond the grave,

and be the unsealer of that tree.
She might have been dead for a week,
though she went on with her deep
dying, her womb a transparent crystal

turning into a brown relic
even before her death. The blinding
beauty of her hood opening
acted upon me as my own ghost

would do, sounding silk,
as with a lifting gesture
she tore off flesh from her hand,
driving wide her middle finger

into the palm of the other.
Till being a vessel, Christ appeared to her
as a dish filled with carved-up bread
so unnaturally sweet, so lightly crushed,

she could quench the tall language
of his image in her mouth,
which was the breast-wound, always on the point
of being taken, in his female side.