

Speechless at Inch

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James Caruth

smith|doorstop

the poetry business

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Contents

9	The Bangor Blackbird
10	North
11	February is Over
12	Note
13	Three Little Birds
14	Pigeon Lofts, Penistone Road
15	Rare & Racy
16	A Harvest of Stones
17	The Old Faiths
18	Listen
19	Grave Goods
21	The Irish Yew at Cromford
22	Beatitudes
24	Stoop
25	Above Redmires
26	Apostle
28	Eight Days
29	The Christmas Rhymers
30	From the Chinese
31	The Art of Distance
32	Marking the Lambs
33	Considering Grief
34	Snow
35	The House
36	A First Glimpse of Snow
37	Once More
38	Found Poem
39	Rain
42	Dublin Beat

- 43 This Poem
44 Constance Markievicz at Stephen's Green
45 Tunes Played on a Penny Whistle
46 Six Degrees
47 Lissadell
49 Glendalough
50 Gallarus
51 Speechless at Inch
52 Son
53 I Am Invisible In The Dark
54 Love Lines
55 The Photograph
56 All Roads Lead Home
57 The Temple Jar
58 Bewleys
59 The Seagram Murals
60 There Are Many Ways To Hypnotise A Chicken
61 Resolution
62 Snapshot
63 *from* Dark Peak
Creed
Offertory
Pater Noster
66 Lagán
67 Belfast
69 The Deposition
70 Milltown Sequence
72 Coast Road, North Antrim
73 Dinner with Sharon Olds
74 A Step Away
76 Tranquil

77	Recurring
78	The Old Austerities
79	Dreams of Donegal
80	The Down Shore
81	The Demesne
82	Bangor
83	New Year
84	The Last
85	New Year in Arras

In memory of Steve and Matthew

The Bangor Blackbird

after 9th century Irish

A desolate song rings over the Lough:
a blackbird in a hawthorn bush,
unsettled in the gloom of leaves, sings
a gilded lament to an empty nest.

North

A day when the earth seemed
out of kilter, when the wind
came at us from some neglected corner
as we pointed the old Ford
resolutely into the north,

windows down, swallowing
the scent of rain on ploughed fields,
looking out over reed-beds
as a heron, almost perfect,
rose up from the rushes.

Geese wintered on the mud-flats,
brent, greylag, pink-foot,
gorging on sea aster below a sky
like the inside of a shell,
feeding in the shallows
before the journey home.

All of us pulled to a single star.

February is Over

after Frank O'Hara

February is over
but a taste of ice remains on the air
like a tarnished spoon.
I lift my face to a corner of the garden
where the sun might be.
You're at my ear, saying –

We cannot touch.

Look there, the cherry tree
coming into bloom,
a breeze worrying that branch
where a small bird preens,
ready for flight.

We must not touch.

Winter has eased, a scratch of blue
along the horizon, the day receding
as the dog stirs under the weathered bench.
It's chasing rabbits over wide open fields.

We cannot touch.

February is over.
I think of you alone in a room,
the glory of twelve white roses.

Note

The music must always play.

– *W H Auden*

The TV above the bar's on mute
but the rolling-news declares
democracy's under siege.
Footage of the citadel,
barbarians stalking the hallways.

Along the bar a radio plays 'Slow Dance'.
I'm mellow, sipping espresso
in a mid-town dive, trying to make it last
as I write a line on the back of an envelope
and 'Trane wanders off on a blue note.

On the TV the Capitol's marble dome
shines on the Washington skyline.
Here, rain is falling on 52nd St
and I think – Sometimes that moment comes
when we realise that where we are
is where we want to be.
Caught on that note 'Trane holds
like it's the last sound we'll ever hear.

Three Little Birds

Bob Marley seeps over the fence
as sunlight slants across next-door's lawn
where three sparrows shake their wings
at the edge of a pond, bathing in clouds.
Rain has ceased, pearls strung on a spider's web,
honeysuckle drips, the last roses curl and spill
rusted petals over the untended beds.

A woman stands washing dishes in a sink,
her wrists sunk in a lather of suds.
She looks out at the garden's slow demise.
This is a time for shedding, stripping back,
to trust a pulse faint and deep.
Three birds in the alder singing –

*Don't worry, about a thing.
'Cause every little thing, gonna be alright.*

Pigeon Lofts, Penistone Road

after Stanley Cook

Above the dual-carriageway a few still cling
to the slope, abandoned crofts
of an island community long-since returned
to the world. They hide amidst the scrub
and litter, windows boarded-up, doors
barely hanging on, the faded paintwork crumbling.
They are wounded by weather.

Below, the afternoon traffic races by,
no time to consider these stately piles balanced
on the edge of decline. No one hears the wind
shake the perches free of bloodlines –
Ebony Giants, Blue Supremes, Janssens.
No one hears the flap-flap of wings,
or someone calling a lost one home.

Rare & Racy

Sheffield

From a back-room,
scratchy strains, Charles Mingus
on vinyl, an elegy wandering,
haphazard notes falling like leaves
in a forest gloom of high shelves.

Saturday, time on my hands
to sift the thin stacks of books,
the scribbled labels fading –
Philosophy, Politics, Poetry,

stations where I might bend a knee,
pull out a slim volume,
its sudden musk intimate, like sex.
The shop door opens on another page,
a tinkled riff – ‘Goodbye Pork Pie Hat’.

A Harvest of Stones

for Elizabeth Scott

That September the rains came early,
the day fading by mid-afternoon
so she'd sit by the fire knitting, talking
about the farm near Mullaghbawn
where she'd often lean at the open door
watching the sky altering over Slieve Gullion.
How her people had cleared those fields;
each year a harvest of stones.
How not an inch was theirs, not a blade of grass.

Some evenings
she'd lift her hands to catch the moon
while things moved in the dusk,
a beast settling in the low pasture,
the rill of water in a ditch, a breeze
shivering a hedgerow, and God
somewhere in the darkness.

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