



THE PRIVILEGE OF DISTANCE

Poems of the Ulster Museum





With thanks to Anna Liesching and the Ulster Museum and to Rachel Brown and the
Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's for supporting this publication.



THE SEAMUS HEANEY
CENTRE





Composed by students of the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast, these poems celebrate, reflect, interrogate, contextualise and reimagine a selection of works held in the Ulster Museum's collection.

Looking is a political act, and these poems discover in their inspections and empathies questions of class and gender and sexuality. If, as it was once said, painting is an art of space and poetry is an art of time, these poems find new meanings and resonances in a variety of works.

They demonstrate that an old picture might yet tell a new story, and that, if one's eye is keen and one's imagination charged, that inspiration might be a kind of agility; that one could find, even in an image a century old, a new way to think about how the world works today.





BEBE ASHLEY

OIL, SMOKE & FIRE ON CANVAS

Purgatory Flower, Otto Piene

Our first photograph of a black hole took one year
eight telescopes and a global network of scientists.
I have recreated it here with oil, smoke & fire on canvas.

I took something incendiary in my hand
struck the match and flirted the flare
so the centre smouldered.

In the centre I believe I saw a missing bullet
exposing a thing we haven't seen before
and a thing we've seen too often.

The glaze is diluting in the rain.
Somebody is screaming.
It is too dark to hear the flame.





ANDREW RAHAL

IT BEGINS WITH “CAT” BY GWEN JOHN

Drawing, ink and wash and white on paper, n.d.

This picture ends with a child and still life. It begins with my son's hands.
His life and death questions quarantined in the Ulster Museum until close.

It begins with the hard orange and white tortoise shell cat, a replica
based on “Cat”, covered in soft and short hair, curled up on the bench

far from the tables where children color their own cats on square slips.
It begins in disruption. My son cannot sit like his peers without a rainbow

of crayon and pulp massaging his new back teeth. It begins in the Saturday
afternoon purgatory. There is a quiet bench on the wall. There for the replica,

not there for processing the cat's motionless tail or approaching the bright tuft
of cat ear as my son does so delicately, but for modelling a perfect sleeping cat.

It begins when the replica does not twitch back like a cat full of life, or sink
between my son's fingers like the stuffed animals he studies for hours in his crib.

It begins in repulsion. It begins, instead of memories, with the unknowns filling
his head, his elbows in and white palms out. It begins because the life in his hands

is not responding. It begins in protest and in the clatter the cat makes
after he shoves it with both hands. Clear off the bench, the cat pearls head first

and lies motionless on its back. It begins when my son giggles, makes an ooh.
It begins in worry and potential. It begins as all my assurances naturally fail.

It begins when I remind him, after he is bored of being, and goes off prematurely
like a teenager so interested in breaking the next thing, that he was never hard-wired

to anything, never taking life so seriously. It begins because he leaves it on the floor
and sits by the cat, alone in a thought, humming like a disturbed stone in a museum.





MÍCHEÁL MCCANN

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN BY GLYNN PHILPOT

1

This man in paint of silence. Oh young man,
oh the hours, and the stains.
committed to memory: the Verdigris
eye tone; the reflecting of love in his eyes.
Are they even hazel? I'm not sure.
I'm not sure it really matters.

2

Young Man is looking to the museum label
to his left, ignoring you really. The word
homosexual burns like a poker lying low
in the arms of the fire-dog. His eyes sparkle
asking *Me?* *no* *I couldn't possibly*

3

You begin to envy the attention that he
paid this man, how the folds in cashmere
scarf... those lost hours, those real hands.

The time and the hands and the stains
maybe these are the layers that allow
the oil onto the board onto the canvas

and make the vein pulsing in the temple
mean something more than 'oh, really?'
or the shine of studio lamp onto the oils.





4

The wood-grain frame is the silent, textured
mother of our guy. To hold his
weight up, and mask most of herself really.

A motherly window. Kind, protective—
—maybe, some evening in the dark of closing time
the window isn't one way glass. Our friend can look back
along the sideways length of the gallery
listening for the keychain coming, singing of company.
and a brief flash of a torch: mid-night comfort.





BART BREATHNACH

GOODBYE AND GODSPEED FATHER (1935)

The oarsmen get the
boat ready.
One pulls with all his might
in the shallow
white water, needing to catch that
millimetre of lift,
when the tiny horses run in, pressing,
the shoreline

sand. The other stands, one
hand above the tarred back of the currach,
to steady it ,
a third oar balanced between his elbow
and sweat
dripped armpit, ready to jump
in and
push them out, when the time
comes.

All the island's men who helped carry
the boat down
and more who followed behind,
gather on the beach to see the
priest off.
One eye always on the sky,
as they wait
in turn, to give
their rough
hands
to his softer ones.





The clouds are right
and left.
They are vanishing, sure,
with specksof gold
light, rising
from off the horizon, above
the dark blue sea,
as if to say:
the time is right, Father.

Goodbye, Father.

Godspeed, Father.

Take care, Father.

Hold tight to your hat for the journey,
Father.

There will be an extra log on every fire, tonight,
for you, Father.

The priest's luggage sings:

I won't forget you either, people of Inishmore.

I will always spread my prayers
to those who need it.

May your Sons and Daughters suffer no
jealousy or hatred.

May they live, like this – in their hearts –
for centuries to come.





AINE MCALLISTER

THE CURLEW CALL

after 'Red Bay' by Elizabeth Magill

He may have thrown her to the wind as a demon
but Aoife was given the form of a curlew by the Morrigan
who knew more of her than anyone.
Today at Red Bay, the children flew from the river lagoon
back to sea and with the curlew's tongue
she called out her sorrow to them.

*I dreamt a child grew wings and flew,
and for the first time I knew
what it feels like to be free,
when I woke I thought the child was me.*

The children did not hear or understand her,
the world was dark for Aoife and it grew darker.

The spring-lit bending willow turned to crimson,
delicate leaf fingers felt like wire
yellow whin on the headland melted black as tar,
suns of celandine, sparklers of ransome, purple vetch
became like briars,
she couldn't tell a bright blue rope from mossy tankle.

*A spore of darkness had grown in me
where the power of my voice should be,
power that I didn't know transformed
and cloaked you in your innocence as swans.*





The children did not hear or understand her,
the world was dark for Aoife and it grew darker.

Flecks of sun through cloud scrapes
streaked the sky burnt orange, the blood reflection
of the willow left the river purple
the red earth turned to muck, the sand became like clay
above the water-burn and after every wave break
the clouds and ocean both, were as petrol like as pewter.

*I answered you Fionnoulá with a truth that I live too
The time you spend in exile depends on you;
there is a harsh place you must go alone
or it can take 900 years to find your own way home.*

The children did not hear or understand her,
at Waterfoot the curlew calls to a silenced woman's spectre.





ERIN GANNON

QUEEN IS A STATE OF MIND: FRAMED

After Medbh McGuckian, Oil on canvas, By Peter Edwards, 1989

I.

Not many people ever look at us do they? Not to see.
We always need to tell them, show them, and that's a language
that makes us slaves. Mouths are not necessary.
Resistance: The guileless correction of a misbehaving bra strap,
a faded t-shirt, serving uncoiffed and unconcerned about it.
Dead right in our own skin, we disobey.
We don't play flash, we don't lay low, pretending
we don't exist to survive.

II.

Look: Here's the Lioness.
Rocking chair repose,
Rocking chair regal.
Peter told me to relax.
I chose this place
and sit crowned
and caped in color.
What I don't see
is the shapes in the light.
What I don't see
is the shapes in the dark matter.
What is conjured
by my tightened fist.





III.

What we carry, from before,
how we destroy, birth, how we beget.
These inheritances are inevitable.
Oh, there was weakness, but in it
we saw greatness, tenderness;
the kind of understanding that exists
only through sharing a body.
The constraints we slid through and by.
The constraints we couldn't acknowledge.
But: Flight. There, the pigments are deep,
the sky infinite. The lights refract
but they cannot distract the eyes.
The darkness isn't empty.
In fact, to be so bold, I see lavender.
Just behind you.





SUPRIYA DHALIWAL

WE HAVE SOME TALKING TO DO

After Hannah Starkey's Mirror – Untitled, September 2015

The heliocentric distance between me
& the woman pulling over her car
on Nankin Street is almost negligible.
We lament, lie, live & love surrounding
each other, co-existing in banal urbanity
like two uninvited guests crashing
the same party, not for the free food
& drinks but the low-key free
companionship with no strings attached
that the nightclub grandeur fails to offer.
It is a form of modest mutualism.
Most times, we are mentally prepared
to overlook basic human needs
like the need to have to talk or wear
flowers or glitter. I have been closely
monitoring a wound on my forehead
minimising. It is a rather slow event.
I take selfies every few hours to record
the progress. This goes on
for a good few days. To mark
my sadness I dress in an oatmeal
(the boring kind devoid of cinnamon,
honey & any kind of fruit) coloured coat.
Fighting several coniferous branches
against a hypnotic mellow blue sky
I find my way towards
an incomprehensible graffiti
on Nankin Street where that woman
will pull over again today.
I bet we have some talking to do.





MARCELLA L.A. PRINCE

LEFT RIGHT AND CENTRE

After Cornelia Parker

I had the accidental pleasure
of walking in just as the end
was reaching the beginning again.

I became part of the loop,
watching the nine minute
and thirty-seven second film

three times in a row. I did
not move from the bench
when people arrived,

staggering into the dark
of the theatre. Look,
newspaper & headline

flutter silently
all around the House
left right and center – papers.

Of the seventeen people passing
through the makeshift theatre, none
saw the sunlight breaking through

the windows of parliament,
or the newspapers stacked so
carefully. Only I saw.

This got me thinking
about the things I've missed
walking in and out of rooms

saying instantly to myself
not much going on in here,
and walking back out, content.





TAYLOR BELL

**DAYLIGHT RAID FROM MY
STUDIO WINDOW
BY SIR JOHN LAVERY**

ah, once again the sun is dumping
its afternoon refuse on this moment
where a woman with a sharply thumping
heart crawls to have a look – a porous event
full of toil & danger is taking place
nowhere near the window. the sky far away
is a schoolyard where planes dip & dogfight
like bullies elbowing at the top of the slide
to be the king. an indifferent hand suggests
through some windows you hear the opulence
ringing louder than the air raid sirens.
vaulted ceilings swallow all the silence
and money affords the privilege of distance
which seems to be why her face is hidden –
so no-one can see how scared she isn't





MILENA WILLIAMSON

YELLOW DEVICE, 1962

After Patrick Scott

As I walk away, yellow dwindles
to the code and colour of dial tones.

Like a funambulist lost in the art
of tightrope, I keep the device in sight.

This approach as I take my leave
yields a yellow echo of desert tests

and the desire of fly-by-night devices
to paint aurorae in the sky.

The yolk of egg tempera vanishes in canvas.
The orange apparatus could be renamed

like planetary nebulae, their glowing gases
wholly unrelated to planets or exoplanets:

Lemon Slice, Soap Bubble, Cat's Eye or Helix.
Little Ghost, Hourglass, Footprint or Fetus.









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