

Inner and Outer Landscapes

By

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**I hereby declare that the material found in this thesis
Is entirely my own work.**

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MA THESIS – Noel Monahan

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ABSTRACT

INNER AND OUTER LANDSCAPES

This study of John Montague's poetry takes the reader beyond the family and political history as subject matter of his poetry to a deeply felt exploration of the landscape.

Montague's interest in Irish place names and mythological associations with the landscape are explored. The study deals generally with two of John Montague's collections of poetry: *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom*. The fact that Montague's mother abandoned him and gave him over to the care of two aunts at the tender age of four is central to this particular study. The study looks on the landscape as a surrogate mother to the poet and offers possible connections and reasons why the poet is attracted to this subject of landscape. Where appropriate, the study shows similarities between the work of John Montague and that of William Carleton and Patrick Kavanagh.

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BLACK LOAVES

We weren't given the game.
Somewhere, out there in the dark dust
Of childhood, we found it, discovered it bit by bit
And it lead us on to making bread,
Baking black loaves, whenever the sun shone.

It was a summer of black clouds
But we were somewhere else,
Where nothing mattered much,
Below in the turf shed by the road,
Mould and water devouring us,
Sifting the turf mould into flour,
Mixing the black dough, sand buckets full of water,
Our postures changing, kneeling upright,
Sitting on hunkers ...

Cheerful chatter, half listening to one another.
Dorry said she loved me and might marry me
Some other summer. Swallows flew in and out.
The dog stretched before us, her paws forward,
Eyes wide open, tail wagging,
Watching us mix the mould,
The black dough slipping through our hands.
Des lost concentration for awhile

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And drew a face in the turf mould with his finger.

Jimmy, who was working in the yard, shouted in at us:

What are you doing bedaubing in there?

Our hearts were full of black brilliance then.

Trays of turf loaves baking in the sun

Soon crumbled back to mould

But I still feast on the crumbs.

A GHOSTLY LETTER

FROM SHERIDAN TO SWIFT

Dear Hypothetical Reader, Mon Frere,

Let me Swiftly take you away
To ghostly noise of yesterday,
And you must bend your eyes and ears
To songs and rhymes of bygone years.

 Buffoonery and jugglery,

 Idiosyncratic --- octosyllabic.

A poem's meaning, sense and sound
The likes of which can still be found.

Quilca House, Two Thousand and Four

Shades of Sheridan's and Swift's lore,

Ghosts hover here, words all alone,

Silence the language of the stone.

Years have past since last we conversed,

Before they walked behind our hearse,

Jonathan ... Come Back To Quilca,

For one long last noisy fracas ...

We'll visit Shantemon, invoke,

And get the old altar to smoke,

By Quilca's lake and Stella's bowers,

We'll pluck amaranthine flowers,

Big Doughty will carry your pony,
Brobdignag farmer from Raffony,
You remember how the Teagues could gabble,
Triall, Droch and Drib from the Gaelic rabble.

`Tis all changed --- all different now
` Twould put the cat off her *Meow*.
Bobby Yahoo, has won the elections,
Political, and other connections.
It is his vile most burning ambition,
Build Piggeries without Planning Permission.
Men happy with the change of life,
Every woman, anyman`s wife,
Sex in abundance, they say it`s better,
Everyone praises The French Letter.
Supermarkets in Virginia Town,
All claim to bring their prices down.
Jane The Monger, Mickey Cooper,
Joe The Dealer, Jim The Weaver,
Had visits from The Receiver.
Only Pat The Baker, survived the fall
And Dunnes Stores Better Value, Beats Them All.
On second thoughts, not much has changed,
It`s just a little more deranged,
We still have lunatics and fools

In charge of Faster Learning Schools.
“ *The Legion Club* ” ,open to bribe,
Is now “ *The Dáil* ”, curse of the tribe.
Please return to Quilca once more,
In this year, Two Thousand and Four,
I hope you will not grieve to see,
Sometimes I write as well as thee.
And lastly, it pleases me most to tell,
Though the body be dead, my soul is well.

Semper Eadem,

In this life and the next,

Ton Cher Ami,

Tom Punsiby.

REPLY FROM THE LAST DUCHESS

after Robert Browning's poem

Have you come here to see my bosom heave?

Listen to him prattle on and deceive.

Don't believe a word of what he says. He

Pulls this curtain everyday and talks of me,

Not for your sake. He likes to play the fool

Talk about my wanderings on a mule

About his estate, eyeing the servants.

I was young then, in love with the merchants,

The squires, the butlers, bakers, whoever!

Love to him was a mystery forever.

My portrait takes hold of him, possesses

Him. He gets swallowed up and confesses

His hideous thoughts, envies and desires

And with the painter Fra Pandolf conspires

This false impression: *That's my girl*, he'd bray

As though he purchased me some other day,

Oh! Yes, he thought I was a work of art,

But I'd have none of it, I was too smart.

Then he got angry, gave a dark command,

Had someone slit my throat and here I am,

Hanging on the wall as if I was alive.

AMEN WOMAN

She was in love with colours,
Streaks in her hair,
Peacock feathers grew in her hat.
November winds danced on her summer dress
And she always said: *Amen, Amen.*

She pushed a wheelbarrow full of gadgets
Through the streets,
Shouting: lamp shades – clothes pegs – sun glasses –
Nibs for pens – bottles for rheumatism;
And finally she would say: *Amen, Amen.*

She could call at any time
Of day or night, front door, back door.
The cat kept a nervous eye on her,
The dog barked furiously
And she calmed him with her *Amen, Amen.*

She told us all the news,
Who was getting married – what happened to Eileen?
And more if you listened –
About Ukulele Joe and his midnight parties
And then she'd say, *Amen, Amen,* and trundle away.

She got lost somewhere

Disappeared in the fog –

Someone said she went to a brother in America,

Others say she was old enough to die,

Grew wings and flew to heaven, *Amen, Amen.*

HAIKU DEVOTIONS

Antiphone of rain
On the roof, proceeds the chant
Of wind in the trees.

The Rain has blue eyes
Chains of tears, locked in grief slide
Down my window pane.

Necklace of skulls changes
To one of chrysanthemums
A cycle complete.

When the green lion
Eats the sun, hedges blossom
Frost blooms on the moon.

The open fire drinks
Wine from the setting sun, eats
The bread of the moon.

One pen and three cobs
At one with the white noise of
Feathers in the wind.

Winter petals fall
Like snow ladders descending
From God's tearful eyes.

CONFESSION BOX

That second year at Boarding School
We carried too great a burden
For our souls to bear,
The heaviness of Virgil's *Aeneid*,
Horace's Odes, *Paradise Lost*...
Weighed us down.

We crawled on our hands and knees
Into a confession box,
That lay flat on its back,
Lodged in the debris of waste furniture,
Abandoned in an old shed
That was out of bounds to all.

This tired old confession box
Was our refuge of sinners.
All martyrs to: *Majors, Rothmans* and *Carrolls*,
Clank of the wooden shutter pulled across,
We passed cigarettes through the eyes of the grill,
Surrendered to the call of nicotine.

Throughout that second year
We nursed our dwindling self esteem,

Lying there where someone once was kneeling,
Wondering what ghosts lay in the cracks
And crevices, the crucifix still clinging to the boards
Made us anxious to be on the good side of God.

A small world, we used to say
As we squeezed into our separate boxes.
Adrift, addicted...
And the silence was not silent
And the darkness was luminous
In the confession box in the shed.

THE PAPER CHASE

Three athletic boys played hares,
Ran off ahead of us,
Leaving a trail of paper shreds behind.
The rest of us were hounds
And we followed the scent of old newspapers,
Torn copies, old exam sheets
Through the fields of:

Lismacanigan,

Barcony,

Lisnabrina,

Aghawonan

We ran through fields, barking,
Cows with smoky breath stared at us,
Alarm calls rang out from blackbirds in the hedges,
The wind whined in the gloom of pine trees
About scattered country houses.

We had to cross the Inny.

The river yelled, we swallowed
Angry mouthfuls of rusty water,
Our hands and legs blue with the cold,

Our hearts throbbing with fear of pike and eels,
A thousand hands clawing at the far bank,
Shaking ourselves like wet dogs
We left the reeds, went tracking through the rushes.

We entered moods of wishing:
Wishing we were warm and dry,
Wishing we were conjugating Latin verbs,
Wishing the priest in the Wellingtons
Would stop repeating:
That will knock the blubber off you.

Nothing really happened and everything
Happened.
The wind lifted our game to new heights,
A trail of papers darted across the whins,
Gibberish of torn words, lost syllables
Headed for the sun.
Our barking grew slowly silent.
We walked back to the College, over the bridge,
We never caught up with the hares.

THE SCHOOL POND

Frogspawn appeared mysteriously
In the school pond over night,
All those black specks looking up at us
From the warm wet slimy stuff,
April warming into May
Eggs melting into movement
Elusive heads and tails darting everywhere.

Here in this walled-in garden
Is our chance to connect to something,
Something deeply grounded,
Timeless,
Unfathomable.

We wrestle in classrooms,
Talking to God on the internet,
Longing for something to wish for,
Awash with plans
For panic attacks, mood swings,
Planning and more planning
And for what?
To continue to guess our fate.

While these dreamer tadpoles
Grow arms and legs
And leap into a new existence
With that cool frog look of detachment,
An eye for the invisible,
Knowing something we don't.

The frogs are the stoic heroes of our school,
Sitting there by the pond uncomplaining,
All master at bridging the gap,
Restoring the magic.

THE BACK GARDEN

We shut our eyes to its darkness
When we heard the awful news.
For years after, it was rarely spoken of,
A wilderness of weeds grew about it
Everything was projected onto it.
It became a sort of refuse bin,
A place to hold our past seven years.

Finally, we tackled the dark chaos,
Germinal energy was bursting everywhere.
The sharp music of blades cut the morning,
Slash hooks, trimmers, waged war
Against tribal weeds and roots of briars,
Catapulting cow parsley, trimming goat's beard,
Throttling sow thistle, nipplewort and yarrow.

A field mouse peeped from underneath a stone,
Sentry to a dry pond where goldfish swam,
Infernal mêlée of old rubbish lay in wait
Under several blankets of scutch grass: a hair brush,
A plastic flag, seven Christmas trees,
Two pence in old money, Action Man, a child's do-do ...
A robin, perched on a sycamore, looked out for worms.

The garden opened its eyes. We looked and listened,
Skeletons of gooseberry and currant bushes
Cracked in our ears as we dragged a canopy of briars
Across their shoulders, old wounds creaked
Like ghosts hiding in the limbs of trees,
Last year's bird's nest, a moon of moss hooped in twigs
Sang a solitary note.

The back garden was cooking in the mother pot
For seven years, in all its wonder and terror,
Stretching back to an alphabet of clay
Where words lay hidden inside one another.
It took four days and three of us to turn
The pages back and now we are left
Weighing words and raindrops in broad day light.

SLEEPING OUT

I spend a summer night on a sun-lounger
Looking up at the moon,
Listening to the whispers of blue shutters,
Hearing the fascia boards breathe.
House lights go out one by one,
Black fields hang down from the hills,
A sudden breeze, melody of leaves,
Flutter of poplars, maples touch one another
In the dark, something is stirring behind the house,
Night voices echo far away,
A bird screeches down at Beahy Lake
As if she wants to say something
But cannot find the words
All the worries and cares of yesterday finally fall asleep,
A cloud passes over the half shut eye of the moon.

It is 4.30am.

Darkness steals away into the hedges,
Dawn comes down the fields like spilt milk.
A crucifix of light comes through the branches,
The geraniums on the window sill start to redden,
Morning begins as if the trees have forgotten everything
And need daylight to call them by their names:
Beech, Ash, Sycamore, Hawthorn, Maple...

The moon is slow to disappear,
The purr of traffic on the bypass grows louder,
All life seems to curve in a roundabout way.

CATALOGUE OF MY ROOM

I am a seascape painting tilting to the right,
Pulling and dragging at the blue ceiling
And the white walls with the African carvings.

I am the white marble mantel piece full of knick-knacks:
Sculpted candles, the Black Madonna of Montserrat, my aged father's
Photo, a screw driver, a sea shell, a piece of rock from Mount Etna.

I am the white shelves full of books all about the
Walls.

The unsung painting of a tree with a rosary wrapped about its
Branches,
The sculpted straw hat for a mummer, a mask from a theatre
Persona.

I am a bust of Sophocles with his head bashed
In,
A photo of myself in New York in the 70s.
Tapes of the great composers: Mozart, Chopin, Beethoven,
A few of Bob Dylan,
My mother's prayer book, the green catechism, uncle Frank's
Rituale in usum Cleri Hibernici.

I am the framed posters for: The Glass Menagerie, Oedipus Rex, Half
A Vegetable, Mother Courage and Her Children,
The cupped hands sculpture above Louis Macneice`s selected
Poetry,
The pine shutter waiting to be hung, the framed photo of Noel Brown`s
Funeral with its face to the wall.

I am the echoes and whispers in this room,
I am the early riser at my desk in this room,
I am now in this room and all that matters is now
This very moment.

BELLAVALLY GAP

Between Legnaderk
And Altnadarragh
Sahara of white grass
And rusty rushes.
Two homeless jackdaws
Beak to beak
On an electric wire,
Not a chimney in sight.

PACE OF ASSES

I came across a pace of asses gathered together
In a cemetery bordering Leitrim and Cavan,
One hesitates ... one is lying on his back
Feet skyward ... one brays, complaining about
God knows what ... one nods off as if listening
To painful gossip ... another turns away ...

Nine asses with that tired suffered look
That comes from eating grass in the local graveyard
And listening to the grief of the wind
Among the grey headstones.

Nine asses cast out of Ballinamore,
Flanks caked in muck,
Big nostrils quivering,
All willing to carry their cross.

Nine asses, like ghosts
In grey raincoats,
Awaiting the next shower
From across the lake.

CROM

The town is off her guard ... lets her hair down.

Crom and his Twelve Idol Businessmen

Sidle down Main Street in yellow underwear, caterpillar footwear,

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank

Scattering all before them,

Striking buildings with hydraulic hammers ...

Impact breakers, mammoth wrecking balls ...

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank

Building prisons, banks, madhouses ...

Schools of Technology, Institutes for concrete reasoning,

Enough to petrify the young into bricks in the wall.

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank

Crom and his Twelve Idol Businessmen build

Houseboxes for us all on the backsides of drumlins,

Beneath dolmens, beside the lakes, under the trees,

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank.

Crom and his Twelve Idol Businessmen bop

To seismic music night and day.

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank

Crom and his Twelve Idol Businessmen

Expect us all to fall before them,

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank

A modern version of an ancient myth,

It all depends on which side of the wall you fall,

Shuttle and clank shuttle and clank.

CATCHING EACH OTHER BY THE TAIL

What happens when the BANKS collapse?

The walls fall out

The roof caves in.

Will we leave the bed

Risk dancing down the road?

Naked, in full view of the milkman, postman ...

Adrift on the New Roundabout,

Desperate to find our bearings,

Talking to ourselves and the rest of us,

Marching, striking, queuing ...

Listening to what RTE has to say,

All the Specialized and Proficient

The cordon bleu of Banking

All confused but talking all the same.

Is there anybody home? says I,

It's a whirligig, says Somebody.

Asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants

Hid behind half-doors, fridge doors,

Glass doors, cage doors, any door

As long as they got in

But now they can't get out fast enough

And heaven's door slams shut
Like the surge suppressor
On a computer.

A judge in a District Court
Sends a man to jail for whispering,
Bishops in buskins and zucchetos
Don't agree on Child Protection
Politicians in mohair suits,
Grease the wheels of the treadmill,
Bend the Green Greenness of Éire
So the peas can run freely in their pods,
Then pause and listen to themselves.

All back to where we started,
Catching up with ourselves,
Round and round the merry-go-round
Catching each other by the tail.

FOR BILLY, KATHLEEN AND FAMILY

When words of sympathy are idle talk

We remember the lost words

Wildly dancing on the lip of night

Words beyond the turn for home,

Drift words, afraid to form a sentence,

Hooting words in the owl of winter light.

When words of sympathy are idle talk

We remember the unspoken

Wrapped in winter frost by the roadside.

Lichen words clinging to stone and tree,

The bare feet of words running away from me

With the wind on their faces.

When words of sympathy are idle talk

We remember the inner words

That tear at the heart of God.

Words hiding in the wardrobe with our clothes,

A line of words like trophies on a mantelpiece,

Dream words tucked away under the blanket.

When words of sympathy are idle talk

We remember the unspoken words

That keep coming home.

RESTING PLACE

Right on this very spot
Someone's journey came
To a sudden end
Leaving relations, friends ...
To grieve and mark the place
By the roadside with a wooden cross
Pinning flowers on it
A place of silence
Ringed by stones
Living by a roadside.

I REMEMBER CHRISTMAS

I remember Christmas
In the owl of the moon,
In the flaked belfry of a white chapel
On a frozen hill.

I remember overcoats walk
To midnight Mass,
Scarves look over their shoulders,
Footprints talk in the eternal snow.

I remember the chirrup of bare trees,
The kettle's tune, logs spitting in the grate,
Holly purring, ivy wagging its tail
And the red raspberry eyes of the cat by the fire.

I remember mince pies cooling,
Aunt Annie's cake and Uncle Joady's brandy
And ghosts pulling crackers
In the darkness under the stairs.

WINTER MOON

Watch for her shadow

Behind the clouds,

Cradle of light in her arms,

Maiden, mother and moon,

Ladleful of milk in the stars

Hushed melody

Of winter snow.

THE MUSIC OF SNOW

At first we hear
The faintest music of snow.
Then the moon slowly rises
And dreams us back
To childhood memories

Of cows chewing their cud
In the byre, a blackbird's alarm call
Across the hedges as darkness falls,
The eerie creak of the yard-gate
In December wind swings back

To a first Christmas night
And we journey there,
Retracing our footprints in the snow
..... hurrying down lanes and country roads
To Midnight Mass.

The chapel opens its door,
A flicker of carol singing
Stirs into the light of words:
Glory to God in the highest
And peace to His people on earth.

BEYOND THE WIND

BEYOND THE WIND

(centenary celebration poem

to Patrick Kavanagh, 2004.)

I can imagine him looking over
A fieldgate, knowing the hour has arrived,
Wondering why everyone deserted him,
Girls fell in love with the man in the moon.
The mirror of a pothole points a finger
To Inniskeen and to Golgatha ...
The drama of fields hurries to an end,
Scourged by briars, hiding from the neighbours,
He feared the hosanna crowd on the hill,
Known to shout "Hail"... "Crucify" with one breath,
Tired of the drop of mother's milk from the ponger,
He saw another cup beyond the wind,
Happy to be alone with himself
And to drink the silence and the dream.

BOOCHALAWN BUÍ

The wild bee tosses my yellow hair where
I reside along a closed railway line
Since government surveys mapped my decline,
From that day forward pain was always near
Living as I do in mist, fog and fear
Staggerweed, stammerwort, names from outside
With their intended power to deride
Can't rob me of pollen and nectar here.
I love the risk, pleasure of the abyss
I am the shomeer come out of darkness,
Forsaken, I close my daisy yellow eye
On the grey incontinent Irish sky,
Whisper my name whenever you need me
Boochalawn, Boochalawn, Boochalawn Buí.¹

¹ Hiberno-English for Ragwort.

VISITING KIERKEGAARD'S GRAVE

A sense of doom hovers about your name,
Kierkegaard, a Danish word for churchyard,
Aloof in childhood, burdened by sorrow,
Frightened by an Old Testament God
That hooked you to the nails on the cross.
You searched inside your soul for months, years...
Discovered a new song, a leap in the dark,
A call to take chances, to walk alone,
A call that now drives me away from the crowd
To walk sidewalk after sidewalk, past kirks, canals ...
And stand at your graveside in Copenhagen.
Time holds you darkly in this secret place,
Hidden in trees, covered in October leaves,
Kierkegaard, at one with your name at last.

DRAMA FESTIVAL

We become trees, lost to a forest of chairs
In the Town Hall. Snow covers our world.
Oedipus enters upstage centre,
Plants strange forgotten words along our paths.
We become rooted in clay at the crossroads,
Stars peep through darkness to speak to the snow,
The light of the moon passes through our branches,
Our leaves are full of the wind's chorus.
For a moment we have forgotten who we are.
Our Sunday hearts drink another blood,
A family tree creaks at its roots: Father, Mother,
Son and Daughter can never be the same again.
The adjudicator calculates in his head,
A practise old as Sophocles. Everyone waits.

BUSKINS IN THE COUNTY MUSEUM

When bells clanged and chapel organ sang
In *Gaudio Magno*, his buskin boots
In marigold yellow, cherry red studs,
Waltzed below his crosier and altar skirts
In a slow liturgical procession.
And people who felt they walked in darkness,
Saw heavenly sole shimmers ascend
From the Pontifical Abbot's high-heeled boots.
Years later, the same boots, now footless,
Glare out at me from a glass cage
In the County Museum, smug and silent,
An exhibit for all to stare and wonder at
And a chilled thought flashes across my mind,
I once stooped low to lace them on his feet.

GATHERING MUSHROOMS

We climbed into Tully's field, the gate rattled,
Sheep scattered, cows stood their ground as we strolled
Around in the hope of finding mushrooms.
You're blind as bats, Madge Reilly said,
I can see them sleeping under bedstraw
Hear them whispering in their dreams,
Her black thumb quenching the stars in the grass,
Their frail pink gills breathing a final tune.
Nightfall, the road lit up with the sparks
Of mushrooms beaming from bucket and hand,
Like pilgrims returning from the Holy Land,
Thraneens laden, beads dangling in the dark,
A glimmer from lost fields I long to find
Hidden somewhere in the back of my mind.

Thraneens is a Hiberno-English word meaning a long wisp of grass.

THE SEPARATOR

We stood around the dairy floor, eyeing
All the gewgaws that were spread about,
Flying saucers, cans, crockery and spout,
Disc-fitting-into-disc, compressed in-between,
Our mother bent over the green machine,
Making it yowl and purr and sing,
The stray cat on the sill looking in
As we waited patiently for the cream.
At first the blue skimmed milk gushed forward,
The cream trickled, falling into circles,
Our pongers reaching out to intercept
The flow of something longed for, well timed.
It was singled out, homemade special cream,
Its inner nourishment continues to stream.

Ponger: Hiberno-English, a metal mug.

**TO SEE SEPTEMBER
THROUGH A FIRST YEAR'S EYES**

For Brendan McCann.

To see September through a first year's eyes
Amid shifting tides of maroon laughter,
Hear her fears; cherish the hopes of a youngster
As she explains her burning issues: *There's a bee
Humming in the window of St. Jude's ...*
One by one they talk with him as with a friend,
Given pride of place on the road between two places.
The school-bell rings, the evening star shines
Through the office window and he knows it's time
To wipe the blackboard clean and dream,
Time to wait for the silence to whisper,
Time to move on and not look back,
Time to hear a thousand soft nibs write thank you
On a Loreto sea of wine.

THE CHILD LIVES FOREVER DEEP WITHIN US

A celebratory poem

To mark 75 years of Loreto College Cavan.

The child lives forever deep within us
And once in a while, that child laughs, cries ...
Even sings with memories of school days
When thoughts were quavers away from a song,
Whispering down corridors in the night,
Long silence in study, our hearts beating
To the rhythms of the classroom, the exam clock
Ticking on to a hundred white faces.
Here in Loreto College Cavan, where drumlins
Are brooding since the Ice Age, nuns and teachers
With minds deep as a well, are quenching our thirst
And reminding us we're young talented people,
Deserving of love and exhorting us
Never to lose sight of the child within us.

EPITHALAMIUM

for Síodhna and Kevin

The chance of a couple meeting
Is filled with wonder, like leaves touching
In a breath of wind. As children Síodhna and Kevin
Were central to their worlds in Cavan and Galway,
Blowing out candles on birthdays, making wishes
And dreaming, always dreaming of some special day.
All eyes are turned on Síodhna and Kevin today.
Rows of relations and friends in hats and best suits
Are gathered, confetti of conversations,
Candles burn on the altar, gifts are offered,
Bells ring out *Sanctus*, lips utter: "I Do"
For this is the flesh and blood of their promises
The love that grows not only in words
But in the silences between words.

POSTOJINA CAVE, SLOVENIA

(Home to the Human Fish --- Proteus Anguinus)

We were shuttled in train loads underground,
Past drapery of rock, lichen grey candles,
To a high altar in the underworld.
Eternal dripping, metronome of drops,
A flowering of water into stone,
Where skeletons of the unknown wrap
Their bones about a calcium organ.
An afterlife of rain bearing witness
To a human fish lost in a tabernacle
Underground, rarity and wonder to us all,
Three fingers, two toes, ghostly white and blind,
Lost soul, smelling of damp, clawing its way
Along grit and sand into our dream world,
Where altars take root under the weight of darkness.

THE CALF BEARER

It wasn't the fore-locks of the marble horse
Or the ringlets of Kore that caught my eyes
But the calm and stare of the Calf-Bearer,
In the museum of the Acropolis.
A farmer like my father with a calf
Slung over his shoulder, the field his altar.
He knows the agony of clay, the language
Of weather, blaze of the sun, squally winds,
Apples dropping on the lap of autumn,
Winter under the trees of the moon.
Travelling alone, down the mountain side,
At one with the secrets of stone and clay,
Eyes set on the road ahead, never looking back,
The house always somewhere in the distance.

TALKING TO MY SHADOW

When will you dig me up, get me out of here?

Rain water sings in my boots, the wind screams

Inside my head, I am smothered under

Bundles of sticks and fallen branches,

My weather-bitten face is the colour of clay,

My fingers, rods of winter ash, eyelids full

Of frozen tears. I am tired of leafy pillows

And the straw bed of this roadside ditch.

Listen to me my loved one, you are more

Than what has happened to you, I will light

The dark ditch inside you, fire fills my mind.

Dip my fingers in the dew of the night,

I will write love letters to the moon

On your behalf, soft as a baby's breath.

CUILCAGH

This woman is strange.
Perfume of moss and wild asphodel,
Squatting here in the wilderness,
Blanket of bog about her shoulders
Her fierce breasts held in place
By whins and heather.
Sheep graze on her,
Birds wing across her limbs,
The wind gives her words,
The sun lights up her chalky face.
Farmers drive stakes through her peaty flesh,
Black streams are veins
Winding slowly round her hips,
Bog water trickles down her legs.

ETNA

From afar you can smell her smoky breath,
Her jagged complexion cuts into the sky,
Smoke plumes rise above her head. She throws
Tantrums, wriggling red-hot spaghetti through
Her teeth, sending rocks flying down to sea.
Etna Mongibello will take your breath,
Divine and fierce, pines wither in her gaze,
Warp and woof of snow cover her fiery breasts.
Forever a fashionable lady,
She loves to model her almond stockings,
Chestnut shoes. Irresistible as ever,
In the amber and pink of her sunset,
I see the ghost of Empedocles walk
Around her lips to sup at her long tongue.

SÍLE NA GIG

Call me Sheela, Baubo or Magdalene,
You'll find my image in remote places,
Hiding in ivy ruins of churchyards,
Reduced of late to hearts on Valentine cards,
Resolved to stand firm. Call me day or night,
My mobile number is your invite.
You won't find me lacking, legs spread apart,
I'll lick your wounds, stitch your leaking heart.
I am that inner voice, once conversant
With monks on their way to silent prayer,
Gaping vulva in the light of the moon,
Witch in the wind crooning a graveyard tune,
I howl across the flood fields of your dreams
To open grassy meadows in the sun.

SCARECROW WOMAN

I catch sight of her on a sea of wheat
Drifting past, her blouse, jumper and skirt
Clamped to her bones with clothes-pegs,
Her face veiled in old straining-cloth,
A Sunday hat one side of her head
Alone in the field with her secrets,
A black diamond stitched to her sleeve
To remind us of winter and her dead daughter.
Perched on a wooden leg on golden grain,
She sways to scare the crows away,
Drinks rain, breathes the wind,
A sprinkle of poppies ignites the ripples,
Her promise always, the gift of grain
And the hope of tomorrow.

SUMMER HOLIDAY

We are a possessive people, attached
To small holdings, a view we take on trips
To staked out terraces on sandy strips.
Here we cultivate the sun's rays, dispatched
Beneath umbrellas, overtly mismatched:
Rosy pinks, tomato reds, pale parsnips.
We stretch to oil our navels, wet our lips,
Lost to holidays and feeling detached.
Here we sense the need to look out to sea,
To project ourselves onto a grotto
Of sea rock, the hills and the olive tree,
Holiday homes if we won the lotto,
Bemused by a side-show from a sand flea,
Drifting with the evensong of the sea.

PRIMAL LOSS

for John Montague on his 80th. birthday

The loss of the first love of your life
Left you clasping at the blankets of sleep,
Your heart tugging to free itself, dreaming
Of a mother's smile that failed to show her face.
You took grief for a walk about the fields
Of Garvaghey, straying past the *Dolmens*
Of Childhood, determined to put your point across.
All roads lead to that primal loss.
You stopped looking in the same direction
As everyone else, mapped a new projection,
Few signposts, you learned the language of verse,
Shaped poems from stones in *The Rough Field*,
Found the locket your mother wore, revealing
A photo of a boy with curls in Brooklyn.

Dánta i nGaeilge agus Aistriúcháin / Poems in Irish and Translations

BEALTAINE

Is leanbh í an aimsir

Ag súgradh liom faoin spéir,

Cam an ime, solas gréine

An ghaoth ag séideadh

Gúna buí an aitinn,

Is caisear bhán mar gealach ar strae

Is rún na gcloch sa chré.

THE MONTH OF MAY

The month of May is the child in me

Playing outside.

Buttercups are full of the sun

The wind lifts the yellow dress

Of a whin bush for fun

And the dandelion is like

A moon that lost her way

And the stones have secrets

Buried in clay.

MAITHIÚNAS NA bPEACAÍ

Tabhair maithiúnas

Do Bhean Uí Nualláin

A chaith uisce beirthe

Ar na Jehovah Witnesses

Is iad á míniú a gcreideamh

Ag doras a tí.

Tabhair maithiúnas

Don tSiúr Máire na nAingéal

A chuir hata donsa ar dhaltaí

Iad a thaispeáint do cách

Iad a tharraint mórtimpeall na scoile,

Is an slua beag ag magadh fúthu.

Tabhair maithiúnas

Do Phearla Ní Cheallaigh

A chuir mallacht orm

Nuair a d`inis mé di

Go raibh cúig phónaí suas an bhóthair

In ionad cúig asal.

Tabhair maithiúnas

Don chrochadóir Ó Dálaigh a dhíol Woodbines dom

Deich bpingin ceann amháin

`Sé ag síor leagadh na mallachtaí orm
Nuair nach raibheas ag tarraingt an deataigh
Síos go hionga na gcos.

Tabhair maithiúnas
D`amadáinín *Poker*
A thóg a bhod amach faoin mbínse
I rang a sé, crom ar a chuid oibre,
Greim ar fhorcraiceann, ní raibh cosc le cur air,
Ag péinteáil a bhodín le dúch dubh.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Grant forgiveness

To Mrs. Brady for throwing scalding water

On the Jehovah Witnesses

And they only explaining their faith

On her door step.

Grant forgiveness

To Sr. Mary of the Angels

Who put a dunce's hat on scholars

And took them from class to class

For all to see and mock and gear them.

Grant Forgiveness

To Pearl Kelly who cursed me

When I told her

There were five ponies up the road

Instead of five asses.

Grant forgiveness

To the hangman Daly who sold me Woodbines

At ten pence each and he forever cursing me

When I wasn't inhaling them

Right down to my toe nails.

Grant forgiveness

To that little eejit "Poker" who took his bodín out

Monahan 63

From under the desk in 6th. class, no stopping him,

Bent on pulling his foreskin back

Painting his bodín with black ink.

CIARÓG DHUBH

Bhí na ballaí ag éisteach linn
Oíche amháin a chasadh orm é,
Blaincéad dhubh ar a dhroim
Ag taisteal faoi scáth na hoíche
San dorchadas chiúin.
Duine den teaglach
A théann I bhfad siar.

Dia duit, A Chiaróg
Bhí tú ann romhainn
Gan bheith ró chraiceáilte
Cé go n-itheann tú gach ní,
Taos fiacla, gliú, bun toitíní ...
Is tá sé ráite go maireann tú
Gan do cheann ar feadh seachtaine
'S is féidir leat tú féin a choscaint
Ó radaíocht núicléach.

In dúirt an chiaróg liom:

Bí ciúin,

Mairim san spás idir na bhfocal.

COCKROACH

The walls were listening to us
One night I bumped into him
A black blanket over his shoulders
Travelling in the black silence
Of disguise
One of the household
That goes a long way back.

Hello, Cockroach
You were here before us
Although you weren't much crack,
Eating all around you,
Toothpaste, glue, cigarette butts,
And it's said that you can survive
Without your head for a week
And that you can protect yourself
Against nuclear radiation.

And the cockroach said to me:
Be quiet,
I live in the space between words.

4 Diary Of A Town

Diary Of A Town (a dramatic poem)

Diary of a Town

I

They were all waiting for things to happen,
Dividing time between waking and dreaming.
Some lived in Ballalley Row, Porter Row, Waterlane ...
You could say everyone was in the audience and no one on the stage.
When I look back
Shadows creep from nowhere,
Places and people come alive again:
The strange look of the trees at night,
The untaxed cars hiding in the backyards,
Old walls, byroads, the long and short division of fields,
Rain water on the Scrabby Road.
There's a cold wind coming in from Lough Sheelin
That sends a sea of grass up the hill.
And from the hilltop, fields and houses move with the clouds,
The Lady of The Rocks looks down on the town
With her limestone smile.
Slowly night makes way for day.

The boys are tussling over a red ball in the school yard.
The master blows his whistle and they line up.
Fisty Finnan gets nought for sums,
Johnny Tucker's fingers are smeared with ink.
The sing song of tables and the drumming of catechism

Echo

6 1s are 6
6 2s are 12

Is the Father God?

The Father is God and the first person of the Blessed Trinity.

Is the Son God?

The Son is God and the second person of the Blessed Trinity.

Is the Holy Ghost God?

The Holy Ghost is God and the third person of the Blessed Trinity.

Johnnie Kelly wipes his nose in his sleeve.

The *glantóir*² goes missing and Fisty Finnan gets six slaps on the hand.

Another half hour of nib dipping and out to play.

Donnelly's Bus trundles down Main Street, heading for Somewhere,

Johnny Matt comes from the Barrack Spout

With two buckets of water in a box-barrow, dripping and spilling ...

Three girls sitting on the steps of the hotel chant their gibe:

² Gaelic for duster.

Johnny Matt skinned a goat and threw the fat on the fire.

Men, women, dog and cat

Come out to talk to Johnny Matt

Johnny Matt, Johnny Matt, Johnny Alleluia ...

January walks through the streets

Looking ahead and looking back

Morning returns to find the night covered in snow.

A white cowl spreads across the rooftops,

Icicles hang from the gutters,

Rosset's cat is out crying in the snow for a Tom,

She whispers to the snow:

Meow ...Meow ... Meow ...

Any TomCat will do,

We cats have no time for morals.

Meow ... Meow ... Meow

A blackbird skims across Main Street and up Waterlane,

A child throws a snowball at the snow,

The evergreens above the chapel are half white,

The first bell rings out:

Frosty eyes look up from the snow and sparkle,

A ghost tiptoes round the corner,

A few scattered people climb the hill and head for the chapel.

Is that the first or second bell for Mass?
Heads bowed at the altar rails,
Eyes shut, tongues hanging out for salvation,
Bald heads nod at women's hats and scarves.
Every Sunday the same,
Kneeling ...standing ...sitting ...
Kneeling for a long time ...sitting for a short while,
Shopping after Mass ... shelves of tins:
Sardines, peas, beans ... assortment of sweets, barley sugar,
Chester cakes in Doherty's window ...blood oranges in from Sicily.
Light brown tissue paper to wrap the loaves in,
A ball of twine hangs from the ceiling
Awaiting the nimble fingers of T.P.
Sunday dozes into Monday
A crow leaves a branch in Burns`field,
Loops and flies the other way.

II

February begins to lift its head.
Snowdrops nod in the wind.
Lonely farmhouses hear lambs bleating in the haggard.
The town listens to the laughter of children in the school yard:

Hop! Hop! My little horse

Hop! Hop! Again

How many miles to Dublin?

Three score and ten

Will I be there by candle light?

Yes! Yes! And back again

Hop! Hop! My little horse

Hop! Hop! Again.

Mickey Rourke straightens the handlebars of his moustache,
Three girls sitting on the steps of the Greville Arms, chew gum and enquire:

Did ye get a Valentine, Mickey?

Did ye get yer candle blessed, Mickey?

Did ye get yer throat blessed, Mickey?

Did she make ye a Bridget's Cross, Mickey?

Mickey grunts.

Cock Fagan is spreading dung in Tully's field,
He stops to light a fag butt
On the zip fork of his blue jeans,
Complete with Sideburns, Brylcream glistening in the February sun,
He talks and sings to the mule and a cart full of dung:

I want to be a teddy boy and sing like Lonny Donnegan:

Oh! My old man's a dustman

He wears a dustman's hat

He wears Con-Blimey trousers

And he lives in a council flat.

Guard Cooney stands to attention at the corner.

The dough is rising in Pat The Baker's.

Martin Ruther, cap with flaps down round his ears, is out with the bucket.

The guards' wives gossip:

What's that fella doing with the rabbits ears?

Collecting slops for a slip of a sow.

Did you hear Sheila Mac is marrying a monkey from Kilcogy?

Never. The poor gorilla.

I'm killt with the chilblains.

I told you what to do,

Soak them in your wee and they'll disappear over night.

Someone is out polishing the brass on the door of The Ulster Bank.

Busty Mahety, fireman and painter,

Wets the bed in a fit of false awakening

Ay! Jasus! Not again ...

He has a thick slice of loaf for breakfast,

Then leans across the wall for the rest of the day,

Waiting for a house to go on fire.

Nurse Doyle, complete with Gladstone Case,

Goes to pull a rabbit from its burrow.

Midwife most merciful,

Friend to mothers far gone,

Mothers in teems of sweat.

Mrs. Chat Dooley sells herrings and whiting from a pick-up truck on Friday,

Boxes of herrings... haddock, cauliflowers, tomatoes...

Onions in net bags. Mrs. Chat Dooley guts the fish while you wait.

School children gather round the truck,

Stick their fingers in the open mouths of herrings

And feel the prickle of their glassy teeth.

Hello! Hello! Hello, says old Dooley,

A good day it is, indeed it is a good day

A good day it is Then looking up at the sky he informs all:

It may come to rain yet, I feel it in my bones.

There you are, now you have it.

Three o'clock, all the funeral bells ring out.

White alb, purple stole of the priest,
Mourners in black up beside the coffin,
Small table, complete with white cloth cover for offerings,
The men file past in single line,
Jingle of half crowns.
Brass bucket with holy water ...hyssop stick,
A sprinkling of holy water on the coffin,

Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison,

Pater noster

Et ne nos inducas in tentationem

Sed libera nos a malo...

Four brothers shoulder the coffin,
Down the long lane to Granardkille .
The glut of graves is privy to whispered conversations:

She was taken bad a year ago, took her time about dying,

We all get there in the end...

We do indeed...

Thud of clay on the coffin,
Open grave to inner darkness.

Jack Traynor, hairy nostriled and doubled chinned
Stands to attention at the butcher's block.

Liver, kidneys, steak, strings of sausages, ox tails, cow's tongue, bullock's hearts, Lamb shoulder and lamb shank

Chipping and chopping away. Skewers and scrapers, saws and cleavers ...

Knives sing on sharpening steel, the bench is streaked in blood,

Sheets of grease proof paper to one side, sawdust on the floor,

Three sheep hang from meat hooks,

There's a poster for a carnival in Mullahoran behind a haunch of beef.

Mrs. Keenan, banker's wife prim and proper parks her bicycle on the street.

*Good morning Jack, two gigot chops, -- cut away the fat, Please,
And bones for the dog.*

She counts out pennies, thrupenny bits, tanners

And places them in the maw of his big hand.

Jack yawns and dreams of loins and genitals

And 150 naked women running wild

Outside the Granada Ballroom.

A given time. A given place.

Every townland has a ghost or two looking at the past.

The fields dream of seeds given back to clay.

The crows fly from the trees in Burns` field,

A calf jumps out of the well at Tober Gamhna,

Runs down the hill and the water after him. So the old people say...

Ghosts minding their own business at this unearthly hour,

Hear the commotion

Of the yes and the no

Of the now and evermore:

552AD. There was a sickness called the Sawthrust

There was much frost and wind in 588AD.

The virgin Sawhyn from Clonbroney, dead since 736AD.

Fiachra from Granard died 765AD.

So the Annals say.

A burnt patch by the roadside is observed

By the single eye of a raindrop.

Old mother moon is coming out

Over the barley hill,

Over the awful silence of fields,

Minutes are nibbling away at the light

Crows come home to roost

Like black snow crosses the hills.

Tonight everywhere and everything is waiting

For something to happen.

Helen Sheridan, fifteen years old talks in her sleep

And walks across a lake with cowslips and amarants in her hair.

Cluckcluckcluckcluckcluckcluck

Joe O`Reilly hears horses trotting in his sleep,

Mary Verdon drops her teeth into a glass of water by the bedside.

Listen:

What's that noise in the attic? ...in the kitchen? ... on the stairs?

Houses and rooms have secrets.

Hughie Small, Busty Mahety and The Danger Smith

Are swilling pints of porter in The Star Bar.

Hughie counts the rows of bottles on the shelf

8...9...10...11.... Busty drinks to escape a medical condition,

And The Danger Smith, unable to raise his life,

Rows with his nose in the mirror,

The barman standing in the way of the door, shouts:

Have you any homes to go to?

Pearl Waters with the red lipstick

Lets her hair down and leads the town into temptation.

Piston and cylinder throbbing

In Fiat 127s, Triumphs and Mini Minors,

Corset on the chair, garters on the floor,

One transparent night, pulling ... dragging,

Up and over,

Dog jumps bitch, stallion mounts mare,

Billy on the nanny,

Creaking bed-frame,

Pearl thighs, red toe-nails, Pearl curls,

Pearl loves to be touched,

Pearl ellipse, all pink Pearl

All wild and plotting Pearl,

Pearl in heat,
Mons Veneris ...Hilltown of Venus,
Pearl about to take a bath
And the whole town gawking at her.
Pearl was once as white as snow
Many, many blue moons ago.

The two shilling rows in the Odeon Cinema
Have cushioned seats,
The curtain opens to applause and cheer,
HIT THE DECK ...Jane Powell, Debbie Reynolds, Ann Miller,
Luscious showgirls ...musical spectacular,
Usher in the aisle with his torch and peak-cap,
Separates the lovers,
Seventy four mouths munch crisps, slug Fanta and Coke,
Eyes glued to the screen,
Coming soon:
BY THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON,
With Doris Day and Gordon MacRae.

Janey Early takes to the streets to settle her nerves,
Past Donohue`s Corner, up the hill, counting the steps
Past the Celtic Cross on the left
To the lonesome church, the big iron bell,
In for a few prayers, a short visitation:

Lord help me stop crying,

Out the chapel gate and up the laneway to the Virgin Grotto,

Wailing evergreens, jagged rocks,

O Mary conceived without sin

Pray for us who have recourse...

Down the other hill, lines of drills

In the back gardens of O`Callaghan Terrace,

Janey, dotty on Aspirins, and other medications, talks to herself:

I`m taking red pills for me blood pressure,

And blue ones and yellow ones to make me sleep.

Down New Road, a blast of wind and rain,

Corner boys at the Market House jibe and whistle:

How are ya fixed for tonight Janey?

Janey journeys on, past the porter barrels outside King`s,

Past Morrissey`s, Leahy`s Chemist, McGahern`s Garage,

Heading for the convent, heading out, heading beyond,

Talking to herself ... to the dying ... and the dead ...

Mick the poor man fell into a threshing machine ...

Mary was taken away in an ambulance because she had bad dreams,

Lord help us all...

Ash Wednesday.

There`s a long line waiting for ashes in the chapel,

All waiting to be marked:

Memento homo, quia pulvis es,

Et in pulverem reverteris.

A reminder in Latin of our mystical ending

To all those who have been eating sin for supper.

III

March wind makes us shiver,
Its hoarse voice is heard in every throat,
Its breath is sharp, its ancient words cut stone,
It scorches grass; it burns the flush of flowers,
Dead shamrock on a button hole,
Singed overcoat of wool on barbed wire,
It roars down Market Street and Barrack Street,
It shouts underneath the slates of every house
And fills us full of fear of losing one another.
Boom.- Boom.- BoomBoom-.BoomBoom.-Boom.-BoomBoom
The time signal on the radio ...O'Donnell Abú
Is blaring from the two Miss Bradys' hovel.
A large dwelling house and Paper Shop in sad neglect.
Never a sunrise or a sunset let inside,
Boarded windows, unwise virgins, tired of measuring
Day and night, they live in candle light.
Webs and dust everywhere, hills and mountains of newspapers,
Tabby cats, black cats, Manx cats ...
Some taking a nap, some sipping milk from saucers,
More meowing, an old mangy buck is nibbling something small
In a corner. Cats` piss everywhere.
Two ragged ladies behind the counter,
Raw scalps under headscarves, hairs on their chins,

Their awful white faces in the flicker of candles,
Tracks of their wormy fingers in a loaf of bread.
A half empty bottle of milk on the counter.
Women determined to bring news of the outside world
To us all, selling *The Times*, *Independent* and *Press*.

Good Morning birdsong daisy dawn.
A hundred different alarm clocks go off,
First squeals from babies for bottles.
Crackle of radio ...early morning news.
Clattering buckets, milk bottles rattling.
One morning resembles another and sleep lingers.
They all hate to leave the warm bed.
Cold bare feet on the bathroom floor,
Half- shut eyes looking into mirrors.
Mouth washing, shaving, combing,
Brushing away the fears of the night,
All in a hurry to face the earthly morning.
Mrs. Farrelly throws a splash of pink paraffin in the range to light the fire,
Spits on the hot plate to see her spittle dance,
Then puts the kettle on.
Jack Hall, postman is on his rounds.
A few women head up the hill to Mass and pray with their heads in their hands.
And thank God for another day.

Mick Mulligan brings out bicycles

And places them against the wall of his repair shop on Moxham Street.

Widow Reilly's only lovely daughter, Margaret Mary,

Tells to the morning star her tale

Of having to wear canary yellow stockings for her mother's sake.

Dan Doyle beats hell out of the ass up Dagger's Hill,

Go on you lazy fucker...go on you lazy fucker.

Parks the cart by the roadside,

Ties the ass to a stump of a whitethorn bush

And leaves ass and his fragile daughter Bridgie, there all day,

While he squanders the hours away with Jimmy Fay.

Dan the Piper is going to a football match or coming home.

Mary Verdon, No. 3, Waterlane, comes to the door:

I had the bleeding last night,

Me varicose veins are rising

And me gallstones are paining me.

You're a living martyr Mary,

That's what everyone says.

Mary Green shares the sweets of sin with Dirty Jimmy up against a wall.

The poor priest and canon can't make saints of them all.

The bell rings,

And Mary and Jimmy can't tell the ding from the dong.

Lines of houses all the same,

Ball Alley Row and Water Lane,

The wind coming under the door,

Patterned lino on the floor,

Damp inscriptions on the walls
Curl of fly paper hanging in the halls,
Holy pictures and TV,
There's little more to see.

Out on the street, children are playing
Hula Hoop and skipping rope,
Tee-hee girls draw chalk-boxes on the toe-path,
Hop scotching on one leg, boisterous boys shout:

Dolly has a potty under her bed.

Ring A Ring A Rosy Girls,
Gather primroses, cowslips in Durken`s field,
One girl stays at home by herself:

I sat on the hill

And cried my fill

And drank my ponger of milk

Brave boys climb in the high branches to the crow's nest,
Older boys dream
Of Peggy's leg that never wore a garter.
More read *The Beano* and *The Dandy*,
Tell me a story before you go to bed.

I stay outside and dream for them.
I sing my song alone,
And I listen at every turn of the road,
A bewildered heap of stones refuses to go away,
Fields climb the hills, footsteps walk in front of me.
Tree spirits talk:

Remember us as we are...as it is,

Men bend over the drills in silence,
The wind is coming through a draughty gap
Sending a swathe of hay over on its back,
Rust red sheds behind the houses
Sing in the rain. Gortawillan Lane
Surrenders its secrets.

Teenage lovers cry unto the sky
Out of the long wet grass in Keegan`s field,
Bad mouthing nuns and priests.
Leaning against a rock in the quarry,
Philomena`s red dress reeks of perfume,
Des has a wild dance in his eyes,
Rising and settling,
Waxing and waning, intimate and repelling
Panting breath, flush on her face,
Philomena`s lips part

Pear shaped tongue slips out,

Slips in again ...

All Des sees is her injection mark,

No chance of a fall from grace this evening:

No Des ... No ... No...I'm not doing it, maybe after The Intermediate.

Is that another bell ringing?

Hailmaryholymary ... Hailmaryholymary ... Hailmaryholymary

We love our sins and our bad humours,

We love to ask for forgiveness,

We love to get the spots off our souls,

Father forgive me for I don't know what I'm at.

We love to hang our heads like daffodils

And nod away in the wind

We love to kneel in black boxes

And mumble away at our sins:

Father I didn't fast.

Father I said a wrong word.

Father I met a girl behind a wall...

Met her in a field ...in a gripe

In the hayshed...under a lorry...up a tree,

Father I didn't know what I was doing.

Father... Will there be sex in heaven?

Hailmaryholymary ... Hailmaryholymary ... Hailmaryholymary

The Easter ceremonies

Bring nuns up from the convent

Like black and white bees from a hive

To swarm about the chapel gate.

A cold wind comes in from Siberia,

The grass by the roadside shivers,

Coughs ... colds ... flu ...

Everyone sneezing and snorting,

No bells on Good Friday –

Clip- clap- clip- clap of the clapper,

Purple drapery on statues, wrapped crucifix,

An entire town gathered to witness

Nails in the hands and feet,

Pascal light in the darkness,

A town suckled on grief and fed on tears

Ponders the hope of:

Lumen Christi ... Deo Gratias.

Easter Sunday,

Life-Death-Life

White as new light,

The priest unlocks the tabernacle,

Slides the veil to one side
And takes the ciborium out,
Mona Lisas in Easter bonnets slide up the aisle,
Lent is over -----*Hosanna ... Hosanna ... Hosanna ...*
Easter eggs renew our appetites,
Tin cans lined in moss are full with
Hen eggs, duck eggs, goose eggs ---
The whole town happily eating after the long fast.
Kitty Kiernan sends an Easter Egg and a hug to Michael.

IV

Golden April,
Blaze of whins, a blast of wind,
Bees venture out for a first look about.
There stands a hill not far from the town
That turns from green to brown.
Two Massy Fergussons are harrowing it to hell.
The men grow tired of the broken clay,
Abandon their tractors in the field
And compose this lay:

A Tall Tale

Or

The First Gravy Train Into Town

One sultry morning, once upon a time,
In the month of April,
The town was taking it easy,
When a hag from Trumra and a dog fox from Gallid
Hastened to the steps of The Greville Arms Hotel
For a better view of the parade,
Guard Moore and Guard Cooney are wearing plus fours.

The whole town was discussing the main function of the First Gravy Train.

The train arrived late for a start,
All the *Pater Nosters* were kneeling on the steps of the hotel,
Praying to St. Swithin,
The Rinn Roe Ceili Band struck up a tune,
A ghost of a late abbot from Abbeylara
Was carrying the bones of a local saint in a shoe box
And nobody passed much remarks on him.

The choir sang a polyphonic version of:
Pouring Rain, Weather That Storm and Easter Snow.

The two inseparable sisters, the Miss Bradys came to the door to peep.

The local politician, Councillor C. Rooster was crowing about the town's proud History and how two Sicilian brothers, Espresso and Cappuccino

Came to the town in the middle of the night

And changed the format of thinking.

They were great talkers and sat up the entire night

Talking about what they would do for the town they love so well.

Then the Canon, the Grand Old Inquisitor

Asked for silence and there was a great hush over the moat,

All along the streets and the footpaths

And the canon blessed The First Gravy Train:

Bisto ...Bisto ... Sancto Bisto,

And he sprinkled it with Holy Water,

And the entire population shouted : *Amen.*

It is early

When birds sing in first light,

Dandelions open their golden eyes,

Wild strawberries stretch their limbs

And playful lambs find a safe place in the field

Where life is held together in a childlike way

If only for a day.

Fields are not mute you know,

They talk ...Yes ...The talking fields,

Trees speak, stones chatter, bushes wail

For the fields have stories:

Once upon a time

There was a world of clay and stone

And fish and stars

And children heard about a green lion,

A dog with three legs,

A necklace of heads, a girdle of hands

And an old hag's hut

Revolving on a chicken's foot.

And the stories strike back at those who try to change them.

And lone bushes are best left alone.

Back in the town

Mrs. Muldoon looks over her privet hedge

And asks the same questions of Jack Hall the postman every morning:

Busy day?... Who's getting letters?... Who's the parcel for?...

More clothes from America?... I suppose?

A blackbird builds her nest in the privet hedge,

A few stragglers are coming down the hill from Mass,

Further down the street Busty Mahety throws raw liver on the pan,

Turns away, coughs and spits into the coal bucket,

Martin Ruther is whipping the hell out of a spinning top on Moxham Street,

He says he's too sick to be at school.

Each year on the first of April, the town's people

Offer the rosary for the women and men of Scrabby,

That their electricity won't be disconnected,

And that they may get themselves out of bed every morning

By pulling their own pigtails.

More April showers are promised on the forecast this morning.

A bellows breathes in Jimmy Flynn's forge,

He talks football, scores goals, kicks points
And is sent off for putting the wrong shoe on the wrong foot
Of a mule.
Winking stars appear

Little windows to our souls in darkness,
The town's voice quietens into the night,
Inner voices of the people sing to themselves in sleep.
Their voices rise above the chorus of the day,
Above the crowd, mob and congregation
They sing alone in sleep:
Mary Major screams internally,
Someone is walking inside her heart
And she feels the thud of his boots in her blood.
Mother Angela sprinkles children's tears about the playground.
Bogán Kiernan, retired commercial traveller,
Rides a bicycle through the roads and byways of his dreams,
Canon O`Kane, parish priest carries everyone's cross
Up the Main Street, up the hill, across a desert of ploughed land,
To a field of stones.
Mike The Barber looks into a big mirror
And shaves the dead face of every man in town.

And cries all night beside the turnip pulper in the shed.
Mrs. Blaney writes messages to herself every day
And reads them aloud in her sleep:

Dear Mrs. Blaney,

Remember to leave the key under the mat
Just in case Mr. Blaney returns unexpectedly from the grave,
And report the scoundrels of children
That knock and kick down your door,
To the master, the nuns, the priests and the guards.
And don't forget to boil the potatoes,
And pay for the milk and the bread
And God willing leave money for the priests
In case you die in your bed.

Yours truly,

May Blaney.

Another April morning, the sun is about to rise,
Grim reds, dead black, flushes of vermilion,
A ghost comes down the old road
And vanishes with the fog.
First the pyx of the sun then the monstrance,
A breeze blows the darkness away,
Syllables of sunlight, spurts of rain,
Smudges of cloud across the blue curve of the moon,
Spring is looking out from under the trees in the park,
Wood anemonies, primroses, celandines open their eyes.
And life happens,
As it was in the beginning,

Is now and ever shall be,
A robin lifts a twig
And flies to build her nest,
It starts to rain again. Blue, red and green umbrellas walk to Mass,
The canon's wipers won't *swish swash*
And he drives up the hill, his head out the window.
Two dogs sniff each other in the rain,
Bow-wow... and pass on.
Rosset Kelly puts his hand into his raincoat pocket,
Takes out nothing and calls his manx cat in out of the rain:

Pussypussy ... pussypussy ... wetpussy

Psh... psh ... psh ... psh...

Rain is making music everywhere
Babble of showers, leaking gutters,
Cantabile of raindrops on slate and galvanised roofs,
Squelch of Wellingtons on the pavement,
Memory hovers about with the rain,
Flooding the corridors of our brain,
Makes noise in the gullies on Waterlane.
Men, women and children with mugs of tea
Hear the weather forecast and ponder the thought of a long wet day.
Cock Fegan can't stand the rain,
He takes out a picture of Elvis
And sings to it:

Can't you see?

I love you, please don't break,

My heart in two.

He stops abruptly to tell us:

I'm off to Hollyhead in the morning,

You'll all drown in the town,

This town is truly Purgatory,

A place where people suffer,

Before they take the boat to England.

Old Dooley has wind of local gossip,

He walks the streets in the rain talking to everybody and nobody.

Hellohellohello, Hellohellohello,

With a grin on his face like a rat in a graveyard he ponders:

Boys Oh Boys!

The noodynaedy wan in the drapery,

Has to leave in a hurry,

Proof of the pudding, bun in the oven,

Broth of a boy from the next parish,

So they're saying,

Mum's the word, mum's the word,

Boys Oh boys,

*In every sense and meaning,
Terrible rain, more promised,
The swallows will be late on arrival
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.*

Canon O`Kane, alone in the presbytery,
Is sifting words for his next sermon:

*A time to reap... a time to sow...
Time falls in darkness.
Time walks by your side,
Slowly at first, then in a hurry,
Time sleeps with you ... time eats you...*

Rosset Kelly plans to purchase:

*I'll get a new Raleigh bike on the never-never
And cycle out to Bord na Móna
Work in the bog for May
Freewheeling down at the break of day
I'll take comfort in the job
A man of means ...nut brown, stripped to the waist,
I'll lunch outdoors with the best of them
Busty Mahety , Danger Smith ...
We'll drink our flasks of tea, eat ham sandwiches
And talk politics and religion*

And cycle home each evening to the sweetness

Of well earned sleep and dreams of Pearl`s lips and her long wet hair.

V

Holy Mother month of May,

Rosy halo of first communion,

White goddess of the hawthorn flush,

Oaten cakes round and flat,

Primrose on cusp of thorn,

Pleroma of roses on the garden wall,

Mayfly on Lough Sheelin,

Innumerable voices rattle on:

I`ll sing a hymn to Mary,

The mother of my God,

The Virgin of all virgins

The nuns set up May Altars

To the young girls they once were,

Canon O`Kane of the woeful countenance

Leads the devotions:

Virgin most prudent ... Virgin most venerable ... Virgin most renowned ...

Philomena laughs

All the way home from the chapel,

Des follows her up the road,
And they pair off into the field, beyond the gap,
Smell of wet clay,
Heading for the blue curve of the moon.
Scent of hawthorn blossom burns inside us all,
Maia mother of Mercury, hears the call
And Autumn unveils what's sown in Spring.

Two Redemptorists , black soutane and giant rosary
Arrive on a Mission of self denial,
One walks up and down the chapel
For fear someone might fall asleep.
The other yells his sermon and jumps about the pulpit:

*We are all fallen angels
Trapped in our bodies
Barred in a ribcage till death
Our flesh, food for maggots and worms,
Our souls are meant for God,
All will be made clear to us when we die
And living is only about dying...and dying about living.*

The Danger Smith with the grog-blossom on his nose
Sits up - listens and goes on the dry for a day or two.
Pearl asks God to keep her away from men.
Philomena prays for a secret intention,

Girls in black mantillas promise chastity before the altar,
Two stalls on either side of the chapel
Sell rosaries to beat the band; Bronze ones ...Silver ones ... Gold ones ...
Scapulars and *Agnus Deis* to wear next your skin.
Every sort of medals : miraculous ...St. Christopher ...St. Jude ...
Statues of The Sacred Heart ...The Blessed Virgin ...The Child of Prague
The whole town is coming down with Religion
But the Redemtrists leave for Tubbercurry
And the same old sins keep coming back.

Children from Moxham Street are playing bus with Children from Waterlane.

Mouthing engine noises:

Beeb Beeping up and down the footpath:

VROOM---VROOM---VROOM---VROOM---VROOM ---BEEP---BEEP.

RIMM---RIMM---RIMM---RIMM

They soon grow tired of the game

And turn to insulting one another:

Go home to your scabby spuds

Your pigs` trotters and fried bread.

Waterlane replies:

Fuck yis all in Moxham Street with your Tapioco Faces

And your Semalina Arses from the senna pods on Saturday.

The verbal abuse continues into the night:

Big head.

Gawky.

Cowardly Cowardly Custard.

Go home to your stirabout

Fuck Off.

The first round of the B Division League
Has begun in Heslin`s field.
Someone kicks the ball over the ditch,
Spectators lift their heads to watch the clouds gather.
And the two teams start kicking one another.
Danger Smith floors a fella with his fist.

The Ref is crawling about in the net.
Heslin`s cows are eating shirts, trousers and braces
At the upper end of the field.
Ward`s dog mounts another mongrel bitch behind the goals
The ball returns from the next field
The game resumes.

When the game is slack and there`s no rowing
John Kelly turns to Jack and makes an observation:

Look at that for a line of crosses going up the fields, man.

I had a job once with the ESB when the country was going electric.

You could be put doing anything, man,

Pulling giant spools of wire through fields and gaps,

Digging holes for poles ...tarring poles ... climbing poles, man.

How did you get up the pole, John?

You stepped into the grips, man, clipped them to your boots,

Strapped yourself to the pole for fear you'd fall

And up you went

Lugging transformers up the poles for nineteen shillings a week, man,

Them transformers are the electric brains of the country

Fork lightning does away with them in a flash.

VI

Midsummer.

Noonday is heavy in this happy town.

Sun blinds down on shops,

The sparrows are silent,

Ward's dog is asleep on the footpath ,

Dorothy Doran sits in her wine red chair taking the sun.

Shopkeepers come to the doors to look at the heat

And watch the line of children come to Larry's Shop

For ice lollies...Mr. Freezes and vanilla cones.

Martin Ruther goes into Doherty's to buy a lucky bag.

Finds Tommy asleep behind the counter.

The shop is full of trays of buns with cream and icing,

Chester cakes, bun loaves full of currants,

Martin leaves Tommy to his sleep, forgets the lucky bag,

Fills his pockets with buns and heads down the street.

A bumblebee is beating its wings

Behind the blind in Mrs. Major's shop window,

Sheets of newspaper are yellowing in the summer heat,

Up the old road the council men are tarring,

Black rakes, black spraying cans, black hands, black faces.

Out for the day.

Donnelly's bus stops at Maggie Dick's for Anothertown.

A journey up and down,

Past bushy green hedges,

Humpty dumpy hills, scraggy stones,

Cocks of hay, bales of hay,

The bus driver leans over the steering wheel

And waits for passengers to come down the laneways:

The clocks are never together in this country,

No sense of time... but they won't be late for their funerals,

That's for sure ...old ways die slowly round here.

Clamps of turf sleep in the bog, clouds roll by,

Fieldgates, yardgates, going to rust,

All houses great and small,

Roses in the gardens,

Trees and bushes to break the force of the wind.

Donnelly's bus stops in Anothertown.
Farnham Street clings to the Reformation,
Churches, brick houses and door brass,
Poor Clare Convent, pandemonium in 43 is recalled,
Smells of lunch and early dinner from the hotel,
Maze of Woolworth's counters,
Trays of racing cars, polka dot footballs,
Cap guns and cork guns, colouring books and paint,
A barmaid sweeps her side of the street,
A man helps a woman across the road
Into Vera Brady's for a new hat and outfit for a wedding.
Corsets laced up the back, litany of cloths ...
Shetland wool, camel hair, cashmere,
Cotton, linen, mohair,
Bridge Street for The Lido Café,
Fish and chips, salt and vinegar, a tanner to play the duke-box:

It's lonesome away from your kindred and all

By the campfire at night where the wild dingoes call ...

Night darkens the streets and lanes.
The silence is black.
Sometimes, for no known reasons
We wander in the back gardens of our minds and wonder
Is it love that holds the stars together?
Faraway grains of light sing down on the still night,

Like sparks from long forgotten fires,
Our hearts are warm our souls reach
For the light and we sense in some small way
How much of life lies hidden faraway.

The boys were playing and playing,
Fiddles, flutes and melodeons,
Hop leap and kick ...jig, reel, and jump,
Katie White's out on the street,
Bodhrán beat, thud of her feet,
Waifs in green costumes, lepping and laughing,
Coyle's straw hat all aflame,
With peony roses, lupins and daisies ...
Swilling lanes, staggering streets,
Paddy and Pearl stepping it out
Everyone shouting and tripping about

Stand back till you see Pearl

With her arse dancing and her face laughing

Go on Pearl ...Give it to them

Shake it Pearl

Just look at the length of them legs

And the blood flowing through them

Kripes she's coming down

Give the woman a chair

Any chance of an amhrán eile

From the big curly fella from Clonbrony?

Duddlie... Diddlie... Dól

Duddlie Diddlie... Dól

There's no describing the Fleadh Ceoil.

Morning drizzle.

Tomato Pat makes a living on less than an acre,

Moving among the lettuce and scallions

In his garden of earthly delight.

Planting, staking, pruning

Waiting for the green tomatoes to turn red.

Daydreaming in a strawberry bed,

Ripening into middle age,

School children throw stones at the glasshouse,

The weeds outgrow Tomato Pat, the roots push on ...

Ciúnasciúnasciúnasciúnas

The nuns are busy translating silence into Irish.

No matter where you walk you meet a *Ciúnas* Sign.

They're everywhere ... on the backs of doors,

Walls, windows, presses, in corridors, porches, toilets ...

And if you think silence matters so do secrets.

Sister Dolores calls up Tommie Kelly:

Don't tell anyone Tommie about the secrets of Fatima. That's a good boy ...

You know there's only one true God and He's a Catholic

But don't tell the protestant children anything ...they're not entitled to know.

I will not Sister. I'll keep my mouth shut.

That's a good boy.

Authority is in a voice:

Seán Ó BhrádaighAnseo

Tomás Ó CheallaighAnseo

Nóra Ní Mhainnín.....Anseo.

Authority is in a black and white habit.

Authority is in the words, *Micheál Seas Suas ...Pól Suigh Síos.*

Authority is in the stick

And there is humiliation round the corner.

If the day at school doesn't add up

Or you are out of luck with spellings

The Dunces Cap is red with baubles and bells

And you jingle your way through the classes

While the others chant ;

Duncy, Duncy D

40 Days on A,B,C.

The Moat belongs to the wind,

Fractal green --- daisy wink --- twists and curves,

And the Moat belongs to us,
Helps us find our way home in the dark,
Hill of stories,
Once there was ... and once there was not ...
A necklace of seeds,
A head of clay, full of the narrative
Of a wild flower
At the Angelus hour.
St. Patrick with staff in hand,
Looks down on the town.
Everyone looks up at him:

On us thy poor children bestow a sweet smile.

A hawk takes a swipe at a robin
As she feeds her young,
Plucks her feathers, rips her apart,
Life is one great happy meal.
Corpus Christi. Amen.

VII

July.

Fields and fields of buttercups stretch beyond the town.
Wispy hay is blowing in the wind,
White pebbles sleep on dried-up river beds,

Beelzebub, Lord of The Flies orders
All the bugs in the parish to head
For Ward's meadow ...clegs ...dragonflies ...horse-wasps ...
Follow the *clipaticlop* ... *clipaticlop* of horses
Pulling paddy rakes, wheel rakes,
Men in sunhats, sleeves rolled up,
Are shaking, raking and combing down hay,
The big frightened eyes of a heifer
Look over the ditch at the commotion,
Holy hive and honey,
Blessed are the wild bees swarming above our heads
Will the sun ever come out from the clouds?
A curlew calls from the bottom meadow
Announcing rain,
Fanged flashes, summer thunder,
Ward's men take shelter under the trees
And talk and lean on forks and rakes,
And watch a forage harvester and tandem of silage trucks
Cross the horizon beyond the moat,
Jim Small explains:

Hay is a thing of the past, it's silage now,

No work... all machinery .. Doesn't matter if it rains.

He lights a woodbine, inhales, and blows smoke rings
Into a swarm of flies.

News arrives late in the afternoon,
Jane Ward carries a can of tea and sandwiches
And tells the men how -
Mrs. Dorothy Doran who used to take her holidays
In Salthill for the last fifteen summers,
Was found facedown in her breakfast
Of rashers... sausages,...eggs... liver... puddings...
Funeral arrangements later.

For the first two weeks in July
Circus posters are pasted everywhere,
On poles, walls, on a big board at the Market House.
In the early hours the town awakens to almighty engines,
Multi coloured lorries, banjaxed tractors and vans
Pass the Technical School, down the Main Street,
Heading for Keegan`s field. The town reaches new heights
As the Big Top rises above the bushes and trees.
Old and young sit around the ring
Staring at the wonders:
Acrobats from Russia, camels from Arabia,
A man eating fire, a girl in tinselled costume
Sparkles like the Queen of Sheba.

Are they real people at all? Janey Early asks.

You`d wonder.

The canon refuses to go and looks the other way.
Pearl Waters runs off with a snake charmer
And returns a month later and tells nobody anything
And everybody wants to know.

VIII

August is fluff in the wind, bearded barley,
Balmy days, the carnival colour of leaves,
Haggards fill up with hay,
Mushrooms appear in Tully's field.
Scent of apples in Walsh's orchard.
Pearl Waters is drying her hair in the sun,
Mary Verdon is plucking at the threads in her cardigan,
Martin Ruther is heading for Camagh Bridge on a bicycle,
Bamboo cane for fishing rod, hooks, worms, line and reel,
Past the ruins of the monastery at Abbeylara
An old man sits by the roadside counting the clouds
And puffing away at his pipe,
Martin inhales the pipe smoke and pushes on,
Boochalawns and thistles everywhere,
Blackberries reach out to the road,
Grasshoppers on their last legs
Vibrate.

Reed music by the riverside,
Water lilies ... water-cress ... meadowsweet,
Cork bobs, pops, sinks into the dark,
Martin swipes another perch and cycles home,
Swallows gather on the wires,

All the ripening of August.
Briars laden with fruit,
Buckets of blackberries,
And money to be made from the Rag and Boneman
Who buys blackberries by the stone
And sells them to a Dye Factory in the North of Ireland.
A bonus income, a way of paying for school books.
Town's people run down country lanes,
Picking and talking,
Staggering shadows,
Children up on mothers' shoulders reaching for the juicy ones,
Black tongues,
Black blood leaking from cans, pongers, saucepans and buckets.
An old man walks past with a stick
And remembers he was young once
And picked the same berries for the price of a catechism.

Early frost starts to strip the bushes, clothe the roadside.
Pearl Waters wants to be alone,
Something or someone calls her

She responds, heads up the old road,
Sits on a stone, makes this corner of the world her own,
Breathes the wild breath of country air,
Rocks herself into daydreams of becoming a singer in a band
Her eyes begin to sparkle,
Happy to be close to her dreams if only for an hour
She returns home to face September.

IX

First Thursday in September...The Agricultural Show.
Pink of horse nostrils quivering,
Chestnut, grey, bay and roan
Duffy's Clydesdale Stallion has
Four white socks to the knees and hocks,
Bulls bellowing ...Donkeys braying ...Sheep bleating...
Spectators lie on the grass and watch horse and rider
Clear red-white... green-white ... blue-white jumps,
The loudspeaker calls out:

Number 5 has four faults

Number 7 is eliminated.

Will stewards please keep spectators outside the arena.

Will the owner of the Aberdeen Angus bull number 55

Please go to the Tea Marquee immediately

As the animal is causing an obstruction.

Housewives examine the poultry coops,

Hear the hens cackle, ducks quack,

Tables of exhibits in the Big Marquee,

Lilies-of-the-valley and machinery,

Prizes for oats, wheat and barley,

Janey Early whispers to Mrs. Farrelly:

Did you hear?

What?

About Mrs. Blaney,

What?

She won 1st. prize for her gooseberry jam.

That mad bitch.

Further prizes for flower arrangements ...dressmaking and crochet ...

Outside the marquee a Trick of The Loop is

Waving a Bullroarer and shouting:

Ollie ...Ollie Ollie Ollie Ollie

My Granny's Granny is shouting down from heaven at me

And I'm shouting up at her

We're all bobbing here ... We're all bobbing here

The last few tickets here ...pick a straw

Even numbers you win

Uneven you lose

I'm not making a fortune missus ...I'm only making a living

God made the bees

The bees make the honey

The jockey does the dirty work

And the Bookie takes the money

Hawkers put down their baskets

To gawk at The Stone Wall Championship.

Gormley`s mare clears 6 foot 6 inches to take the cup.

Monday is market day,

Old ridges and furrows yield in Autumn,

A countryside of tillers and sowers invade the town.

Lines of carts, orange and blue, shafts raised,

Tied horses with winkers on

Regain their composure outside the Market House.

Blotchy faces, stubbled faces, haggle over money,

Words devouring words, noise everywhere

The click of studs on stone

Young lads shovel spuds, sleeves rolled up,

Globules of sweat on their foreheads.

The whole place is reeking of plug tobacco,

Men wearing caps spit out phlegm,

Old decency in felt hats know better

Some are in fits of laughter, others recall the year of bad oats:

All straw and no grain,

Sacks of

wheat, oats and barley against the wall

Await collection,

The giant iron weighing scales crashes down

With a clank

Old Dooley is chewing a wisp of straw and talking of drawkie days

Martin Ruther is eating a thick slice of bread and looking on

Roddy Gilpen starts up the tractor

And Market Street disappears in the smoke.

X

It is truly Autumn.

Trees are shedding old life, leaf by leaf,

Over the hills and far away.

Fields are struggling to be green,

Under a stark grey sky,

The wind is ripping posters off the Market House.

Orion the hunter has returned,

Migrating geese fly in from Canada,

A hare hides in the after-grass,

The Carneys are snagging turnips below us.

Molly Gorman slips in a furrow,
With a bag of potatoes on her back.
Cock Fagan never took the boat to Hollyhead last Spring.

Me back is broken from picking spuds in Tully's field.

I'm definitely out of here ...

This time for sure ...

Any day now ...

As soon as ...

If only ...

What if ...

On top of Old Smoky, all covered with snow

I lost my true lover, for courtin' too slow.

He returns to the drills and continues picking potatoes.

Sister Flahoolagh distributes free boots and jumpers

To the needy children in the school.

Peter Daly, cattle drover, walks three heifers home

From the fair in Arva in the dark.

Mary Major weighs tea and sugar

And puts the tea into red bags and sugar in brown bags,

Before she closes the shop.

Susan Fox looks into a teacup

Janey Early desires to know the future:

What do you see Susan?

I see the stars, black stars on a white dome.

I see the tail that wags the dog.

I see a bunch of keys. Are you thinking of leaving?

There's a tree looking into your bedroom... the branches are stretching in to

Help you. You're going on a journey but it's ... not far.

You'll pass water... before you cross it.

There's a silver fish down here. That's money for you.

How much money? How much...?

Ah! It won't be hard to spend it.

Susan strikes the dome of the cup on the palm of her hand

Roads of tealeaves freewheel down the side

The words fall out:

Is that a heel? No

It's a hare fleeing across a field

I don't like hares.

Well it could be a rabbit. It's hard to tell.

One day in Autumn.

While the crows were circling the beech trees,

And wind and rain would go through you,

Old Jamsie McDonagh recalls his past.

Distant fire by the roadside, tent full of children,

Piebald mare tied to a bush, old bitch of a dog,

Pulling herself away from her pups.

He remembers his father walloping tin cans, his mother staring into the smoke,

And Julie, his older sister,

Wearing a pony tail and walking the byroads

In search of:

A lock of hay for the pony ... any praties or bread?

God Bless You.

Guards' wives, farmer's wives, the barber's wife

Assemble in Moxham Street Hall

For the A.G.M. of the I.C.A.

Women wanting to be alone

Happy to be away from their men

If only for awhile.

Sharing recipes for Chicken Marengo

Joint and skin chicken and put into casserole

Heat oil, add onion and cook for a few minutes

Add tomato purée and cornflour and mix well

Rub through a sieve ...

Rub what? Shouts Mrs. Muldoon

And the whole class of women erupts

A sea of laughter, tears falling from their eyes

Their boobs shaking in their bras,

Laughing themselves silly
Taking the rage out of their lives
They return to their homes renewed
Ready to start another day.

Mickey Maguire lives on his own
With the moon and stars for neighbours,
Grows garlic on the window sill
To keep his madness out,
Walks to town with his head down
To buy a loaf of bread.
Once he ate clay, drank rusty water
And had to be taken away in an ambulance.
Mickey makes darkness his secret,
Imagines he has committed some unpardonable sin,
Walks the dark roads and laneways,
Talks to the hoarse wind in the trees
And asks for forgiveness.

Kindling fires on the Scrabby Road,
Magpie morning music on the terrace roofs,
Women and small children gather round
Pat McGivney's van,
Back doors swing open to the creamery can,
Chattering wives ... clattering cans
Pushing and shouting for pints ... quarts

Milk for babies` bottles ...

An extra sup for the cat, Pat.

Ladle dip sings into the can

Scoop and souse ... one woman shouts:

Go on Pat don't be mane,

Some talk, more overhear conversations:

A man made money once

And when he was dying, he ate it with his toast for breakfast,

Then up and died and took the money with him.

The ten o'clock news blares from the radio in the van.

Someone shouts:

Will you look at Ward's dog with his thing up Finnan`s Darky

Dirty dogs ...Dirty dogs ...

The mornings are foggy,

Leaves grow darker and darker,

Apples are ready to fall

The river is swallowing her banks

Farmers come in from the fields

One car passes another quietly at the top of the hill

Clouds block out the blue of the sky,
Two boys raise their chestnuts in combat in the school yard
Rattle of chestnuts ... tangle of shoe laces
Splutter splatter of Martin's champion,
Loud laughter from the other boys gathered round.
Flicker of light from the fiery skull of a turnip,
The clocks go back, street lamps come on.
All of a sudden it's cold.
Mary Green and Dirty Jimmy are bedding down together
In Heslin's stable.
October fights against the dark.

XI

A wet November night creeps in.
The town gossips about the dead,
Cockroaches run across Rosset Kelly's floor,
And he informs us:

You know, death isn't voluntary,

As he stamps on the cockroaches with his size tens.
An older house talks to a bungalow
Over the frozen hills:

Where did you get such a name?

The bungalow doesn't reply.

Philomena can't sleep at night,

Her secret intentions weren't answered.

Owl-eyed night.

Restless spirits walk the roads,

Dead leaves ride the wind

Stray across the road.

Winter rain floods the fields,

Hoop and clout marks of the cattle in wet gaps,

The haggard is all muck and clábar.

Does anyone know the business of sin?

Indulgences are a one day industry in this town

Plenary and Partial available for souls in need

To cut the cost of suffering of our dear departed

Good bargains to be had : 300 days ... 500 days less

If we intercede on their behalf and pay and pray a little.

Clochcinn, dormitory for the dead

Whispering and counting prayers and calculating

Souls` release from Purgatory.

Rosset Kelly wants to know:

*How come the Protestants never have to pay
For their Departed?*

Old Dooley isn't sure of the whole business:

*Those who know never tell us,
Those who tell us never know.*

Fr. Woods quietly talks to the congregation:

*As we enter the darkness of winter we need to put to rest
Our fears and worries about the next life,
Our concern for our dear departed relatives and friends.
We remember the ghosts of the departed
Who have no relations to pray for them.
Not only should we put the dead to rest in November
We need to meet with our own ghosts
That which is truly wild and hurting us,
Let us confront the rage within us,
Bring it for a winter walk to the country roads,
We can listen to the wind in the trees
After awhile you'll find the trees have less to say
And settle into being trees
And you'll settle into being yourself again,
It's good to walk the country roads
When you don't know what else to do.*

Canon O`Kane looks sharply at Fr. Woods,

Canon O`Kane has the final words:

Requiem aeternum dona eis Domine

Et lux perpetua luceat eis.

XII

A December evening

Is growing frost on the trees and bushes,

All the house lights climb the hill,

Little windows barely open,

Like mouths in sleep.

Christmas advertisements on the TV sing:

Tom Thumb cigars for Christmas ... Tom Thumbs in tins of ten ...

Blue and red edged envelopes arrive from America with dollars.

The first Christmas Cards are on the mantelpiece,

Holly and ivy wedged behind the pictures.

Mother and son go shopping for Christmas,

All the way down to Morrissey's for

Sultanas...raisins ...lemon peel ...nutmeg ...cherries ...almonds

2lb. pots of red jam and a bottle of brown sauce,

Lemon jelly ...sponge cake ...custard and cream for the trifle

Mother and son return home, shopping bags full

Past a pool of streetlight at the crossroads
They face the dark road home with a flashlight.
Mrs. Farrelly has made her Christmas puddings
Her son Terry has had his gall-bladder out for Christmas
And will have to be watching what he's eating.
Busty Mahety is killing turkeys with a brush handle
And plucking day and night
And Mary Verdon is dreaming of dying before Christmas
But that happens every year.
Busty Mahety joins Hughie Small and The Danger Smith
In The Star Bar.
The three men get triumphantly drunk for Christmas.
Danger Smith strikes up a conversation with his empty glass
The glass doesn't reply
And at that critical moment
The glass jumps off the counter
And shatters itself on the floor
So Danger Smith insists.
Busty Mahety is having remorse
For all the turkeys he's killing
And starts getting all sentimental
He tells the others:

*One turkey looked me straight in the eye
When her turn came for the broom handle.
I couldn't do it. I have her in the bag here*

Look at her, pure nature's intelligence

Birds and animals know more than we do

They can sense a storm ... know all about the weather.

Hughie Small states:

The tractor in a wonderful loco... motive.

Then he complains:

There's never enough light at Christmas

To find your way home in the dark.

Outside, the three men cling to one another.

The streets sway, houses swing from the trees.

Mahety's turkey jumps out of the bag

And takes wings up Water Lane

Hughie Small squares up to Rosset's cat on Moxham Street:

Psh ... Psh ... Psh ...Psh ...

Good Night, Mrs. Cat

Are we going to have a white Christmas?

The town sleeps,

All the doors and windows close in secrets.

Tonight above all nights everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Purple chasuble, white chasuble ...

Are all in accord with Bethlehem.

The town awakens

To little remote stars on her ceiling

The streets throw shadows, the grass on the Moat is black.

Much talked about snow never comes.

So old Dooley says.

Martin Ruther

gets a small box of water-colour paints

And a mouth organ in his stocking.

The whole town is heading for Bethlehem on the hill

Some walking, more driving the roads

Carrying their dark secrets with them

To place in the crib.

The school children's voices are raised in song:

Oíche chiúin, oíche Mhic Dé,

Janey Early prays out loud:

Hail Holy queen mother of mercy,

Hail our life our sweetness and our hope ...

Other prayers are soft whisperings, babble of Babel,

For all are seated here: compassion ... endurance ... blind faith

A shopkeeper fingers his pocket
Pretends he's counting his coppers
When someone gives him the wicked eye.

Pearl Waters clings to the rails
But everyone recalls her wild dance,
The town and its mother know Pearl.
All stare at the crib as if it was a cage
With ox and ass and baby in the straw
But few can see the bars.

Too much of Christmas.
Too much of the Galilean
More of us pray to a different god.
With a paper hat and a cracker
We're full of goose, turkey, ham and stuffing,
Too much to drink
And much of the same on the box:
The Queen's speech, the Pope's blessing and Billy Smarts circus
Time to be moving on.

Night is going on outside,
All the houses close their eyes
Against the darkness.
The town as theatre of laughter and heartbreak
Turns in its sleep and sings:

The wren, the wren, the King of all birds.

The wren is the only bird

That sings all year round.

We'll hunt the wren cries Robin the Bobbin.

The wren is the only bird

That sings all year round.

Stone the wren to death.

That sings all year round.

Carry the bird's brain through the streets

Up Waterlane, down Silver Street.

The wren is the only bird

That sings all year round.

The town lies still

Children are sardined into a bed,

Three at the top, two at the bottom

Rosset Kelly is waiting for the cat to purr,

Mary Verdon closes her eyelids,

Faraway voices return to her

To protect her from what life throws at her daily.

She hears ghosts talking in her sleep,

She sees them

Polishing the snow, parcelling up the wind.

Night sleeps with daylight on either side,
The wind blows leaves through our dreams,
Leaves, like lost words
From long forgotten conversations.
The trees stand their ground,
The branches barely whisper.
Milk white flakes flood the morning
Busty Mahety tries to put his trousers on
Upside down
He tries again and gets it right.
Doors squeak open
Another year begins.

Landscape As A Major Symbol In The Poetry Of John Montague

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Landscape As A Major Symbol

In The Poetry Of John Montague

I propose to deal with John Montague's sense of place as is evident in his collections of poetry. I have provided an Ordnance Survey Map of Co. Tyrone at the end of this essay for reference purposes.

OBJECTIVES

I intend to deal not only with Montague's sense of landscape as is evident in the physical world but also his sense of an inner landscape, the landscape of the psyche, the landscape he imagines in his mind. To complement the physical and inner landscape, I will confront his subtle acoustic landscape of noise and silence and psychic resonances, in other words how the external landscape affects the inner imagination of the poet Montague. I will take Montague's collection of poetry: "The Rough Field" and illustrate how his sense of place leads him to a unique reading of the history of his people. I will examine Montague's interpretation of the midlands as he experienced it in his collection of poetry: "The Dead Kingdom", when on summer holidays he visited his uncle and aunt in Abbeylara, a small village, two miles outside Granard. Again Montague invites the reader into the landscape of the Midlands and it's as if the landscape is shaping its people . I will illustrate how Montague's journey in poetry takes him beyond the family and political history as subject matter to the deeply felt "DINNSEANCHAS". By "DINNSEANCHAS", I mean, Irish place names

and mythological associations of mountains, rivers and lakes with such places.

With regard to the inner landscape, I will integrate the archetypal figures as they occur in his sense of landscape. I will confront the woman, women, hag, and goddess as they appear in the landscape.

To conclude I will suggest that the writings of William Carleton and Patrick Kavanagh have had influences on the sense of landscape in the poetry of John Montague. A voyage of discovery of such an undertaking will take the reader beyond the borders of the conscious world.

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC OF LANDSCAPE AS DISCOVERED IN JOHN MONTAGUE'S POETRY

Montague reads the physical landscape in a hieroglyphic way. Each mound, river, lake has a life of its own and creates its own poetic image. For John Montague, the landscape becomes unique in a typographical manner. Montague traces its life on the blank page to form his poems. It is a type of transmutation of the physical landscape to the written word. There is a sense of mystery to his work, best described in the poem “*Courtyard In Winter*”, where the poet delivers a telegram to a mountain farm in the snow and on the way home observes the animal tracks in the snow.

*The tracks of foxes,
Wild birds, as I climbed down
Seemed to form a secret writing
Minute and frail as life...*

From “*Courtyard in Winter*”, (*A Slow Dance, 1975.*)

Montague's deciphering of the landscape and its secret writing is a major theme in all of his books of poetry. In this essay I intend to address this theme. At this point I would like to take a broad look at the whole concept of landscape.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (born in Prague 1875) asks a very important question in one of his sonnets:

Shall we renounce our ancient friends the Gods?-

Powerful, undemanding, but unknown

To the unyielding steel we fiercely breed.

Will we require new maps to track them down?

(Sonnets To Orpheus 61)

John Montague provides new maps of the landscape in his poetry. It's as if Montague is responding to Rilke's Sonnet XXIV. He wishes to discover new approaches to age-old knowledge that has been forgotten. One aspect about John Montague is his great sense of travelling. One might say his journey is his home; he is always on the move. Montague has never stayed long at any one address. He has lived in America, Ireland and France. Although his poetry is about place, ultimately, we discover his life is not a place but the journey. His life is not an answer but a question. This journeying to and fro reminds me of the lines you find in TS Eliot's " Little Gidding":

" We shall not

cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time"

(The Oxford Book of American Poetry 369)

THE ROUGH FIELD

With that broad sense of place as illustrated in the lines of T. S. Eliot's, I approach John Montague's collection of poetry "The Rough Field".

In the preface Montague says: “This poem begins in the early sixties, when I went to Belfast to receive a small poetry prize”. Also in the Preface to “The Rough Field”, Montague admits to being influenced by American poets Paterson, Olson and Duncan.

“living in Berkeley introduced me to the debate on open-form from Paterson, through Olson, to Duncan”

(The Rough Field, preface vii)

The form of “The Rough Field”, is based on what Charles Olson called Projective or Open Verse also known as “Composition By Field”. This style of “Projective or Open Verse”, moves in and out of Stanza form, giving us utterances, cuttings from papers, snippets from history books. You will find an example of this type of utterance on page 32 of “The Rough Field” where Barkley, the map maker, lost his head in Tyrone.

By observing the landscape in “The Rough Field”, Montague is looking at the situation in Northern Ireland in 1972 and reflecting on how it emerges from the past. He is moving in the direction of that ever changing moment. It is a meditation on the need to change and the will to change. Perhaps Montague saw the need to move beyond the modernists; Eliot and Pound and that “Wasteland” dimension of a landscape.

Montague needed a personal and cultural renewal. Montague steps back into the past. He is working towards a statement of position. The Rough Field signposts the stages of this development. The busy road is the driving force behind this long poem. The busy road is symbolic of change and the journey of change. A journey that throws open the road to mythology. A journey that opens our eyes to images that stream out of the ground. As Montague stated in one of his lectures, “The Bag Apron” from The Poet’s

Chair Collection:

There are truly primitive and pre-historical powers working. Stones and water are among the enduring images in my work.

The Rough Field is a collection of movement back and forward in time with a spontaneous regression to the ground:

**“ To a gaunt farmhouse on this busy road,
Bisecting slopes of plaintive moorland,
Where I resume old ways of walk and work
So easily, yet feel the sadness of return**

To what seems still, though changing.

No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here (The Rough Field 11) .

The opening section of “The Rough Field”, HOME AGAIN, is mobile in the sense of time and space. It is a journey across the landscape of urban and rural Ulster. A landscape that haunts Montague. A landscape that leads him on to further commentary: *Narrow fields wrought such division.* (The Rough Field 11)

Section 2 of HOME AGAIN eases into the house and home, where at dawn the first noises and movements awaken the poet’s imagination. Here we find the acoustic noises and silences that jolt Montague’s imagination. He is set alight with the farmyard sounds: *Hearing the cock crow in the dark.* (The Rough Field 11)

In section 3 of HOME AGAIN we reach Garvaghey and the ancestral home of the poet, John Montague. Again as one might expect the poet launches into a description of the landscape and the ancestral home:

**“ Between small, whin-tough hills,
The first slated house in the district;
Garvaghey, with its ring of firs.
From a silvered daguerreotype
My grandfather, county lawyer,
Hedge schoolmaster, Redmondite
Stares out, white beard curled**

Like a seahorse. (The Rough Field 12)

I see these as heart-felt lines and they remind me of Baudelaire: (*la forme d'une ville Change plus vite, hélas! que la coeur d'un mortel*) (*the form of a town changes more quickly, alas! Than the human heart*)

(*Le Cygne, The Swan* by Charles Baudelaire.)

Montague's feelings are close to Baudelaire's here. It is the intensity of change that challenges him most. In this section, Montague journeys back to his own family history. He is aware of time and change. The grandeur of the once powerful family has changed:

“The rotting side-car propped a hole
In the hedge, box lanterns askew.
All the sadness of a house in decay
Showed in the weed-grown cobbles”

(*The Rough Field 12.*)

This elegiac type of writing reappears in Montague's collection “*The Dead Kingdom*” where the poet and his cousin return to a closed up house of the O'Meara's in Abbeylara, Co. Longford:

“ The house smelt of neglect
And the garden was overrun;
Crumbling unpicked berries
Bending the tangled stems:
A small cleared realm
Reverting to first chaos
As if they had never been” (*The Dead Kingdom 17*)

In section 5 of *HOME AGAIN*, from “*The Rough Field*”, we meet the old people in the poem “*Like Dolmens Round My Children, the Old People*”. The people resemble dolmens, a feature of the Irish Landscape. The dolmens are symbols of the past. The dolmens point to a burial landscape that every county in Ireland is familiar with. Is this

the nightmare of history that haunts Montague? The images of these people from his childhood weigh him down: Jamie MacCrystal, Maggie Owens, The Neills- all blind, Mary Moore, Wild Billy Eagleson. These characters from his poem live on the edge. They trespassed on the poet's dreams. The poem ends in a shadowy landscape where these gaunt figures passed into "the dark permanence of ancient forms" What is most interesting about this poem is the movement to a different plain or level. In the final stanza Montague enters the magic circle. The characters take on a numinous quality. They can be perceived as archaic vestiges or archetypal figures of ancient Ireland. This is Montague in a ghostly landscape. He has moved beyond the empirical to the landscape of the unconscious psyche. I feel Montague encounters his own fears in this poem. This is the beginning of the journey to self knowledge for Montague. The dolmens and the people dominate his field of vision. The uniqueness of these characters in the poem stares Montague in the face and demands he replies. The dolmens are part of the landscape and form the equation with the people. This confrontation with the old people forces Montague to cope with his own consciousness. Montague attempts to cast out the devils of his childhood. There is an attempt made at a change of character of the poet. It is a metanoia that may or may not have worked. The reader is not fully convinced. But one thing is certain in the final stanza of this most important poem, Montague enters the unconscious when he states: *they trespassed on my dreams.*

"Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,

The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,

Formorian fierceness of family and local feud.

Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,

For years they trespassed on my dreams,

Until once, in a standing circle of stones,

I felt their shadows pass

Into the dark permanence of ancient forms.” (The Rough Field 15)

In the final stanza Montague has reached the motherlands of nature. He has reached mother earth. This mother earth from whom all things emerge and to whom, dying, they return As Patrick Kavanagh succinctly put it: *The womb and tomb press lips in fondness like bride and groom.* (Kavanagh, The Complete Poems 63)

Montague is responding to the wholeness of nature in which the unconscious is part. The mother goddess has become part of his thinking and he as poet will hover in and out throughout his writing. Montague travels alone between the motherlands of nature and chaos and the fatherlands of reason trying to make sense of it all. This is the journey of his poetry, in search of father reason and mother chaos. The Rough Field as a collection of poetry is in many ways a dialogue between two different and related aspects of thinking. Montague moves along the layers of history as they twist into the landscape, generating shadow images of the past. Together with snippets of history, cuttings from journals, he portrays a family history that twist in and out of the highlands of his imagination and take us to the high speed images of present day as viewed in the poem : *Hymn To The New Omagh Road.* (The Rough Field 57)

In section II of “The Rough Field”, Montague is drawing up the presence of the past as a contribution to the future. This is an elegiac section entitled “The Leaping Fire” in memory of Brigid Montague (1876-1966). In the closing lines of section 2, Montague jumps from the past hardships of his aunt’s life to a pondering of a new generation:*The sap of another generation / Fingering through a broken tree.* (The Rough Field 19) .

In section 3, Omagh Hospital , Montague enters the world of the dying woman. She is crone like, “white hair, thin rack of shoulders”. He draws us into the moonscape with his apt metaphor:

“broken down by
process to a pale

exhausted beauty
the moon in her
last phase, caring
only for herself” (The Rough Field 20)

In section 4, Montague links the death of his aunt with the archetypal figure of the banshee, the old crone who cries at the death of an Irish Family. This earthy woman blows back to life yesterday’s fire in the grate. This selfless woman who bore the pain of a whole family:

“Family legend held
That this frail
Woman had heard
The banshee’s wail
& on the night
She lay dying
I heard a low
Constant crying
Over the indifferent
Roofs of Paris –
The marsh bittern
Or white owl sailing”

(The Rough Field 21)

Removed from causality, (cause and effect as we know it), Montague engages in the synchronicity of events, (one event mysteriously following another). In Paris he senses his aunt’s death back in Ireland. This extra-sensory power taps into a living imaginative energy. This is also a twist in the journey of the poet. A journey from the rural landscape of Tyrone to the urbanscape of Paris. A dialogue between two different kinds

of thinking, causality as we know it and synchronicity as found in the archetypal world of the unconscious. In this section we sense the dark presence of the chthonic mother, the earth mother who has been marginalised into the hardships of running a farm single handedly. We trail the motherlands of nature. This section is a response to the wholeness of nature, dealing not only with human consciousness but also the landscape of the unconscious. Things can happen beyond our conscious comprehension. In a Wordsworthian way Montague has entered the world of intimations and intuitions, he has become a type of nature's child so to speak.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

(Ode Intimations of Immortality, William Wordsworth, The Penguin Poetry Library 1992, Selected Poems, page 209)

It is as if his information is coming from unknown sources. It is a world of immeasurable extent. But we must remember our dreams are asking us to remember. Our dreams are constantly saying things to us beyond our conscious comprehension. We generally accept that fears, moods, plans and hopes come to us with no visible causation. We often say and do things whose significance we only realize later. We often write poetry whose true meaning comes to us at a later date.

THE BREAD GOD, section III, as Montague states at the opening is: "A collage of religious misunderstandings, a journey into the religious divide of Protestant and Catholic". The BREAD GOD opens onto a Carleton's Christmas Landscape. Montague recalls the Midnight Mass at Christmas as described by William Carleton, in Vol. I page 346, "Traits And Stories of The Irish Peasantry". The whole landscape lights up with the torches all converging to one point where Mass is celebrated in the open air.

William Carleton describes that remembered Christmas:

“ A blazing flambeau of bog-firs, all streaming down the mountain sides, along the roads, or across the fields, and settling at last into one broad sheet of fire. Many a loud laugh might then be heard ringing the night echo into reverberations; mirthful was the gabble in hard guttural Irish; and now and then a song from someone whose potations had been rather copious, would rise on the night-breeze, to which a chorus was subjoined by a dozen voices from the neighbouring groups”. (Carleton 346)

In the opening section of *THE BREAD GOD*, Montague responds to Carleton’s Christmas descriptions. Again we witness the journey over and back in time. Montague takes up the pen to chart the winter landscape of Tyrone at Christmas in the 20th century.

“ Lights outline a hill
As silently the people,
Like shepherd and angel
On that first morning,
March from Altcloughfin,
Beltany, Rarogan,
Under rimed hawthorn “

(*The Rough Field* 25)

Montague links the Christmas celebration of the William Carleton’s age with his own experience of the “Gray country chapel with gas-light hissing”. The sap of another generation is going through its winter solstice ritual from the outdoor of Carleton’s winter landscape to the inside of the dark gray chapel. Out of this rough rural landscape its people emerge. Montague continues to deal with the age old archetypal need of a people determined to find the gods or a God. It is an inward eye of man and his need to find a god, a journey along the primordial patterns of ancient man. I feel I

should introduce Patrick Kavanagh here. In his long poem “THE GREAT HUNGER”, Patrick Kavanagh de-romanticized rural Ireland. He dealt with the hardships of the Irish peasantry in the drumlins of County Monaghan. His character descriptions are similar to Montague’s, a people belonging to a landscape and forever caught in its rough grip.

“ Maguire knelt beside a pillar where he could spit
Without being seen. He turned an old prayer round:
Jesus, Mary and Joseph pray for us
Now and at the Hour. Heaven dazzled death.
Wonder should I cross-plough that turnip-ground.
The tension broke. The congregation lifted its head
As one man and coughed in unison”

(Kavanagh 85)

When one reads the above lines of Kavanagh from “THE GREAT HUNGER” and compares them with Montague’s description here below from “THE ROUGH FIELD”, I feel you will be convinced of the similarities of approach:

“Hesitant step of a late comer
Fingers dip at the font, fly
Up to the roof of the forehead
With a sigh.

On St. Joseph’s

Outstretched arm, he hangs his cap
Then spends a very pleasant mass
Studying the wren-marked heads
Of his neighbours, or gouging
His name in the soft wood

Of the choirloft, with the cross
Of his rosary beads”.

(The Rough Field 26)

The similarities of approach on this subject matter is noteworthy. The male character in both poems exercises an indifference to the religious ceremony. One spits in the corner another cuts his name on the pew.

Whether it be Kavanagh or Montague, both poets know and recognise the patterns and ancient needs of a people. They recognise:

“ the grey and grief and unlove
The bones in the backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them” (Kavanagh 92)

Place names are important here. Altclonfin, the height of the white stone. Montague’s journey in poetry takes him beyond family and political history to the deeply felt Dinnseanchas where Irish place names and mythological associations with mountains, rivers and lakes are poems waiting to be discovered. Landscape dwells within Montague’s psyche. The impression the landscape makes is at the very depth of Montague’s poetry.

The Severed Head section of The Rough Field takes us to the Orpheus Section. A movement from the conscious to the unconscious. This section deals with loss. The loss of a people of the linguistic domain of Gaelic. Also the loss of place. In the opening lines the poet is on the move through the landscape marked by the visual and the acoustics of farmyard noises: “ hollows of sweet grass”, a well, a collie dog barking, a farmyard with raw-necked turkeys. A changing landscape:

“ Barney Horisk noted, “ leaning on his sleán he ponders awhile:

“ and think of all the people
Who have bin”

Like shards

Of a lost culture, the slopes

Are strewn with cabins, deserted

In my lifetime. Here the older

people sheltered: the blind Nialls,

Big Ellen, who had been a Fair-

Day prostitute. The bushes cramp

To the evening wind as I reach

The road's end. Jamie MacCrystal

Lived in the final cottage, (The Rough Field 34)

Montague's sense of place leads him to a unique reading of the social and cultural history of his people. In the above quoted section Montague returns to "The Dolmens Round My Childhood", poem . Although this time the dolmens are reduced to shards, "deserted in my lifetime". He enlists a lifetime friend of his, Barney Horisk to make the observations. I was privileged to meet with Barney Horisk in the company of the poet John Montague in summer of 1995. Barney Horisk has since departed. The mood of the opening of this section is one of a sense of loss and a changing landscape and people. Dolmens, standing stones, are signposts, to the unconscious world and the darker side. Such archetypes that appear in myths, fairytales and dreams. They hark back to a time of tribal history handed down from generation to generation by oral tradition.

Montague ponders the mythical world of his ancestors. He is working his way back to the unknown world of the psyche, back to the psychic life of the primitive tribe. What Montague is really saying is that the psychic life falls to pieces when it loses the mythological heritage. Is he saying something important about present day Ireland? Is Montague's poetry enjoying a new relevance in the Celtic Tiger age where secular values are fast replacing old traditions? There is sufficient evidence to be found in our

social and cultural behaviour to illustrate we are not a happy people. We have only to read the newspapers, listen to the news headlines to discover how quickly we have changed. We have to face our growing numbers of suicide cases, the increase of violence and murder in our society. Our psychic world appears to be falling to pieces. Is it a question of the catastrophe of forgotten knowledge and our great need to recover from it? This is the renewed relevance of Montague's poetry. He is constantly reminding us we have forgotten too much and too quickly. Montague borders the unconscious. He is standing somewhere between the age of reason and a darker side of a more primitive past. If we take this physical landscape of Montague further backwards in time, we will arrive at the darker side of the psyche. I feel what Jung described as "archetypes" are lurking in this manuscript. The whole purpose of writing "The Rough Field" is to illustrate to the reader the great need for renewal, a renewal of the skill of reading the landscape. It is suggested this skill is partly lost and needs to be reawakened. A landscape of Irish place names forgotten like the language itself. The whole area of DINNSEANCHAS, the knowledge about and meaning of place-names has been passed over like the Irish language itself. Here the journey across the landscape takes the poet to the issues of the Irish language. It is a journey over and back in time with a spark of hope for its survival: "Tá an Gaeilge againn arís". (The Rough Field 35)

Section 3 of THE SEVERED HEAD deals with the fall of O'Neills and consequently the fall of the Northern stronghold of Gaelic rule. Again the poet sticks to his history lesson outdoors. The landscape manuscript turns to the pages of political history. We are taken to the coronation stone of the O'Neills. The rites of passage of Irish chieftains took place at certain geographical marked areas usually a large stone marked the spot. This rock is a pointer in history to the O'Neills final defeat:

" In the wet meadow near

His broken coronation stone

From Tullyhogue
He rides to Mellifont
To kneel for an hour
Before the Lord Deputy” (The Rough Field 37)

The O’Neills have lost political supremacy, the Flight of The Earls is imminent and the Ulster Plantation is at hand.

LANDSCAPE OF PILLAGE

Section IV of THE SEVERED HEAD deals with the lament of defeat. The fiddle-player warms up with a hornpipe or a reel but moves to the slow climb of the lament. A lament for a landscape that has been pillaged: “ burnt houses, pillaged farms, a province in flames”. Here the poetry of lament for the Gaelic order lies between two snippets of primary source materials, beginning with the Annals of The Four Masters and concluding with an account of Chichester to Mountjoy, Spring 1607. It is a lament sandwiched between the hard facts of history. Section V of THE SEVERED HEAD is particularly moving as it suggests the harsh psychological damage at the loss of a mother tongue and the loss of place-names in Gaelic. The landscape is about to change its place-names. The task of having to learn a second language is dealt with here.

*To grow a second tongue, as harsh a humiliation
As twice to be born.* (The Rough Field 39)

Montague bisects the page to give graphic illustration to this great divide. Here we encounter the collective upheaval and the move and slow progress towards a new language. In the final part, section VI of A SEVERED HEAD, we encounter a unique language , that of Hiberno English. Montague does not have to leave his county Tyrone, for a fitting example of this linguistic evolution. William Carleton, a native of Co. Tyrone and author of “Traits And Stories Of The Irish Peasantry”, wrote in Hiberno-English. Carleton describes his mother’s reference to English words. She said English

words were like a man and his wife quarrelling. The best example of Hiberno-English can be found in the words of William Carleton himself. Carleton lived in Co. Tyrone when his people were beginning to abandon the Gaelic and were starting to speak their own version of the English language.

“ I heard them as often, if not oftener, in the Irish language, as in the English; a circumstance which enabled me in my writings to transfer the genius, the idiomatic peculiarity and conversational spirit of one language into the other” (Carleton Autobiography 19)

The names of places alter with the coming of the plantation. New place names crowd the landscape. Place names from a different tongue with new sounds: *Bloody Brae* , *Routing Burn*, *Spur Royal* and *New Town Civil*. Here Montague is dealing with the emergence of a New Ulster. It is not just about a loss of one culture but of the integration of the old with the new:

“And what of stone-age Sess Kill Green
Tullycocker and Tullyglush?
Names twining braid Scots and Irish,
Like Fall Brae, springing native
As a whitethorn bush?”

(The Rough Field 40)

Here we recognise the fall of a language but also the integration of new place names and the twists and turns that bring renewal. It is the debris of the past with the seeds of crops to come. The mechanics of this section resemble a circle coming and going. It compresses the 17th. Century in Ulster and the Plantations. Individual and family developments wheel past. Multiple meanings are present. Characters and motifs emerge. Themes are recognisable. The genesis and mutations of place names journey forward. Montague’s “ Rough Field” is a history fading in and out of the landscape of

Tyrone and its environs. Its prehistoric, historic and legendary evidence he reaps from the landscape. Its technique at this point reminds me of James Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake". When one recalls the opening lines of "Finnegan's Wake":

"riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and environs."

The Rough Field is river like. It is not lineal in its approach to change. It is cyclical in its approach and technique and space and time are fluid. Like a river it meanders into the sea, condensation occurs, it falls as rain and the cycle begins again. We follow the topography of the Tyrone landscape to the new world of America where John Montague was born and where the Irish fled in their thousands during the famine. And back again in Tyrone Montague as abandoned child faces the obstacles that come his way. This collection of poetry is always on the move. The landscape is dense. Time scrolls the ancestral earth. Montague deciphers for us the forgotten language of clay. And this reminds us of the opening of Patrick Kavanagh's long poem "The Great Hunger", with the unforgettable opening line "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh". What I am getting at here is that I wish to sandwich The Rough Field somewhere between James Joyce's, "Finnegan's Wake" and Patrick Kavanagh's Great Hunger. Its literary importance merits this placement. In the Rough Field, Montague takes the reader away from the stark realism of The Great Hunger to the borderlands of "Finnegan's Wake" and the unconscious. In Section V of The Rough Field we move towards revolution and the

reader is introduced to the republican activities of John Montague's father. Here the land vomits up artillery:

"A generation later, the only sign
Of your parochial struggle was
When the plough rooted rusty guns,

Dull bayonets, in some rushy glen

For us to play with”.

(The Rough Field 43)

Again Montague reads the history of Tyrone in the landscape. The landscape is a manuscript of history as is evident in the following lines:

I assert

A civilisation died here;

It trembles

Underfoot where I walk these

Small, sad hills.

(The Rough Field 45)

The journey now turns to America where John Montague’s father flees to escape the implications of being captured back in Co. Tyrone because of his involvement in the IRA. He is given a job in the Subway. A place of employment with extraordinary poetic undertones. This Nekyia or journey to the underworld takes us to Montague’s great poem about his father, “ The Cage”. The subway is of course a classic image of the unconscious. His father is now back in the womb of the earth. There is a type of childish helplessness about him. In modern day we might look on it as a motif for depression. The opening line is direct and simple:

“My father, the least happy

Man I have known. His face

Retained the pallor

Of those who work underground”:

Montague’s father worked underground in the NEW YORK SUBWAY. This image revives the old Greek theme of katabasis , the necessity to go down if one wants to heal a wound. His father’s descent is not easy. The anguished look on his father’s face. “ The

most un happy man". His father is a figure in a different landscape : An Underground Man. His masculine model is an underground man. This is a core issue in his poetry. He is a ghostly father attached to the underground with all the Dante implications. The underground, cellar, dungeon, cave are all familiar symbols in literature and are all related to one another. Places to or through which people descend to break taboos. Orpheus arrived there. Montague's father is at work there in the real sense. The poet as son examines the issues that took his father underground.

Montague's father is at work in the womb of the earth.

The myth of the earth eating people is everywhere in ancient mythology. The womb of the earth gives birth. We return to the womb. The death direction is the same as the birth direction. In the immortal lines of Patrick Kavanagh: " The womb and tomb press lips in fondness like bride and groom".

(Patrick Kavanagh The Complete Poems,The Ploughman 63)

Montague's father works in the womb of the earth or the tomb of the earth. The subway is a huge image. Metaphorically speaking he is caught in the Earth Mother. How to escape from her is the big question? It conjures up all the old stories of the afterlife. If the heart weighed more than a feather, the dead person was likely to be eaten on the spot. Montague's father's underworldly life of going to work in the subway unearths a haunting figure. This underworld component gives Montague the poet an invitation to sound out the voice of his dark side. Many times men and women have descended into the underworld without knowing it. In modern day living we constantly hear of treatment clinics for people who have descended to the underworld and need to escape. The underworld can be perceived as a metaphor for depression, alcoholism, drug addiction. Montague raises the poem up from the underground and gives us images of a more Arcadian dimension when his father returns to Tyrone and they walk along the fields together but he abruptly dispels any display of sentiment when he

parallels his relationship with his father with that of the Homeric reference to Odysseus and son Telemachus.

“When he came back
We walked together
Across fields of Garvaghey
To see hawthorn on the summer
Hedges, as though
He had never left;
A bend of the road

Which still sheltered
Primroses. But we
Did not smile in
The shared complicity
Of a dream, for when
Weary Odysseus returns
Telemachus should leave”.

The final stanza of “The Cage” has a Kavanagh-esque ring to it. It reminds me of Kavanagh’s poem, “Memory Of My Father”. Both poems harbour an aloofness. There is a sense of separation in the relationship.

“Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered”. (Kavanagh 69)

When you compare Kavanagh's lines with Montague's concluding stanza of *The Cage* you will get a sense of a similar tone.

“ Often as I descend
Into subway or underground
I see his bald head behind
The bars of the small booth;
The mark of an old car
Accident beating on his
Ghostly forehead” .

(*The Rough Field* 46)

In the *A GOOD NIGHT*, section of *The Rough Field*, Montague takes the reader to *The Last Sheaf*, to spend a drunken evening, full of old songs and childhood memories in Tyrone. Packy Farrell gives a rendition of “ *The Bonnán Buí*”, a famous lament for the yellow bittern, a shy bird of the boglands, now extinct and supposedly fond of the drink. The poem was originally written by Cathal Buí MacGiollaGunna, a wandering poet, living the life of a tramp. The poet was born in Fermanagh or West Cavan, both counties claim him. What is most important about this poet and his place in Montague's *Rough Field* is the whole notion of displacement, the Bardic Order of poetry collapsed after the Flight of The Earls and poets were forced out on the roads to wander and recite their work at street corners or crossroads. Many might say this was great for poetry and the freedom of verse as poets of the Bardic persuasion were political and part of the ruling class. The fact that the local singer is called to “say” the song of the *Bonnán Buí*, is sufficient to sound the importance of the past and how it is recalled and given notoriety and part of the drunken detail of the night. The opening verse of the *Bonnán Buí* is as follows:

“A bhonnán bhuí, is é mo chrá do luí

Is do chnámha críon tar éis a gcreim,
Is chan díobháil bídh ach easpa dí
D'fhág tú' do luí, ar chúl do chin;”

From page 25, *Duanaire, na Meánteistiméireachta, Fólens. Caoimhghin Ó Góilidhe.*

Tom MacIntyre, gives a lively translation to this poem:

“ Sickens my gut, Yellow Bittern,
To see you stretched there,
Whipped – not by starvation
But the want of a jar”

(*Blood Relations*, Tom MacIntyre)

It is noteworthy that Montague returns to the motif of The *Bonnán Buí*, The Yellow Bittern in section VIII of *The Rough Field*, where *The Patriotic Suite* is dedicated to Seán Ó Riada. Here he deals with the Easter Rising of 1916 and in general the revolutionary cause in Irish history and ties it up with the “lost cry of the yellow bittern”.

“The pathos
Of the last letters in the 1916 Room,
“ Mother, I thank ...
A podgy landmine,
Pearce’s swordstick leading to a care-
Fully profiled picture.
That point
Where folk and art meet, murmurs
Herr Doctor as
The wail of tin
Whistle climbs against fiddle and

The *bodhrán* begins -

Lost cry
Of the yellow bittern! ”

(The Rough Field 64)

This is another poignant example of the acoustic landscape of John Montague, where the poet and his heart felt motif of “the yellow bittern” laments.

In section of A Good Night, Montague offers a history of the location of townlands and how the wanderings of a mountain stream divide the landscape into townland divisions. As is to be expected we can rely on Montague’s insistence on the unfolding nature of the landscape even at moments of inebriation when the poet staggers home after swapping stories till cock-crow in a mountain cottage. It’s as if the landscape is an obsession with him that refuses to go away even at the unearthly hours of the morning.

Lured towards sense by the
Unseen rattle of this mountain
Stream, whose lowlands idling
Define my townland’s shape”.

(The Rough Field 52)

Mythology and place converge to tell the tale of the legendary trout. Here Montague tells us of a magical moment in his life when he attempted to guddle the trout. Guddling trout is a rare practise. It involves catching a trout by the hands. It enlists several skills, sensitivity and great patience. It requires you find a stream knee deep with a good flow of water and large boulders. The trout are always facing upstream. With absolute silence you wade your way behind the trout and slowly you lower your hands and eventually you start to tickle the trout.

“Legend

**Declared a monster trout
Lived there, so I slipped
A hand under the fringe of
Each slick rock, splitting
The skin of turning froth
To find nothing but that
Wavering pulse leading to
The central heart where
The spring beat, so icy cold
I shiver now in recollection,
Hearing its brisk, tireless
Movement over the pebbles
Beneath my feet ...**

Was that

**The ancient trout of wisdom
I meant to catch?**

(The Rough Field 52)

Another time Montague claims he was more successful:

**“As the curve of my hand
Swung under his body
He surged, with visible pleasure”**

(NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 15)

This poem “The Trout”, is open to many readings and appears to be playful with a wide range of Irish poetic vision including Yeats. I will leave it for another day as time and

focus do not allow me to dander here.

DISPLACEMENT

The relationship between mind and landscape is evident everywhere. We project onto the landscape. What we unconsciously project on to a place is most interesting. It is generally accepted we carry psycho-geographical baggage from one place to the next. As we travel from one place to another, our psychic bags are full of one place. Our understanding of our own place informs us of the other. Sometimes we may feel a certain place is getting us down. It's like saying to ourselves "I'm sick of this place" or put more crudely "This place stinks". In a place we may feel out of place. We may feel ill because we have been forcibly displaced against our will, as Africans were by the Europeans who enslaved them. We may feel ill because we have been kept in one place. There are many varieties of geopathology. Montague's "Rough Field" journeys over and back this terrain of placement and displacement and it is a note worthy subtext of this section.

The whole landscape is associated with memories of childhood where John Montague robbed bees' nests and the final section, section V, takes us to the Showband Age and the Ballrooms of Romance. Here we can sense social and cultural change is around the corner:

**"An industry built
On loneliness, setting the young
To clamber over
Each other, brief as mayflies
In their hunger
For novelty, for flashing
Energy & change " ...**

HYMN TO THE NEW OMAGH ROAD, SECTION V11, deals with human loss

and gain as a result of the arrival of modern technology. What is lost and what compensates for this loss? We are given the illusion of the New Omagh Road. The reader journeys along the rational conceit of it all but a loss of vital contact with the unconscious is evident. The New Omagh Road leads to modern technology. Further down that road lie the mobile phones, e-mails and text messages. The New Omagh Road leads to modern displacement. In this poem we have a reconsideration of cultural differences. If we have superior technology, it does not follow we have superior humanity:

Loss

**Item: The removal of all hillocks
And humps, superstition styled fairy forts
And long barrows, now legally to be regarded
As obstacles masking a driver's view.**

Gain

**Item: The dead of Garvaghey Graveyard (including my
Grandfather) can have an unobstructed view – the trees
Having been sheared away for a carpark – of the living
Passing at great speed, sometimes quick enough to
Come straight in.**

(The Rough Field 59)

The poem is not just about the value systems of old and new. The subtext seems to indicate that this new road, this techno-pathology, (a made up word of mine) to indicate our obsession with high technology today will lead us towards homogeneity and away from the uniqueness of the individual. Another reading of this poem is the conflict between the ego and the unconscious. We must be careful not to lose the spirit

of a place. We are housed in that place we call our psyche.

SECTION VIII, THE PATRIOTIC SUITE, deals mainly with the revolutionary spirit of the first two decades of the 20th. century in Ireland. Here Montague the poet questions such risings as the 1913 Lockout and Larkin and Connolly. It is a sharp assessment: “All revolutions are interior

The displacement of spirit

By the arrival of fact,

Ceaseless as cloud across sky,

Sudden as sun.

Movement of a butterfly

Modifies everything”.

(The Rough Field 65)

Section V, IM of Mairtín Ó Cadhain deals in general with the revolutionary movement .

The drama moves from city to country from 20th. century back in time. Montague is back in the landscape of the hills and rocks, the last refuge of revolutionaries and gun runners. In subtle verse he paints a history of Irish revolutionaries confined to the hills and brought into the open streets whenever the urge or mode of fashion demanded:

“The tribes merged into the hills,

The ultimate rocks where seals converse.

There they supped rain-water, ate sparse

Berries and (grouped around pale fires

At evening) comforted themselves

With runics of verse”.

(The Rough field 66)

The conflict in this piece is held together through a sense of place. It is a conflict of town's people versus those in the rough countryside.

A train journey between Belfast and Dublin continues the dichotomy of urban and rural landscape. We meet the sprawling town where:

“Row after row of council cottages

Ride the hill, curving up to the church

Or down to the docks

Where a crane tilts into emptiness.

Here nothing has been planned- (The Rough Field 66)

This urban and poorly planned industrial landscape gives way to a more traditional landscape and soon the train is running through:

... Summer fields

Where a roller is at work

Bruising neat stripes of corn

Under hawthorn hedges, patterned in white flame.

(The Rough Field 67)

Montague's visit to Coole Park, site of the residence of Lady Gregory, initiates the debate that is still ongoing regarding the Irish Government's policy to postcolonial landmarks. Only last night (26-11-2008, TG4) I viewed a programme on television

(John Henry Foley – Ghost Of The Empire, directed by Sé Merry Doyle. Producer Jackie Larkin, Loopline Film)

in relation to the much neglected sculptor, of John Henry Foley (1818-1874) , famous for his statues of Burke and Goldsmith, now outside Trinity College and of course the statue of Queen Victoria, shipped out to Australia in the 1960s. As stated in the preview,

(RTE GUIDE, week 26-11-2008 , TG 4 programme)

the film acts as a metaphor for the break-up of our cultural mindset. Montague's tantalising line: *Now we own the cow, why keep the cream?*, (*The Rough Field 67*) opens a similar Pandora box.

MOTHER NATURE & THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL IN MONTAGUE'S POETRY

Apart from this progressive development of place and time "The Rough Field" is a meditation on mother nature. Mother nature as a Muse figure or Nature itself. I believe John Montague to be a Muse-poet deeply interested in the language of poetic myth as explored by Robert Graves in his great tome "The White Goddess". In the dedication to this great book Robert Graves writes:

" All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean-
In scorn of which I sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom I desired above all things to know,
Sister of the mirage and echo".

(*The White Goddess*, by Robert Graves, Faber & Faber,
paperback, 1961, In Dedication, opening page)

Like Robert Graves, Montague is out there in search of this mysterious Muse. It's as if Montague is seeking a magical language bound up with ancient ceremonies. I feel "The Rough Field" has archetypal concerns. This personal epic is a mixture of rhetorical directness and a harping back to the past. A poem about landscape that is given to thinking and feeling. Montague travels a road that dips in many directions.

A BROAD OUTLOOK ON THIS TOPIC

The voyage of discovery

Lies not in finding new landscapes

But in having new eyes

Marcel Proust.

The anima, the internal female side of the male personality is an accepted aspect of Jungian psychoanalysis. At this stage in the essay I wish to confront Montague's inner image of woman, his anima and to show how this inner image is identified with the connections he makes with the landscape. Personification of the landscape was most definitely a practise in the past. The etymology of the word "MATTER" is a key to this proposal. The word "MATTER" derives from the Latin word "MATER", meaning mother. Hence phrases like "Mother Earth", "Mother-Land", seem reasonable. This image of woman is often mirrored in our perception of the landscape. The Gaelic word "Cailleach", meaning hag, is a familiar word in the place-names of Ireland eg. *Ceanna na Ceallach* (Hag's Head), the Southern most tip of the Cliffs of Moher and *Slieve na Caillich* (The Hag's Hill), at Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, where the megalithic tombs predate the arrival of the Gaelic language to Ireland. This type of personification of the land and the physical features is an ancient practise.

"Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that woman, but a definitive feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of the man, an imprint or "archetype" of all ancestral experiences of the female".

1Jung, "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship," *The Development of Personality*, CW 17, par . 338.

(The Sacred Prostitute ", Nancy Qualls-Corbett,
Inner City Books, Toronto, Canada, page 89.)

The wild essence of nature is connected to man's anima, woman's animus and both in

turn lead us to the world of mythology. Here we meet the creation of gods and goddesses. From our needs we create them. Out of our fear we create them.

“ We should not forget that these mother goddesses are also connected with the concept of matter, for not only is the word itself connected with the word mother, “ mater”, but the whole projection of matter.”

(Alchemy, An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology, Marie Louise von Franz)

This wild essence that inhabits nature has been called many names down through the ages. She appears in different places. *La Que Sabe, The One Who Knows*, as Clarissa Pinkola Estés, writes in her book entitled: *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. She has other names: Hecate, the Greek goddess at the crossroads or the Russian Baba Yaga.

By whatever name her force may be personified, she has become an archivist of our soul's intention. She is the far seeing eye of the Old Crone, (*Cailleach* in Irish). This old crone, the one who knows is within us but we must make an effort to find her. She stands between the world of rationality and mythos. She is somewhere to be found in our imagination. We recognise her in music, poetry, dance and the visual arts. She is ageless as in Walter Pater's description of the Mona Lisa. She exists in many guises in our imagination. Carl Jung, the psycho-analyst, located her in the COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS, where Biology and Psychology mingle. She reigns supreme over the landscape of the soul. This landscape transmits great creative energy. Montague arrived at this destination. Montague is never part of the war for power between genders. He is drawn to the ecstatic energy of the feminine. The mother in this poem MIDNIGHT MASS has an honoured place at the centre. At the centre of a more ancient mythology perhaps? Her greatness has been lost in the landscape. Montague challenges our understanding of modern day psychology and our mythological past and in ways it can be argued he integrates these two greats.

MONTAGUE'S CRONE (*Cailleach* in Irish)

The crone traditionally carries all the knowledge of the tribe in her memory. For most people it takes a lifetime for the psyche to find its relationship to the goddess. She appears in the psyche in her threefold nature:

SOMETIMES VIRGIN SOMETIMES MOTHER SOMETIMES CRONE

It is the crone that our culture has so brutally repressed. The wise woman, the healer, the transformer has been one of the greatest threats to the patriarchal world. In the middle ages many were burned as witches and some were the most gifted of people. She controlled the cycles of life and death. Christianity retained the feminine as virgin and mother but eliminated her role as crone. John Montague's poetry reopens negotiations with the mythical plane. Mythologically there is not one goddess but several as listed:

MOTHER NATURE IN A BROAD SENSE OF OUR UNDERSTANDING

BABA YAGA	Russia
Kali	India
Rangda	Bali
Persephone	Greek
Lilith	Bible
Ereshkigal	Sumerian

Montague does not create a sentimentalized version of the goddess. His goddess is closer to the fierce intelligence of the adult.

I yet sing

Of the goddess mutability

Dark Lady of Process

Our devouring Queen

(From the poem *Gone, The Dead Kingdom, 19.*)

Montague can tame the crone energy. Taming that energy can take years of conscious living. Montague is an instrument ready to receive the crone. He is receptive, alert to what is coming from inside and out. Listening with an inner ear, seeing with an inner eye. He has the gift of letting go. The crone knows the truth will set her free. The crone has no expectation now. Montague is able to meet the crone, enter into dialogue with her. Her authority is in her presence. Montague is strong enough to relate to her because he has created an inner container in which his soul is seen and heard by his inner crone.

THE WILD DOGROSE

The “ Wild Dog Rose” resounds with the energy of John Montague’s anima. The “ Cailleach” to us is the Baba Yaga to the Russians. She fits into the wild landscape and is one with it. She is the dark side of mother nature. In the opening verses of this extraordinary poem we see Montague describes the landscape.

The “ hooped figure by the roadside” has a resonance of the Greek Hecate with her dogs at the roadside. Here Montague is confronting the hag within himself. She is the witch at Halloween, the witch in all the fairy tales, in short the universal witch of our imagination. The power of the narrative runs hand in hand with a closer reading of the poet confronting his fears. One particular image in the poem, “ The Wild Dog Rose strikes me as deliberate on the part of the poet Montague. If we take the lines:

“And there
where the dog rose shines in the hedge
she tells me a story so terrible
that I try to push it away,

my bones melting”.

I feel the reader can't help recalling from the depths of Greek mythology the familiar story of Persephone out picking flowers when she was raped by Hades, Lord of the Dead. This is indirect, yet I feel an intentional association on Montague's part, allows the poem to expand and open several levels of reading of this deep poem that will take you on a journey as far as you care to go. The poem lingers on the borders of Hades.

The old crone relates her fierce story to Montague the poet. The narrative unfolds, marked by the wild beauty of a flower in the hedge. This “Shawl of Rags”, as Montague describes her draws us into the realm of the Black Madonna. She is chthonic. We usually associate our shadow side with the dark earth. She is not the blue gowned Virgin herself. Montague gives us the dark side of the mother goddess.

She is not just earthy; she can be depression, despair, dissolution, descent and ...death. She is there to remind us of our fate and eventual extinction. As the poet reminds us:

“I know the colour rose, and it is lovely,
But not when it ripens in a tumour;
And healing greens, leaves and grass, so springlike,
In limbs that fester are not springlike”.

(Dannie Abse, “ Pathology of Colours”, in J. Paul Hunter, ed., The Norton Introduction to Poetry, p. 156. Quoted in: “ On this Journey We Call Our Life” James Hollis . p. 94.)

It is a familiar theme in poetry. Dylan Thomas described it as “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” is also the destroyer of the same flower. William Blake dealt with the same theme in his poem : “ The Sick Rose”.

Every flower unfolding tends ultimately towards withering and decay. Here John Montague's realm is the unconscious. The storytelling of an event of the rape of an old crone borders the unconscious. The mythological image of the external crone is here.

We need to go beyond the literal story and examine the metaphor of the crone, (

cailleach, in Gaelic) . This crone we might call the ancient feminine which we have forgotten through the years of patriarchal culture. In a present day secular world with over emphasis on sports and financial success, (Ireland of The Celtic Tiger), our culture gives very little help to the feminine side of man, the Anima and the male side of woman the Animus. People may think life should bring them happiness. Suffering is not acceptable. But meeting the Baba Yaga, the hag is the real test. We are thrown out of our own milieu into the dark. Montague realises that life deals unfairly with some. Dealing with the hag requires we are in touch with our own life. This *Cailleach*, Montague encounters is similar to the Russian Baba Yaga. Her little hut may not turn on a chicken's foot but she is one and the same hag living in a remote region:

“ The cottage

Circled by trees, weathered to admonitory
Shapes of desolation by the mountain winds,
Staggers into view. The rank thistles
And leathery bracken of untilled fields
Stretch behind with – a final outcrop – “

From “ The Wild Dog Rose”,

Montague takes us to the devouring maw of the hag. She is not as fearsome now. Like he says in the opening of the poem: “ that terrible figure who haunted my childhood / but no longer harsh, a human being/ merely, hurt by event”. Montague's focus is not only on the horrific rape of the hag but how this encounter with the hag is transforming himself. Montague has confronted his fear. The terror and blame that lies in us all is the subject matter in this poem. Out of the rage and grief comes some sort of healing. The poem is an attempt at some type of reconciliation or healing. The crone is at last given some opportunity to relate her horror story. The poet listens. Both initiate a healing process. It is a poem set in a bleak landscape of loneliness and isolation. It is a poem

about external and internal isolation:

“ The only true madness is loneliness.
The monotonous voice in the skull
That never stops
Because never heard”.

It is a bleak landscape of loneliness that leads to dark unmentionable violence:

“In the darkness
They wrestle, two creatures crazed
With loneliness, the smell of the
Decaying cottage in his nostrils
Like a drug, his body heave on hers,
The tasteless trunk of a seventy year
Old virgin, which he rummages while
She battles for life”.

A poem of such magnitude as “ The Wild Dog Rose” leads us to ask questions about the poet himself.

What dragons does Montague battle with? Does he return to his village bearing gifts?

What is maintaining the tension in his work?

Is it a question of forging a new relationship with his sense of himself and of his place?

Is it an attempt to visit the undiscovered landscape of the unconscious?

Is Montague reaching forward into future possibilities, personal, cultural and historical, by drawing the past into the present?

To answer these questions we have to look at the chronological order of his life.

MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN HIS POETRY

The mother-son relationship is almost fairy tale like. The father works underground

and is out of reach. The natural mother is there but gives him away. John Montague has been deprived of this mother presence. He is sent away to his aunts in Ireland.

Montague does not easily forget like many of us. It is difficult for him to forget the shocks of childhood. His mother abandoned him when he was only four years old and sent him back to Ireland to be cared for by his aunts. He becomes an abandoned foundling. The damaging encounter he had with the teacher in National School didn't help and he developed a stammer. I recall John Montague referring to the same in a conversation I had with him in Annamakerrig, Co. Monaghan in 1989.

What was missing in John Montague's life is what is present in his poetry.

The loss of a Mother and a Father. I want to refer you here to one of the sonnets " Primal Loss" in section two of my poetry presentation. To lose a natural mother at the age of four is tragic for the child. There is no one to give affirmation to the sibling. Montague lost a mother, father and a home at a very vulnerable age. Yet this mother is to become a psychic energy in Montague's poetry. This is the drive that takes Montague into a NEW LANDSCAPE. Energy cannot be destroyed. It can only be transformed. That is the first law of the psyche. Montague's pain of loss is his blessing. It is a psychic force to arrive at wholeness. Montague feels cut off both physically and psychologically. He is circling and spiralling for new ways. He is looking at life from every angle, above and below. He is not cut off from his inner feminine, his anima. Montague's poetry is a journey to take him to the inner feminine. Nature has its own laws of maturing. Montague seeks the mother.

Montague's work in many ways is an initiation into the feminine, into what we might call the ancient feminine which I have alluded to early on in this thesis. Montague interweaves his life movements with the stories of the past. He wipes the dust from the Celtic stories and presents them today. This is what drives Montague to old druidic beliefs and stories. In more recent times he goes in search of CROM CRUACH, and

finds him in “ The Plain of Blood”, the final poem in the collection, *Drunken Sailor*, published by Gallery Press, in 2004. His odyssey is heartbreaking at times. Always close to the notion of “ Nostos”, a homecoming. Montague has an intensity and longing for the search for HOME. Montague is dependent on the unconscious and this brings him into a new territory. He encounters the archetypal figures belonging to the collective unconscious. Denied guiding models of both masculine and feminine in the temporal world, Montague moves into the timeless world of the “ Once upon a time”. He in a way is left in a fairy tale realm.

MONTAGUE’S LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL

It is my firm belief THAT John Montague arrived at the landscape of the soul as a result of his Primal Loss, (refer to my sonnet “ Primal Loss 44) his mother’s abandonment of him at the age of four. He pours his heartbreak over the bones of The Rough Field. It becomes the field of his imagination. He is not only interested in the history that he finds recorded in the landscape and place-names but also what’s going on underground. This becomes the subtext of his collection and the song of : THE ROUGH FIELD. John Montague’s plan and structure of his book “ The Rough Field” is in keeping with this old crone as she moves forward and backwards. She is the old bag apron-woman in Montague’s imagination. She is the timeless lady Montague discovers for himself and his readers. It is a question of achieving authenticity as he puts it in one of his essays, quoting Voltaire he says: *You must write what is in your heart, not in your head.* For Montague, poetry is about feeling. *Love is the charge behind the lyric, technical mastery its muscle.*

DINNSEANCHAS

Dinnseanchas refers to the tradition of recording the origin of place-names and traditions, events and special characteristics associated with a particular place. The

mythic and legendary figures of the past were associated with a specific place.

Knowledge of place-names was an important part of early education in Ireland. It was essential knowledge for the Bardic Poets who were expected to recite poems regarding the origin of place-names. Part of the responsibility of the Bardic Poets was maintaining the Dinnseanchas in the collective memory of the people from generation to generation.

Sources of the Dinnseanchas survive and are available in The Book Leinster, The Book of Ballymote and the Book of Leckan. Place names are important to John Montague. In his writing he deals with the old Gaelic place names like “ Altamuskin”, glen of the spongy ground, “ Altcloughfin”, Glen of the White Stone, “ Glencull”, Glen of the Hazel, “ Tullyhogue”, Hillock of the Youths and the inaugural site of the O’Neills of Tyrone from 11th. to the 16th. century. Also Montague takes into account the new place names with the coming of the plantations, eg; “ Bloody Brae, “ Routing Burn”. The anatomy of the landscape attracts his attention. He frames history within the landscape. He cultivates his poetry on the slopes of hills, in the glens and in the naming of these places. For Montague the past is present and looking up at him from the landscape. He knows the physical features by their old Gaelic names. He knows the naming of places is a sacred thing. As Montague once said himself: *Dig deepen in your own garden patch, in whatever garden patch you have been given or you have claimed ...*

(From Adrian Frazer, “ Interview with John Montague”,
The Literary Review 22, 1979.)

Montague sees the landscape as a manuscript and in his case a poetic manuscript. It harks back to a time of tribal history handed down from generation to generation by oral tradition. Montague ponders the mythical world of his ancestors. He is working his way back to the unknown world of the psyche, back to the psychic life of the primitive tribe. As I have already mentioned he journeys all the way back to Crom Cruach.

THE DEAD KINGDOM

“ Near yonder copse where once the garden smiled
And still where many a garden flower grows wild,
There. Where a few torn shrubs the place disclose
The village preacher’s modest mansion rose”

(From “The Deserted Village” Oliver Goldsmith, 21)

Montague recreates similar sentiments in another of his celebrated collections ”The Dead Kingdom”. In this collection he turns his childhood wounds into his muse. Again the Primal Hurt, (the loss of a mother at the age of four), re appears in “The Dead Kingdom”, a collection published in 1984. Here Montague confronts the death and burial of that mother who abandoned him. The collection is an account of the poet’s journey from the South of Ireland to the North to bury his mother. The book opens abruptly, when the poet receives the news from his wife:

John, come in, come home, /Your mother is dead.

MONTAGUE IN ABBEYLARA

John Montague spent his summer holidays with his aunt and uncle Mary and John O’Meara in Abbeylara, Co. Longford . His aunt Mary was married to the local school-teacher in Abbeylara. Here his inquisitiveness about life leads him to a close examination of the midlands and its landscape. By all accounts he was happy here:

In the house at Abbeylara / It was always busy & warm. (The Dead Kingdom 16)

Again Montague is attracted to the landscape:

“ Hedgeless fields
Where I raced naked
Under bent crab trees,
Or pressed my body upon
The loam scented earth”.

(*A Murmuring Stream, The Dead Kingdom, 13.*)

Here Montague was given time to reflect as a young student. He fished in the stream running through the village ... the same waters each dreamer fishes in at night.

Fishing is a kind of dreaming in daylight. A longing for what is below. There are many mysteries in the waters. Poets are fishing just below the surface of things. Always thinking in images with a tune of their own. Waiting for some light to come in from the stars. There are many mysteries in the waters:

“ A rod triangle against
A summer sky, life narrowed
To the plop of feeding
Fish, the sudden flurry
Of a bite, huge underjaw
Of pike, or light, slim perch”

(“Red Island”, *THE DEAD KINGDOM 29*)

There is a sense of presence in the landscape in Montague’s work here. It is somewhat similar to Wordsworth. That luminosity Wordsworth felt as a boy walking among the hills. Idyllic holidays spent in Abbeylara, Co. Longford are recalled in the collection “The Dead Kingdom”. In many ways it is feminine. A female principle is at work here again. Montague is on his own psychic ground at last. He is becoming aware of the wild soul from which we are made. He is a poet living at the edge of the mainstream people. In this collection he realizes the need to come to terms with the unfinished business, the poet sent to his aunts to be reared. This is the journey of this collection. This collection is at pains to make some form of reconciliation with his mother who has just passed away. Montague chooses to remember the happy moments of time spent together. The poem *Intimacy* recalls a visit with his mother to the local cinema in Fintona.

(“ Intimacy, *The Dead Kingdom 62*)

This inner landscape of intimacy recalls his mother's peppered history, *the belle of Fintona's Cumann na m Ban*,

("Molly Bawn", *The Dead Kingdom* 64)

a woman who supported the rebel cause and followed the poet's father out to Brooklyn, New York when he was on the run for IRA activities. There she faced the shattering of her romantic dream. I have already referred to the poem, *THE SILVER FLASK* with regard to the William Carleton landscape. Here I just want to look at the intimacy of this poem and how the mother is treated like some kind of priestess ensconced in the back of the car.

"our mother
Stowed in the back, a tartan
Rug wrapped round her knees,
Patiently listening as father sang
And the silver flask went round".

(*The Silver Flask, THE DEAD KINGDOM. 72*)

Another poem of intimacy is *AT LAST*. Here the poet greets his father at Cobh as he leaves the customs and appears. *A small sad man with a hat* greets them carrying a *roped suitcase*. Again we face another journey North travelling through *lush river valleys of Cork, / russet of The Central Plain, landscapes*. Beyond Athlone they stop to have a drink and to listen to a radio broadcast of John Montague the poet. The father signals approval: *Not bad, he said and raised his glass*. It is a return to familiar landscape. As the poet says himself:

That trembling needle

Pointing always North

As Terence Brown points out in his essay on the "Dead Kingdom"

“ At the heart of this book is the North itself, --implacable ---uncompromising, frozen in its tribal fate”

THIS NEUTRAL REALM

Montague gives us a unique description of the Midlands during World War 2. The sign-posts have been taken down to create confusion should a war plane land. Montague perceives the Midlands as easy going: *monotony of our Midlands; / minor roads of memory/ leading past a stone keep/ stranded by history/ an ivy strangled abbey/ near his first home/ where unemployed play/pitch and toss above/ a murmuring stream. It is a forgotten world, sluggish and full of Goldsmithian simplicities.*

Montague true to form invokes mother nature:

“ Across the Bog of Allen

(a sea of black peat,

Our land’s wet matrix)

(*Bog Royal, THE DEAD KINGDOM 25*)

And again the same sentiments are found in the poem ; “The Well Dreams”. Another meditative timeless poem about the feminine aspect of the landscape. The whole area of Mother Earth and worship to the lady is evident as people arrive on pilgrimage to make offerings:

“A rag fluttering like a pennant.

Or a tarnished coin is thrown in,

Sinking soundlessly to the bottom.

Water’s slow alchemy washes it clean:

A queen of the realm, made virgin again”.

(*The Well Dreams, THE DEAD KINGDOM.38*)

This meditative poem ends with the eruption of “ the hidden laughter of earth”.

And the apparent laughter of the monotony of the Midlands continues with the inertia of this countryside where languor and lethargy abound according to the poet. Montague is hard hitting here. One of the reasons for this may be the fact that it was De Valera's Neutral Realm. The Irish Free State was neutral in World War Two.

“The view from the Motte
Of Granáird over a tranquil
Unrushed emptiness, a world
So torpid it woke only to
The tug of the long
Church bell rope, the rasp
Of a donkey's bray”.

(*Slight Fragrance, THE DEAD KINGDOM, 28.*)

HISTORY MANUSCRIPT

The landscape is a history book for John Montague. It does not follow any chronological order. He deals with history on the spot, at the site so to speak. The landscape evokes an instant response from Montague. The *DEAD KINGDOM* follows an orderly route from Cork to Tyrone and the poet deals with the History of Ireland as it pops up on the journey or floats into his consciousness. We come across special events familiar to us all from our history books . Such topics include a long list:

The Great Forests hacked down, goddess Mutability, / dark lady of the process, / our devouring Queen, /,The Bog of Allen, The monastery at Abbeylara, Tullynally Castle,The Children of Lir, Lake Dwelling Crannógs, The Norse invasion and the attacks on monasteries, DeValera's Neutrality during WW2., Ancient Wells and our pagan response, The Black Pig's Dyke, The Border, Cromm Cruach Lord of Darkness,The Orange Order,The Curse of War & The Blessing of Peace, Northern Violence.

Strangely enough he gets through the main chapters of the History of Ireland. It's as if

the poet is locked in the dream of history. Montague revisits the landscape of pillage in the poem “Sword Land”, a poem focused on Clonmacnoise. Here the poet recalls the Norse invasion of Ireland in the 8th. and 9th. centuries:

“Abruptly, a dragon’s head
Projects from the reeds,
The curling angry prow
Of a Viking longship”

(Sword Land, *THE DEAD KINGDOM*.33)

The Black Pig section deals with the North and its problem. In the opening section the poem “The Black Pig” deals with the ancient border. Again Montague is back with ancient mythology. Mythologically speaking a Black Pig routed up a dyke .

“And can still believe in
Some mythic bristled beast
Flared nostrils, red in anger,
Who first threw up, where North
Crosses South, our bloody border”.

(The Dead Kingdom 43)

A Seagull’s View of the town and countryside is an aerial view of this manuscript Montague loves so dearly. The seagull riding inland has a cornucopia of mixed assortments: *rows of shining roofs/ and cars, the dome of a church, the ivy-strangled O’Neill Tower, a Georgian House, the golf-course, one side of the street (Mac Ateer, Carney/ are Irish and ours, and the names across/ (Carnew, MacCrea)/ are British and theirs, a procession Orange or Hibernian.*

(“What A View”, *THE DEAD KINGDOM* 76)

This poem is a miniature history of Northern Island as the seagull flies.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have endeavoured to illustrate the point that landscape is a major theme in the poetry of John Montague. I have referred at length to two major collections of John Montague namely: *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom* to formulate my arguments. I have referred to his many other writings for the same purpose. Montague was influenced by two Irish writers in particular: William Carleton (1794-1869) a native of Co. Tyrone and Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) a native of Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan. Both writers dealt with the theme "Landscape" in much of their writings as I have illustrated. I have shown that Montague was influenced by both of these writers. It is only reasonable to assume that the fact Montague's mother returned her son to Ireland at the precious age of four had a profound psychological effect on the young boy. I feel this primal hurt led Montague to poetry and a deeper perception of the mystery of life in general. A lonely boy, Montague turned to the landscape and it enveloped him. In an instinctive and unconscious way Montague struck up one of the deepest relationships with the landscape. It became his history book, his folklore, his language and tongue as we witnessed in his love and appreciation of the Dinnseanchas. Montague is at home with the feminine aspect of the landscape and he can journey back to that primal mother earth feeling and empathise with the beauty and fierceness of this matriarchal figure as witnessed in his poem "The Wild Dog Rose". Montague is not one for chronological order. His history appears as he journeys and walks the landscape. He is very much aware of the forces of change. Montague's reading of the landscape moves from a pre-industrial Ireland to the sudden changes of urbanization and industrialization. In these sections of his writing he puts down markers and warnings about the great need for forward planning and the importance of not rushing into sudden changes. The landscape, this manuscript Montague discovered must be preserved at all cost. We must never turn our backs on age-old

knowledge and wisdom. Montague's poetry springs from himself, his family, his countries and the world. His work is universal. In the poem "In Dedication" from *A Chosen Light*, 1967, Montague illustrates his ability to strip bare any romantic notions we may have of landscape and a sense of place. Here we find a harsh reminder that the aesthetic of landscape is not ours for the asking. It is given to us and can as easily be taken away. We are often faced with emptiness and the ground at our feet:

The floorboards were gone:

It was clay we stood upon. ("A Chosen Light", 1967.)

The final lines in this essay will naturally go to John Montague and because the title of my work is "Landscape as a major symbol in the work of John Montague", I find the concluding lines in the poem *Windharp* irresistible:

A hand ceaselessly

Combing and stroking

The landscape, till

The valley gleams

A mountain pony's coat.

From the poem *Windharp*,

A Slow Dance, 1975.

THE END.

Thank you for reading my work.

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