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Filíocht Nua: New Poetry

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Siobhán Campbell



Filíocht Nua: New Poetry

PIEBALD

Horses of the others,
the thinkers, the travellers,
tethered on the edge of new dual carriageways,
tied in the blank side of advance factories.
They verge on the flanks of dealers and shakers
where plans end in a thicket of rubble and stumps.
What are they for?

A yelled canter down the scruff-sides of dusty villages,
barebacked warmth sidling
and a hearts-beating thud between your knees—
where mis-remembrance is a dream to nourish,
where promise can out-run irony.
Not the hero horses, beauties black and brave,
who took the warrior to battle and will not return,
these are compromised, misled and confused,
heads too big for their ribcage, scrawny as the
screed of grass they pull.

Yet they must have been there from the start—
round the back of wired-off ruminations.
We pretended not to notice the occasions
when they recalled a field,
the hock-stripping speed of a gallop down a long hedge
where a quiver of legends misted into song
but when they started to gather
in places built to house a desperation,
they seemed to trick our vision of a freedom.

That was a world we lost before it named us—
none of the promise, the clang
of potential,
instead the fetters that hold us to self-interest
the binds that make taxes out of failure.
That was a world lost before we named it,
part of a larger undertaking
to help us understand captivity.
Go back, go back they seem to say
but we have no direction,
rounding again the ring road to the city
as if we know the story behind the story.



CONVEXED

If the eye of Ireland is really Lough Neagh,
is it all-seeing or blinkered down one side?
Does it know the difference between reed beds
and seedy edges, bulrush and sedgeway?
Can it feel the scoring of oars on nights
with a black finish or tell when small
gravel stones are pulled by more than a boat?
Looking up, possibly through us, the lake
feels huge in its land bed as if we could never
know it as scooped from the hand of Fionn
or as pissed from the horse of Aengus.
And if it looks down, is there a swirl from
the eddies, a sucking out of capillaries
as every last drop down to the centre of that
inexplicable body of water slips through
the upholdings of the expert water leveller?

IN THEIR HIGH CHEEKBONES
RUN THE VEINS OF A NATION

Characters choose to resemble the noble peasant.
They look as if they know the value of elbow grease.
Even though their backs are bent with longing,
they may appear taller than they are.

One might willingly tell of the devil, sitting there on her left,
making her write with the wrong, giving Teacher such a fright
he brought the strap down *Whack*. Tied the offending hand
behind her back. Now she's ambidextrous.

Some may say they lived through the Famine,
or at least were sent packing west of the river
where they told stories set by fires in one roomed schools
and caressed the oppressor's tongue.

In this genre, beware of a creeping nostalgia.
Nothing grows resentment better than an acre of stones.
An island passport might land you a tax haven.
Then again it could cost you an arm and a leg.

ABOUT COWS

They shit a lot and at first it is a warm pat
ridged with raised circles as it dries.
Water stopped in its tracks or a viscous jelly
hardening from the outside in.
I think of dying in a pool of shite,
the one my mother meant—
Go take a running leap in the slurry pit for all I care.
We had lost three cats that summer.
Seeing them stiffed, legs rigid and shining
made an art of death.
But this was to be about cows,
their lumbering walk to the gap to be milked
as if they know more together than apart.
They can smell a stream of fresh water from a mile.
They can hear grass growing under the bull.
They hold time in their four stomachs, chewing it down
till the evening milking, feeling the hours move on through.
They do not miss the calves they have had taken.
No attachment is apparent in three days.
Perhaps like the farmer in a unit of money,
they count on exchange.
Cows know their own patch but they'll stray to graze another's.
Swung towards the hedge in rain, heads dripping,
tail swatch taking a rest from flies.
Apparently rural but worldly wise, cows know that loss
is our only measure, expellation a passing pleasure.

COLONIAL DRIFT

Re-naming the institutions.
Counting the freckles between sleeve and sling.
Watching the mountains change colour in time
to the drums.

Matching ghosts to their namesakes,
licking their like out of bricks.
Dismantling the wall
and re-making it as a cube.

Acting surprised
when plates take off across the room.
How many troubled souls to make a poltergeist?

Re-drawing the districts.
Counting the votes due from each house.
Adding in name variations
in three official languages.

Calculating the rate of shift,
taxes due on the living and the dead.

PHOTOS OF THE ISLANDERS

They have forebears. Noses and foreheads
forged with a look that pawns.
They have seen a daughter wither from ill use,
prayed for her, sent bread to her funeral.

There's a welcome stapled to their tongue
and they count your leavings when you're gone.
What we make now must get us through the winter.

What do they see when they look out—
a one who says they are still married to belief,
a one who thinks they are mired in a falsehood?

Is the split at the picture edge
an implication? That they neither do
nor undo.

*

Poverty Isolation Tradition

Pressure comes in threes.
Devout in practice, loved by an unnamed god,
who will they be today?

Who will they be today?
Masked by the strip of archetype,
life as a scene of foreshadows.

*

He wears the dagger tattoo of his father
and his cap, and like him can
twist his eyes into his head
leaving the whites behind.

Losses eddy in lines about the mouth
and when he sits, because his father asks,
to help repair the trawl
he is brinked on the fray of its knots.

*

A line of men along a wall
each of them matched by a pine behind.
They sit and the dry wall presses back
a heritable skill, plucking and picking
by sight and feel. Wall-making by touch.

They all have a hat of sorts,
many a moustache, a verdancy—
though difficult to kiss.

One hat has ribbon bands, the dandy among them—
equally protected and despised.
They share the hill behind until they die
thinking it is theirs.

*

clearing stones the first peoples made the fields
and on nights with a red dusk you can hear them ease
the pain of strained backs, too much bend
how three feet takes a whole night to clear
how the wall begins at the edge with what they sling
the wall begins to keep something in

if you follow a heifer she will show you where there's a spring of fresh water
not everything is old wives' tales

*

just what would fill the head of a goat
we know the fleet of its feet
the bass of its baa
the burr on its coat

when we know the fleet of its feet
the burr of its baa
the bass of its burr
how to turn on a goat
look it square in the eyes
the dare of it

disrespect in the pupil

it can be slit before its hoary time
the flat black capsule of the pupil

slit and hung before its hoary time
how to better a goat
we've passed this down

the only way is to make a pipe we play
from the sac of its udder
then blow a melody out of her

a mournful lament is the only way
to get the better of a goat

is the way we put a pipe in its udder
then finger a melody

put in the pipe
put in the pipe and squeeze a music from the teats