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Writing Sample

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Includes "The village was small," "Passage Two.," "Swallows," "In Clarendon Street Chapel.," "Flight EI139 (from Bucharest to Ireland)," "I've had an end of it!," "Tears," " Surprise.," "In the Bank of Ireland," "A LONGING FOR A BERRY POSSESSED HER," "WATER DOES NOT DROWN," and "BY THE LENGTH OF NINE WAVES."

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Siobhan Ni Shíthigh

Texts and poetry

The village was small

The village was small, its back to the mountains and its face to the great ocean and the horizon far beyond .It lay in a hollow and the road which ran twisting and bending through it rose to greet the mountains and the rising sun,A river ran at its foot where eels slid between boulders showing their silver white bellies in the dark water. Stepping stones took one across and then on to the path to the next village and through a field to an ancient place marked by crosses and a font and where roses grew out of the long grass. It was a time of ruin in the village, the remains of houses were standing silent, gables triangular, small windows framed the sea,nettles grew in fireplaces and briars covered lintels. My friend lived in a whitewashed house , its green paint-blistered door everopen , its floor sanded, its turf fire whiteashed,fragrant. From the up-stairs window of our house I watched the sun set and colour the sky ,I watched clouds darken,strengthen and move high, I waited for the first drops to spatter on the pane and I listened for the wind. I learned to gauge its timbre,its pitch and in a storm its moment of rest. From the front door I looked straight at the great purple cliffs of Ceann Sibéal and wondered at their changing notation in response to sea and sky , sun and cloud. Then there was the everpraying sighing sea,the roll, the cliff-echo ,the dying hiss and moan of wave,the down-beat of oar,the up-pull of wood on water,the song of the naomhóg,the speech of the men,rising and falling like the wave, its cadence clear over water. Close by was the lowing of cattle, the clang of bucket,the trundle of cart,at twilight the shouts of children at play rising higher and higher, the jangle of harness as a horse is loosened,weary –eyed hens roost, a grey goose shifts in her nest,now evening descends,the great sky covering all, gable , bothán and thorn, the jack-snipe calls from the reeds by the river, there the stepping-stones darken in the darker water and the white bellied eels know no rest, I crouch and hide,the stone is cold, I am three or four who knows, the stone is cold, the hair blown face of the cloud –hurrying sky looks down, I crouch and shift, the jack-snipe calls its goat-filled call, hurrying, scurrying,rushing of air,I am found. I am carried all the winding way home, straw showing gold at the edge of doors,and I am safe from the dog-barking night, the prowl of the fox,the scurrying moon and the sigh and sough of the wind in the reeds by the river.

Passage Two. Above the darkening river lights look out from the hill
and we pass and away to the south Mount Leinster stands snow-capped,
fullmoon veiled, glistening, remote, in silent under the milky-way crossed sky,
and we reach the place
the town stands rooted, castle ruined, river-clung, street-creeping ancient-walled spired,
surprise of light-shafted chimney stacks,
roofs glowing purple after rain,
studded evening streams through castellation,
under bridge all is darkness,

willows sigh with the hiss of pain,
swans tread water ,
and the falls fall
stream strength of water,
this catteracting town,
shafted down-wards
tilt of light gleam,
street-light pooling, pooling amber.

And the night calls from this
ramparted town,
King James sheltering,
stabling, hay marketing coal-carting, garrisoned
piked and baynotted town,
the night calls from her cassocked streets
 streets falling and bending to the river
 turning and rising to the hill,
night calls and trees stand
ever-embracing
shadowing ancient doorways
foot-worn granite slabs
and we pass
and the town mumbles in its sleep
night calls stretching and shifting
in lane and alley
 mumbling words without re-call
 remains of the past
going no-where die
with a dieing fall.
Day has dawned
 sun-streaming Granby Row lifts

her face and the hill
calling green green
beechwood wooing ,blackbird knowing,
strawberrybedded shines
Cathedral tower pales
and the rivers face shines like a Poor Clares.

They have ploughed the hill-field,
I can follow each dark furrow
skirting stone and thorn
to its conclusion,
Light streams through cloud
and all is pattern now
 lending shade to shadow
should you return
I'd walk this ground again.

I searched for honeysuckle;
You know where the road dips
and the horizon is lost,
The way demands its own.

*

Swallows

On the breath of morning
The swallows came
from the plains of Egypt,
as sapphire flying
over bright sundrenched cities,
taking rest in bazzars,
under castle walls,
dipping wing in the Seine.
They came,blades of light,
darting green in the yard,

to nest under tin.
The young who twittered
impatiently in the nests
now sweep the sky
with red eye and blue wing,
daughters of the sun,
knights of the air,
who will bring summer
to me again without fail.

Translated from the Gaelic by the author.

*

In Clarendon Street Chapel.

In Clarendon Street Chapel
I watch light glow
on a gilt candle stick
and come slanting
over the sanctuary rail
to the marble hands of a saint
and I think of you,
a Mass being said for dead Carmelites,
the prayer continues for them
and I follow you to the kitchen's end
where I feel the wind
come under the door
and I watch you and hear
the sound of soap on board
turn and turn about
as it deadens in the cloth.
You fold and I fold with you,
I understand the order;
the steeping overnight,
the second wash in the morning,
the wringing, the spreading
on the lawn where sharp light
will bleach.

The prayers move slowly,
Hand in hand we go
through the garden,
around the haystacks,
around and around
and down the passage
beside the wall,
You raise me up,
and up again,
I see the little wren
in its nest,
Your tale of her old so old.
As you lower me down,
I see the dark purple patches
on the back of your hand.

The morning you were ill
I would not go into the room,
and I return now to the
place on the road
at the gap in the Field of the Path,
The prayer stops
and I get word that you have passed.

Translated from the Gaelic by Pádraig O'Snodaigh

*

Flight EI139 (from Bucharest to Ireland)

You speak of deceit
in the cement cities
of the Soviet Republic
and my eye observes your head,
the unyielding brow
and the red shock of hair,
telling of a race
who lived free on the plains,

who believed the spirit
returned incarnate again and again,
and who called their river
after the goddess Danu.

You speak of hunger
and I trace your cheekbones,
I count the shifts that
define your jaw
from chin to ear.
You tell of a time
(when free to travel)
spent labouring in Holland
and how the North Wing
flayed your body.

How refined your hands!
Are you Van Gogh incarnate
come back to suffer
again and again?

The seas are high
this day in January 2008
and the waves shot with green light,
We prepare for landing
anxiety a tremor in your eyes,
our belts fastened
we land,
and from my heart
I wish you well,
I feel so helpless.

In the baggage hall
I catch a glimpse of you,
your frayed jacket,
your small bag,
then you are gone.

I've had an end of it!

You gave me flowers
one morning,
-red dahlias-
I saw the larvae
in the petal folds,
returning after school
they lay in tatters
on the road.

You sent me for a message,
returning at dusk
a dog ran at me
and I threw the satchel down.

I've had an end of it,
I go down the centre
of town today
in summer frock,
Tall, slim, dark,
A secret wind
directs me,
I don't look back,
I recognise the gods.

*

Tears

Long long ago,
bright welcome at the door
long time since
meeting greeting
forever one thought
tears come unbidden dear heart.

*

Surprise.

She sees the sun
on a bird's breast,
a little leap from heart to heart,
an echo
of a wonder that once was
but now far off,
far off, my love.

*

In the Bank of Ireland

Modes of language divide us
and you remain one with your visions,
living in narrow rooms
in the grey black houses
shadowed by the castle's ruins.
The moon a silver coin
shedding light through trees
and you remain in possession of dreams.
Your sacrifice to be seen
in freezing weather
on the roofs of buildings
securing nails,
the cross beams in place.
Your testimony becomes a wonder
in the Bank of Ireland
on a Friday afternoon.
I observe one of you
in the queue,
cement dust on your boots,
a payslip in your hand,
you take a photograph
from the top pocket
of your short jacket.
I see a woman, three children
and a touch of sky

over Vilnius? Sofia?
 Istanbul? Warsaw? Budapest?
 The line extends through
 the porch in one body
 to Court Place,
 this Friday afternoon in Carlow,
 No earth quakes,
 No rock splits
 and I understand your language.

Translated from the Gaelic by Pádraig O'Snodaigh

*

From THE WHITE-FLAGGED STONES

A LONGING FOR A BERRY POSSESSED HER
 No stir of the hand
 To ease the track
 Of tears, to clear
 My cheeks of grief:
 In this kitchen,
 A sudden death
 Of morning.
 I shove aside each vessel,
 Each bitter mould of sour milk.
 Light falls upon my table,
 A blackbird escapes
 Beneath leaves –
 I grasp at the poem:
 I, the bird, the bough.

Turn to me,
 Turn to me,
 My darling brother,
 Turn to me
 With your verbs,
 Sweet as honey, seductive.

In the cry that trembles
Each wall,
Come to me in the wind,
Dew-light kisses on my lips,
Light as branches
In the wind
Of a water-meadow.

Bring me the tide entire,
The sorrowing, aquamarine tide,
Filling and ebbing
In the pulse of night
And night possesses you
From the tombs of the sea,
I carried in the round coffin:
You the great tide
On the white strand
Of my desires.

I saw you beneath rowan,
Your eyes speared
To my own heart.
Honey came in torrents
From Lee blossom;
And my herds rested
In the shelter of green.
I see you again
Beneath that mountain tree:
Above all the stream,
Your teeth pearl white,
Your jet-black curls.
On the highlands
Of your comforting eyes
I see herds of livestock.
In the valleys of Ireland,
Resting herds,
A world of grass
Heavy with morning dew,
A confluence of trees and hill
Where the river bends.

I saw you at cuckoo-call,
A cuckoo called

*And the blackbird followed
With incessant piping
In its hidden grove,
Where the whitened flags
Were deaf as stone.*

*Desire of my breast,
Across the land of Ireland
I meet you still.
I become bright morning
That possesses the poem,
The white mare
Upon a tilled field;
I, the mare; I, the field.*

WATER DOES NOT DROWN

Muadhán my name:
Water cannot drown me,
Nor fire finish me:
It is I who dressed the lovers' bed,
Gráinne and Diarmuid.
I'm the one with the holly-berry
On a hook, the salmon on a spit.
I am not contrite.
Bitter wind is my companion
As I move back and forth
Across the stream:
One tongue and one country
For us alone;
In no epoch
Were we otherwise.
In the heart of the oak wood
We had wisdom, fierce knowledge:
I surrender to my soul,
To the mystery therein.
I honour earth's image
In the face of a flower,

Each bough of a tree,
Each grassy mound,
Beside lakes,
Beside the waterfall,
Beside bogland,
Beneath the cliff,
Over hill and knoll.

I surrender to family,
Chiefs of Ir and Eibhir,
The seven generations,
Fair-haired, heroic,
The dark-haired,
The brown-eyed,
The soft-skinned,
The crimson-cheeked,
The red tribe
Who cross over water
In first dawn-light,
The sweet-speaking tribe
On agile mounts upon grass.
Muadhán my name, servant
Of history.
I do not repent.
It is I who carried the lover
And she grown weary,
On my back over Sliabh Luachra,
Over birch and putrid rushes.
It is I who struggled,
Her weight on my back, my shoulder.
I do not repent.

BY THE LENGTH OF NINE WAVES

I wished to be faithful
As night blew
The moon my way,
Moonlight on tide
As you sailed your boat
To a hidden harbour.
I watched the tide for you,
With fullness of oil, with fire;
The table dressed for you,
Essence of herb and wine.
At night's end,
A voice in silence:
The silence spoke
And we were saved.

I would be faithful
When the sun rose for me
Over crested waves.
Morning opened in streams
Of light
On fertile field and garden,
Laughing with joy
Over tops of trees,
Speeding to my door,
A door I could never close
Against you.
Do not feel offended
By my pride in you,
My boastful walk
In the heart of Munster.
With you
I would cross the ocean
Through winter storms
And foul winds;
But my promise was a lie
As the soft ripe moon
Caressed my fingertips.
It was I lay on the tide,
Ebbing and flowing,
Flowing and ebbing:

A ship at anchor,
You let me sink,
You let me sink,
Me fettered and bound.
Pity me here, suffering!
In my village
There is grief and lamentation,
And White Stones unhearing.

Co-Translated from the Gaelic with Thomas McCarthy (IWP 1978, 1980)
