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Writing Sample

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Selections from *Still This Need*
(Coventry: Heaventree Press, 2009)

**Fledgling**

This is the time of night
when freight trains start to rumble past
and flicker their electric light
and let off their sharp blasts.
I’d just got off to sleep at last,

it seems, but now awake
I want to conjure up a bird,
for you, a lapwing, a corncrake,
a teal – those ones you’ve heard
me list before. Without a word

I’ll bring it to the bed,
this quiet living thing, this gift
of air, and set it by your head,
and add my own and drift
towards slumber. For what else could lift

me off to sleep except
a grounded bird to keep an eye
on our slight bodies – unslept –
exhausted by surprise,
two timid fledglings in the sky?
The Rookery

_for Anthony Taylor, who was burned out, 2005_

He showed me where the rooks had made their nests amongst the chestnut trees behind his house. Weightier noise had not been heard before, the high-pitched lumber of their working calls, to build those nests, to build that fort of nests. And the missiles that we dodged, air defence, sticks and nuts, chunks of bark and shit, and noise, noise their best defence. We hid there in the shelter of the sheugh and let them hush their panicked calls, and let them rest their beaks, their breaths, and let the coastline quieten, until, who knows what set it off – a branch snapped somewhere in the woods, a fallen cone – the black wave buckled into flight, an arch of noise and weight and always looping back.
Cartographers on Errigal

*Nimh*: Poison (Gaelic) *Neamh*: Heaven (Gaelic)

Scatch-grass and slow water, wild-roaming lambs. This is what we take in on the walk through briars and whins, until we start to climb the hulk of rock, moon rock, unfathomable rock, patched in the crimson blood of Balor slain by Lugh, and the quartzite white that cakes its peak and shines a beacon on the glen, and sends the light in bolts across the lake.

The English, when they came here, named it ‘Poison’ and that is how it stands. The two words were the same to them, their vowels different, and too few listened when the troops were sent to take the stock of a shattered farmer: ‘Heaven, this is the place we call heaven.’
The Burial

Despite the fear, the knowing lurch of what he’d lost and could in future lose, there was still the need.

He headed east in spring, Dunseverick, Ballintoy, under the red bulk of Knocklayd, where the road swerved through banks of mottled gorse, and the rock, carved out like a piece of wood that’s lathed and turned, produced the forest park where it had happened fifteen years before: the unforgivable, taken as a given. He bought an ice cream from the vendor and asked himself, *Am I remembered here? Or has it been too long?* He had stood there a thousand times, it seemed, always when the light was high on the lip of the glen, and the cold sent a shudder to the spine and the wind would find its silence. For there was still the need, to stand beneath the trees and smell the soil, the furring bark, and watch the hedge-line redden in the dusk. He closed his eyes and listened to the rustle of the leaves up in the dark, and shivered as it all came back to him: the unremarkable hatchbacks, the pick-axe and the shovels, the way the earth turned easily under the weight of his foot, the edge of the spade. Then the smouldering unrest of the life he’d made.
**Resurrection**

As the cod that’s cooked in a mountain of salt comes out delicate as butter, a fur of disappearances, unrecognisable, so have I buried the book of our lives in the salt mines of Cheshire, twenty miles of white tunnels, two hundred feet deep. I have taken a knife and carved out a shelf and placed there the first time we met, the bar where I read you my poems, the movies we watched, the first piece of furniture you bolted together, the meals that we ate; I have stored them in salt where they will be dry, not feel the touch of blight: these thoughts, these kisses, these places, this memory of a white fish becoming tongue, mouth, throat, disappearing into your body.
The Cycling Geologist

Grenville Arthur James Cole (1859-1924)

Excursion 1: The Gypsy Road

Poland first, and the minerals of Myslenice, then across the alluvial plains, and up through the Tatra mountains, Grenville on the three-wheeled Humber-Beeston, Gerald Butler in the crow’s nest, the old penny-farthing, keeping a fair speed, cutting through limestone, a curious couple, unused to the heat, unused to the local uses of language, when to speak German and when to speak English, and when either would see a slammed door. With the help of strong thighs they entered the Alps, cooled tired muscles in the river at Garam, stopped off to see the mines at Hajnik, at Schopferstollen ran fingers across the silver, two Slovakian boys holding the lanterns, beaming at payment, then the cone at Schladinberg, and the burning coals near Dux (Oligocene, Miocene), burning, still and always burning – how he found the time to note the sediments, scribble down his verses on volcanoes, collect and store the fragments for his students – one thousand and fifty miles in thirty-eight days, Krakow to Coblentz, the legs turning, the tinkle of stones in the spokes, the odd whirr of wheels startling horses. You can never imagine a grimace, a face strained at a hill, but it must have been there. Instead there is only the thought of him smiling, free-wheeling past olive groves, leaning back his sun-hatted head and shouting to Butler in the gods: ‘It is wonderful what amount of rock has to be cut away before you can make a decently artistic mountain.’

Excursion 2: As We Ride

It had been her idea to cycle down the aisle, and Grenville, still so much her tutor, had agreed; it was like they’d cycled from the church and never stopped, honeymoon turned lifelong expedition, France, Germany, Poland and the Balkans, and Ireland too, her homeland and his home. What he made of rocks she made of people: cold and brittle, overwhelming, or, uniquely interesting,
made with the sort of edge that will take three years to understand, such time to stop not known on their itinerary.

Sometimes they grew tired. There is a photograph of her, circa 1900, sheltering beneath a tree, her head resting in her hands, fed up, watching her husband pull off his boot, their bikes stacked on the verge. But she fell in love with Orahova, and so did he, the small town deep between iced mountains, the name they chose for their home in Carrickmines.

Excursion 3: Ireland Student Trip 1903

*Dalradian, Silurian, Carboniferous.*
It was an unknown language for the west, a queer way to talk of Mayo, the gristly bogs of Galway. The boys made notes studiously, and one stopped to snap the teacher’s ‘Roadster’ beneath Croagh Patrick, or maybe he snapped it himself, the tool of the new evangelism, funded by the State, peddling talk of millions east through Omagh, under Slieve Gallion to the Antrim Plateau – *gneissic, Tertiary, Cretaceous.* They rooted around in Kilroot for salts from the Triassic, then belted down to Belfast to chip off basalt from Cave Hill, and on the last day, up at the crack of dawn, they scaled Slieve Donard, watched the light moving barren and brown across the Mournes.
Oh for a last free-wheel, he thought, his legs beginning to seize, his hands locked tight on the bars, (the funding stopped).
Oh for another hundred million years of cycling! A zip down mountains with the wind moaning softly in the pass.
Still Life with Five Nests

I sent a basket containing birds’ nests to your address today. I have some in my own studio too. They are nests of the thrush, the blackbird, the golden oriole, the wren and the finch. I hope they will arrive safe and sound.

Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Anthon van Rappard, 1885.

When we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world.

Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

They are a pallet of pastels: mauve, pink, a tiny speck of rouge. Fluttery, flighty, my fingers pulled the knot out of the string, unpicked the gum, let the brown paper fall, revealing them, cuckolded in their square nest, a selection of wild birds, a coterie of houses. How must he have held them in his hands, cupped them close and listened for some noise of life beneath the shell, a heartbeat nurtured by the warmth of matted feathers. And the cleverness of nests, the toil of days of labouring at twigs and roots, this one a grassy cup, and this a ball of leaves, its strength the folly in its disrepair. This one would be high in the forks of slender trees, lodged fast to the bark in the late May winds. I can only just surmise what is hidden in their tight warmth, a narrative of craftsmanship and brood, daily attachment. A song thrush smashing snail shells for the flesh, a blackbird darting full tilt from the cat. Boys paid fifty cents to prise them from the bushes and the trees, an artist who would collect them, paint them, summon up the birds careering round the cornfields, hold them in his hands against the black canvas: whole, flightless.
The Granite State

New Hampshire, 1845. The Amoonoosuc River tumbles white and grey below Mount Washington, where, like factory-carts in the black pits of the north, they spill towards the summit.

Eight horses, heavy laden with buckets, satchels, notebooks and knives, navigating through boulders on the well-worn path, a stodgy mule taking the rear, hooves cracking on dark flints.

Lyell, the geologist, a butterfly-net pendulating from his saddle like a metronome as they pitch up-hill, hoiks a piece of rock from the tundra and scrapes the lichen delicately onto a glass.

He loves these moments when he gets into the field, caresses the elements, lets his mind feed. He notes how the cloud-shadows unveil the banded colours of the trees, and the lakes shining like silver.

Yesterday, with the kind guidance of locals, he stood in the clearing at Crawford’s Notch, where the land slipped one afternoon and crushed the Willey family without a moment’s notice –

all nine out with the crops, or painting the white fences, thoughts on the evening meal, they turned to see the mountain fall and could not run. They left life in the sudden shift, the glacial past.

Arctic plants and hemlock. Balsam fir, white pine and spruce. He breathes wide mountain air. Still young, he thinks, eyeing the valley, still young enough to change the world again.

He thinks mountains and landscape and lineage. He thinks granite. He is thinking of the Highlands he walked in his youth, of the island of Arran. He sees in the granite the kindred thing.
Reprieve

For the sake of recovery: the county of chalk.
Wind in one furious push at West Kennett
Long Barrow, the river green below and flooded.
Inside, stone laid heavily on stone and recent
offerings: flowers, feathers, marbles, a dead mouse.

We return to light. The horizontal rain ochres
the hay-bales, and sarsens loom like strangers
on the hillside. A smell of hash kicks the air
and disappears. They’re tying ribbons to the trees.
The valley is still. That nothing changed

in a thousand years, heads and parts of bodies
placed here in the darkness, a ritual never
written down or carved in rock, while fields
stayed green and water ran its course, is alien to us.
We alter daily, and find our histories malleable.
At Last

there is some colour in the house.
Quite amazing, how these four daffodils
have made this room so bright, made the blank walls
painted, the light come back into the space.

It’s all so simple. Pick them from the sides
of busy roads, their petals grey with fumes.
Then put them in a jam-jar. Now you’ve made
an ornament, a pet, a fire, a home,

now an installation, a mausoleum.
I never thought I’d love such sentiment,
and did not think I’d dare to talk of pain.
I didn’t want to take the easy slant

on things. Did not intend. But here we are,
a room, one window, four yellow flowers.