

Charm bracelet

'Hibernia' meant the land of eternal winter

And me being me, I go all over Cashel's Rock
looking for signs of nature – clergy and kings not
having half the potency of meadow flowers.

I'm curious about the plants they used for ale,
how honey became mead; how rosemary
and sage made metheglins that Pepys said
Could stupefy, and keep a humming in the brain.

I want to know which strewing herbs they
tossed on floors, pennyroyal against ticks,
hyssop, fleabane, rue for the churches,
mint and chamomile to sweeten air.

The higher you build, the closer you come to heaven
the guide said, but I bent low to the ferns
in the walls, searching the cracks of history
for any clue – wattle marks in the plaster,

a sandstone bull with wings, an eagle feathered
with granite diamonds like the scales of a fish.
It was like following a trail of crumbs, nature
banished to mere decoration;

ornament on the furniture in the museum:
wooden acorns, an oaken swathe of foliage,
an eight-petalled rose. But I kept on looking
stringing a catechism, like collecting charms for

a bracelet: a frieze of grapes on a limestone vine,
a long-stemmed lily whose petals strained
towards God, whose sepals spiraled
back to the good Earth.

It is hard to find her intricacies within the grandeur,
but nonetheless she is there –
the feminine, lifting her lovely head.

Cill Ghrá an Domhain

'We are in the Underworld and haven't figured it out yet. Both inside and outside us. To operate for a second in the Underworld without being annihilated we have to operate from both wonder and grief, at absolutely the same time.'

—Martin Shaw

It's late season, the far end of summer,
just past the equinox, a day of squall,
when finally we take the ferry to the Aran islands.

The wind and ocean so wild, Ursula and I grip
tight the rail, endure the rise and fall and crash of spray,

until Inis Oírr reveals its small harbour of green fields,
grey-stone walls, and soft drifts of rain.

We've been talking of doing this for years. The islands
always out there on our horizon, a trinity of shapes.
So often just three shadows risen from a dark sea

and then on the bright days, the sun glancing
off their cliffs, the light-house rising clear.

But years slipping by where we've let
duty and responsibility get in the way.



The cloud has come in so low, we can hardly see
the lane ahead as Ursula and I cycle out towards
the rust-ruined, run-aground ship her father
photographed her beside when she was a child.

She's speeding on ahead, curving in and out of memory,
while I'm straggling behind among the harebells
and the dwarf blackthorn bushes struggling up out of
the grikes in the rock with their harvest of smoke-blue sloes.



There isn't time to visit Gobnait's chapel
before our ferry sails on for Inis Mór,

but its name follows us, finds me anyway:
Cill Ghrá an Domhain, the church of the love of the world.

Domhain meaning the Earth, and also its people, its countries and
wonders.

Domhain also meaning depth, deeply embedded, deeply
committed.



Of the many things I value Ursula for, most
is how she doesn't judge my mood.
Doesn't diminish, doesn't try to fix.

As friends, we've been companions in wonder
and in grief, the pair of us wearing our century
like a threadbare coat. Balancing on its knife edge, just.

Once, I heard Kay Redfield Jamison say that people who suffer
from depression have less capacity to deny the state of the world.
And I wrote her words down, and kept them close like a charm.

Oh Gobnait, I'll not be denied my love affair with the world,
but like a wounded thing I keep trying to shelter
within briar and thorn. Keep threading grass-stalk and reed,

keep gathering scraps of silver-birch bark and the velvet-soft
stars of beech mast, keep saving small white feathers
to line a fragile nest, only for it all to fray when

on Monday I read of
the heat dome building over America,

on Tuesday, flash-flooding in Germany
has killed 100 people,

on Wednesday, Siberia's fires have released in days
America's entire carbon output for a year,

Thursday brings word of a mysterious
spike in methane levels,

on Friday a third of California's coastal sea-lions
have cancer.

And round it goes again, on Monday I read
the Amazon rainforest emits more carbon than it sequesters.

On Tuesday I hear two million Chinese people
have been displaced by flooding.

On Wednesday I see the floating island of plastic
that drifts perpetually through the Bermuda triangle.

On Thursday I'll be told, on Friday I'll read.
And round it goes again.

Oh Gobnait, you'd weep to see what we've done to your world.



All day the tourists swarm over Dún Aonghasa's
stone amphitheatre like ants in erratic lines of quest,
phones and selfies diminishing the spirits-of-place.

But up on these high cliffs it's clear, we can go no further West.
We have reached the world's end and must turn again,

ours is a crisis of human values, nature's collapse
the manifestation of our mistaken ethics.

Homo sapiens, Homo economicus. We took a wrong turn
and must turn again, evolve: Homo indigene.



With evening the island empties, restores itself.
The last ferry leaves. Something illicit in the way
I climb back up Kilmurvey's hill.

In the stillness of sunset, Dún Aonghasa's stone-temple
has become a wild sanctuary framing endless sea and sky,
a theatre of cloud and light: gold, apricot and charcoal-blue.

The last rays of sun spill a path of liquid gold across
the surface of the ocean. I have no words for such benevolence.

All around me gull cry and beauty.
How limitless it is, our capacity to love.



And nothing more lovely than this journey to the Earth.
The same Earth, I keep saying, as the Medievals saw,

same as the Vikings knew when they named their Gods
for thunder and for spring. Same as Gobnait praised
when she built *Cill Ghrá an Domhain*.

These days I'll tell anyone who'll listen,
about Jung's ideas of *Shadow*.

How it matters so much now that we know
what our culture makes us stow away.

Its shadow letting us deny our harm,
and just as easily subvert any inconvenient emotion.



In the falling twilight I clamber back downhill.
A grey dusk, grey stone descent. Each uneven step

hastening me towards humanity's denouement.
The spell of our narrative nears its end.

The rock-strewn path seems to bookend history,
Bronze-Age Dún Aonghasa at my back,

and across the blackening water, night has already
swallowed the Cailleach's hills, Hag's Head
and the Burren with its ancient sacred caves.

Caves so dark the other senses compensate for blindness,
hearing becomes acute, touch a small rapture.

Caves of sparse relic and votive offering: antler,
oyster shell, amber rings from the Baltic sea,
a wolf's tooth pierced and worn as a totem at the neck.

I carry them, or they carry me over the stumbling rocks –
something like faith – as I head on into the falling night.



Gobnait, if I could do anything at all, I'd brave my arm
into our dark, the way prehistoric women once put their hands
into the bees-nest bole of trees to draw out honey.

So help me Gobnait. All that's left to us now,
is to pull from our *shadow* our fierce love for the world,
lá dheireadh an domhain – until the end of time.

Banais Ríghi, the High King Speaks

'The land is the figure of the great Goddess Anu whom Cormac Mac Cuilleairiáin, King and Bishop of Cashel described as Mater deorurn hibernorurn, the mother of the gods of the Irish.'

—Sean Ó Duinn

I have always thought she looked
her loveliest from here.

Here more than anywhere
she gave herself to me –
this ground our bridal bed.

When I married her,
she gave me her intricacies,

apple blossom, birdsong,
the salmon's rainbow breast,

the white swans
and the white geese.

The word *feis* meant
to sleep with the Goddess,
to be permeated by her.

When I married her,
I became the mountains,
I became the forest.

Her soft rain fell
and I grew as grain.
When I married her,

she turned me copper,
gave me the strength of iron.

She crowned me with
the goldcrest's burnished head.

In her embrace I was kingfisher,
turquoise, emerald, amber.

She released me
as falcon on the wing.

The veins in my wrists
became the rivers of the land,

when anything happens to her,
it happens to me.

It is my relationship with the land
which grants me sovereignty –
this ground our bridal bed.

For her it was strewn with
the creamy-white petals
of elderflower, of meadowsweet.

She never left our bedchamber
without an offering for my palm:

acorn, sea-shell, chrysalis, amethyst,
a hazelnut drilled empty
and open by one of her creatures.

And after her leaving,
the room echoed with her –

a steady incantation

Tuath, Tuath, Tuath

meaning people, meaning place.