

## Forest, Snow, a Train

*Mary O'Donnell*

On the journey from Falun, farmstead roofs  
pulled down the snow, their shoulders  
tucking white sheets  
around ledges and barn doors.

The train hissed along the forest edge.  
Daily sleet slopped in headlines against the glass,  
became a television from the 60s  
lined with interference, sky, snow, tree,  
sky, snow, tree, and the houses—yellow or red—  
whooped a morse code of comfort. Once, the forest  
called out to the train, stop, for heaven's sake, stop!,  
but the crystal weighted spruces were swallowed  
by horizontal lines, the day's deepening hurry.

And it would not stop.

The forest's sharp nose was sniffing our warmth,  
old bones at the edge of a clearing clicked  
with the need for flesh, our blood,  
a fire for the coming night.  
The train pushed on, and the trees larruped  
windy meltings as the carriage sheared south.

On overhead racks, wrapped gifts  
of Swedish glass seemed insincere,  
artifacts in ice, small candles,  
and berried woollen hats and gloves  
for those who waited,  
at home in the dark.

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## Waking

*Mary O'Donnell*

These mornings  
as you make your peace with final days of work,  
you bend over my pillow, kiss me.  
I, bleary-faced, swim in the blue of your eyes,  
could be that new bride, the one  
you imagined you'd married, the treasure  
you risked your life to bring back  
to shore from some foreign place,  
to spend time with on days  
I thought would never come.

Your dream of me, my vision of you,  
peculiarly jumping land and ship.  
Now we are here, amazed by buoyancy and roots,  
ship and shore there for our taking.  
The shore is wilder than you thought,  
a dancing garment woven during your absence,  
imprinted with words, my monkish work  
from the heart's scriptorium.

But journeys did not part us,  
nor working contradictions of our tuning.  
That jangle gave some purchase to the task.  
Anharmonic, opposites, lured as Sirens lured  
the strapped Odysseus, the difference being  
that our earth tilted slightly, currents changed,  
and we were pulled to one another,  
lovers with no laurels, home.  
It has taken so long to get here. Wake now.  
Wake to new doing, to new pauses in new days.

I cannot sleep for the joy of it.  
Nights sparkle, Catherine Wheels spatter light

as much as a shimmering dawn in the Aegean  
once stirred the eyes of the man who travelled,  
only to return to Ithaca.

## An Irish Lexicon

*Mary O'Donnell*

(A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, L, M, N, O, P, R, S, T, U)<sup>1</sup>

Twilight, and the deer are grazing in the Phoenix Park.  
Someone dreams of Arkle, Beara, Drumlins, Errigal.  
A poet writes of Dubh Linn, Lonndubh, Belfast,

Glens of Imal, Antrim, The Downs,  
Devil's Bit, Vinegar Hill, The Hook, Bannow,  
Ships, helmets, Ogham, Newgrange,

Dawn chorus, dawn light, grave passages,  
Burren limestone, dolmen, capstone, and Dowth.  
In school they speak of Flight, Grammar, Imram,

Lir, Marian, Naoise, Oriel, in the Dáil it's Partnership,  
Rights, salmon, Taoiseach/Toscairí.  
Sea fog and frost are rolling in. Land holds its breath.

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The SOMEONE, the TEACHER, the POET,  
the POLITICIAN weave a dialogue of badger-bait,  
bull-bait, dog-fight, and greyhound,  
Cú, Cuchullán, Dun Dealgán, Eamhain Macha,  
*Tháinig long ó Valparaiso, tá tír na n-óg*  
*Ag cúl an tí, tír alainn trína céile,*  
Mise Éire, Micheál Ó Súilleabhán,

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish language alphabet has only 18 letters.

The Long Hall, The Brazen Head, The Oliver  
St. John Gogarty, The South Pole Inn, Omagh bomb,  
Gugán Barra, Guests of the Nation, La Mon,  
Oedipus Complex, Lough Swilly, Anna Livea,  
National Museum, Síle na Gig, jigs and reels,  
Riverdance, Liberty Hall, the Limerick pogrom of 1904,  
the bee-loud glade, the beehive hut, Georgian Dublin,  
Liberty Hall rebuilt and scaling the clouds,  
Custom House, Guinness, the fighting boys of Annabelle's,  
Fairview Park, The George, Dawn Run, the Curragh.

Wren Women, Glencree, Synagogue, Germans and Jews,

Wicklow Jail, ghosts, Kilmainham,  
Dawn executions in Dublin,  
the Disappeared, Jean McConville, 1994, Abercorn, poteen,  
the Black Pig's Dyke, De Valera, Crazy Jane,  
Old Croghan Man at rest in the his glass box,  
clean as a newborn, renewed for viewing by MILLIONS.  
Arigna, slit nipples, The Clonskeagh Mosque,  
laundries, the Imam, Good Shepherd Convent,  
CPRSI, Bessborough, the Protestants of Cork in 1921,  
Monaghan 1974, Belfast Agreement, Fish on Friday,  
Good Friday Agreement, that blackbird over Emy Lough,  
gold at Clontibret, ghost estates in Laois, a haunted house  
in Lucan, golden apples of the sun, whatever-you-say,  
oil off Cork, Daghda, the Boyne, UB-65,  
September 1913, extra points for Honours Maths,  
Gaelscoileanna, Bodhráns and spoons, harp-making  
in Portlaoise jail, piebalds in Jobstown, free buggies  
for immigrants, free curtains, money-for-old-rope-  
single-mothers-of-four, Arkle, Beara, a wherewithal  
for bags of coal, turf, as a wretched frost descends.

And yet we have a fabled coast, where sea-cattle plunge  
into the WAVES. Inland, hill-sprites on DRUMLINS,  
pismires on the bog, all CELT and tribe in South Ulster,  
further north there's ERRIGAL, but speak not,

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SAY-NOTHING, for words will never count so much as gesture.

Flight of the Earls, O'Neill in Rome, Michael Robartes,  
Kenny in D.C., Irish artists in New York,  
bringing-It-All-Over-there, the knowledge,  
the Gathering, the sliver of salmon, the sucked thumb,  
Fairtrade, Taltainn, free-range eggs, free-loaders,  
curlews, buzzards, Lissadell.

Twilight, and the deer are grazing in the Phoenix Park.  
Someone dreams of Arkle, Beara, Drumlins, Errigal.  
On the Curragh, whin bushes dream, and horses  
are stabled for the night. Frost bites down.

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*Celts*

The exotic myth of origin, spread its cloak  
from Eire to Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Galicia.  
Even today, defies the MONGREL MIX.

I'm an Irishwoman (*you're Irish? I love  
The way you people speak!*). Then part Scotwoman,  
part Norman-maid, part O'Donnell on the way home  
from KINSALE, some fragment of embattled clan,  
lingering in Limerick, not a Donegal gene in my bones.

IT DOES NOT MATTER, WHAT WE FORGET,  
AND MYTH IS NOT EXOTIC, (in text-speak this is  
SHOUTING, but to stretch the letters high,  
to break the stifled code of poetries on the Island  
of the Mongrel Mixture of frayed saints and devils.  
Search for SCHOLARS. All gone to homes  
in America's universities. The saying used to go,  
"At least, we're not British" as the gombeen men  
set up their 70s supermarket empires in ribboning

suburbs, ran despite themselves away from rural,  
Catholic, the West, in denial until Robinson  
hit the Presidency: how we rejoiced at her inauguration,  
at the chewed-wasp faces of Lenihan and Haughey.

But in denial till then,  
I AM A BECAUSE I AM NOT B. I AM IRISH  
BECAUSE I AM NOT BRITISH

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*Máthair mo Chroí*<sup>2</sup>

Front line of the defence, a line with no power  
unless in the home, twisting sons into priests,  
daughters to carers like themselves. Mine simmered.  
EDUCATION! she cried, IT'S CARRIED  
LIGHTLY ALL YOUR LIFE, MY DAUGHTERS!  
In old age, educated, with three university  
degrees, her modesty comes from knowing  
we know nothing when facts are put to bed,  
and all that's left is the heart-thorn of experience,  
although she does not refuse her HAUTE COUTURE,  
smudge-pot colours brightening her eyes at eighty-six,  
alive and equivocating to the end, but moved  
by *The Deer's Cry*, *The Fox-Hunt*,  
music from the culture dancing in her soul.

*Mise Eire* and O'Riada once strung and boomed  
through the house of my girlhood, between Acker Bilk  
and Renata Tebaldi. Music, she said,  
WAS PORTAL TO THE SOUL.  
And so she taught her daughters, guiltless.

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, "mother of my heart," this is a common cliché derived from traditional songs and poems in Ireland.

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*Mise le Meas*<sup>3</sup>

Everybody knew the telephone girls listened in.  
You had to be careful, and women  
having affairs around the town learned fast.  
The phone was not safe, and the local MI5  
custodians of half-baked morality liked to chatter.  
But this was Monaghan. Nobody had affairs  
in the 1960s, did they? Nobody committed suicide,  
did they? Nobody was gay. Some parents  
had a copy of TANTRIC SEX, beside  
THE CATHOLIC MARRIAGE, secreted in the high  
wardrobe, and Mary McCarthy a presence  
in that east-facing bedroom, where my parents could see  
foxes at play in the high field,  
beyond wind-tilted knots of holly trees.

But the telephone girls, those telephone girls,  
how they tattled in the town! They knew  
who owed what to whom, who in HIGH POWER  
was doing his secretary, and the garda known  
to lightly squeeze a woman's breast, great paw  
in through the car window as he advised her  
on traffic conditions.

Hear them, that Irish sibilance: *Putting you through now . . .*  
*Hello Clones, call for you . . . ah how are ya Elsie, not a bad day,*  
*yesterday was pure shockin' . . . right now, call waiting . . .*  
*Caller? Putting you through now . . .*

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<sup>3</sup> The official way of signing off a Government letter, it means "Yours, respectfully" but even today is associated with indifference, anonymity and unaccountability.

*Rebuke to Ideological Feminists*

*“I was not one of the popular feminists who knew what a sound-bite was . . . never took the Contraceptive Train north,<sup>4</sup> nor went to Greenham Common . . .”* (the poet, 2013)

We never moved as one, ladies, girls, women,  
to suggest that it was otherwise would be a lie.  
Today, some of you are CIVIL as any servant,  
as IVORY-TOWERED as any ruminating scholar,  
as unsmiling, grim and frightening as women would be  
who thirty years ago spent time contemplating cervixes,  
took classes in How Not to Smile All the Time.  
Too much smiling—agreed—too much compliance  
and willingness. You can be anyone you want!  
Self-invent, renaissance women all!  
We’ll help you on the way to smash that glass ceiling!

*(If we are to believe the weekly Elle, the woman of letters is a remarkable Zoological species: she brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children.*

*We are introduced, for example, to Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel); Marina Grey (one son, one novel); Nicole Dutreil (two sons, four novels), etc).*

But what does it mean? *This: to write is a glorious but bold activity; the writer is an “artist,” one recognises that he is entitled to a little bohemianism . . .<sup>5</sup>*

Even so. It does not include the ordinary women getting on with ordinary lives, the ones who wrestle infant feet into little shoes, who wipe up puke, wipe shitty bums, clean the rooms where some of you work out the policies.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Contraceptive Train,” as it was known, was boarded in Dublin’s Connolly Station in 1971 by a group of feminists who then travelled to Belfast to buy contraceptives that were at that time illegal in the Republic. They then returned that afternoon and brandished their purchased, daring the Customs Officials to challenge them.

<sup>5</sup> From Roland Barthes. 1957. *Mythologies*. Editions du Seuil, Paris.

*But make no mistake: Let no women believe  
that they can take advantage of this pact without having first  
submitted to the eternal statute of womanhood.  
Women are on the earth to give children to men;  
let them write as much as they like, let them decorate  
Their condition, but above all, let them not depart from it ...*<sup>6</sup>

Some of you never recognised that we were not so helpless,  
despite biology, so victimised, or speechless,  
nor saw that we were ON YOUR SIDE.

The suspicion often fell that *this* was how you wanted it:  
you, on the band-wagon, questioning the language  
(*that* remains a GOOD IDEA).

*A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship  
at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals  
its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship  
involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient,  
listening objects (the students).*<sup>7</sup>

The sexuality, the *mode d'emploi* of every bloody thing  
not quite your business. Your business was—is—  
JUSTICE, FAIRNESS, HUMAN RIGHTS, not  
CONDESCENSION AND KNOWING WHAT WAS  
BETTER FOR YOUR MINIONS.

The battle goes on—ladies, girls, women. The principle remains correct  
and this enquiry asks that you get your hands dirtied in the ordinary  
smut, break your own networks and move into the favellas, the country,  
wherever the road is twisted and UNTHINK IS IN CHARGE, get  
working with the people, SEE WHERE JUSTICE IS DONE and learn  
from that. Or: remember Orwell, that thing about everyone being equal,  
But some are ...? He got it right, all charged up with a memory of native

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes. 1957. *Mythologies*. Editions du Seuil, Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Freire, 1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Education.

male backsides skinned by the bamboo rod, released from prison to  
impooverished wives who soothed it all with mashed banana.

M—A—S—H—E—D    B—A—N—A—N—A .

\*

So Unthink the Englishmen were let loose.

But to each generation its Unthinks. Unthink the Nation,  
the State, the Federation, the Republic, the Monarchy,  
the Commune, the Parish, the County, the GAA, League,  
Union, Association, Gathering, Meeting, in every unstarry  
constellation where people meet there's a Mr. Unthink,  
partered by Ms Unthink and all the Littler Unthinkums.

All Unthinking how they need LOVE, how LOVE rules the world,  
how LOVE is everything and we surely ALL LOVE one another,  
*thee-most-bee-ewt-iful-word in thee world!* But the same one  
all the same for man-woman, mother-child, child-parent,  
bro and sis, covering the spectrum as if it were one colour.

It ain't one colour Ma'ams: it's not black, it's not white,  
it's all and any hut, it hides so deeply it's like Mars the planet,  
people wondering if there ever was life, and if liquid water  
ever flowed in that barren territory. That's what LOVE is.

And then love flows into politics. Into ideals. Into agendas.

Enter: Stage Right: The Leader of the Women's Forum  
*come to speak to the Constituency, plus the Chief Female Poets,  
addressing the great iambed on cross-rhyme  
and good-tempered rhyme, on Being one's Own Best Critic,  
on Seizing Permissions.*

Stampede Stage Left: the confused massing women,  
all apparently worrying about window cleanliness,  
toilet-bowls, children and curries.

Until: behind them,

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a quieter entering: the old, the weak,  
the sick, the confused, the mad, the neurotic, the demented:  
such fill the stage, while behind them again serried lines  
of workers, bee-women, the soft hum of labour, creased brow,  
compliant to the nature of life's business:  
love of the task that transforms.

The only love, perhaps.

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Someone dreams of Arkle, Beara, Drumlins, Errigal.  
A poet writes of Dubh Linn, Lonndubh, Belfast,

Glens of Imal, Antrim, The Downs,  
Devil's Bit, Vinegar Hill, The Hook, Bannow,  
ships, helmets, Ogham, Newgrange,

Dawn chorus, dawn light, grave passages,  
Burren limestone, dolmen, capstone, and Dowth.  
Whin bushes on the Curragh toss and dream

as the wind untethers them. Horses are stabled  
for the night. A fox runs close to the ditch,  
beyond the steady shearing of evening cars, headlights.

Frost trembles on the air, falls firm across the land,  
cooling an ardour of wintry argument.  
The earth rounds in on its prayer to itself.

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