Also by John Muckle

SAMPLER
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Mirrorball

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Nothing Wrong

Nothing went wrong, it was meant to be this way curling around its dense privet hedges over which you pretended not to see your future – a lawn being mowed, the click of edge trimmers, a strimmer starting up like a yawning siren.

Those plans you made were the mislaid plans of a mouse, striding out with an alert nose, a pert mouse who was at any rate single-minded, anything smelling of cheese being just the job under the shadow of the winning-post-tree.

Nothing changed in all the years you knew her turning up out of the blue like that, returning. Her trail of footprints always ended at the border. Only once did you catch her weaving, once or twice a slip of the tongue made you wonder.

Nothing gone wrong, it was meant to be this way, her payment in kind is for the right-wrong reason and your heart is broken for a mess of pottage. Babies crying for their fathers; in the evening a brilliant new star will be coming out for them.
Poetry and Philosophy

Poetry is the poor man’s philosophy
The lamp by which he finds solace
A light significant only for what he reads by it
A subject without agency
Tormented nevertheless by guilt
Poetry is the poor man’s apology

Philosophy is a poor apology for poetry
Dry bandages on a fresh wound
Absorbent wrappings for all that is bloody
All comprehending and surpassing
Whispered beneath sepulchres
Philosophy is poetry’s winding-sheet

Poetry springs out of the mouths of babes
Philosophy’s sense is contested and cumulative
Poetry goes on about the landless peasantry
Philosophy believes the poor are superfluous
Poetry is convinced it has solutions
Philosophy admits its knowledge is worth nix

Believe that and you’ll believe anything
Coming up against brick walls and singing round them
Echoes bouncing back, as clear as day
Into the eyes and ears and hearts of the poor
Philosophy is the rich man’s poetry
It has put food on his table, brought him happiness

But what do you mean by poetry? Philosophy?
I mean clear singing of the heart’s desires
A rigorous interrogation of the word
A knot of images and sounds and thoughts
And I mean to wind the world back onto its spool
So it will play out quickly if a fish grabs it
Ladder of Causes

The first you hear of them they’re getting better
But before long you wake up under their rule.
One has stolen your woman, another is sliding by
In a greatcoat you had been thinking of wearing
Against the chill of prophesied ill-weather.

Whether to stay or go is a question that troubles you
Too late to ask in light of compulsory expulsions
As a dolphin leaps through its hoop, clucking
Like a red hen, smiling at its approaching brother
As their paths cross in mid-air, that’s the truth.

I hear they have set up a commission of enquiry
Which announced remission of its further sins.
Omission, perdition, who can doubt their efficacy
When, after all, injustice requires no clear wins,
It’s simply the outcome of fair competition?

Rumours of war is as good as winning ashes
To tunes of a tin can orchestra, a whistle blows down
Lava all over your stirrup; no way up in the world
You’re in the saddle of a hoarse almighty laugh.
Your children were as good as theirs, you thought.

Ladder of causes, grid of lights, a mayfly moon.
Over the valley is a brighter day. I love my mother.
At the top of the town is the bottom line, and all
These bright young care-creatures, what are they thinking?
They are thinking of the good things in the sky.
Elizabeth Bishop

In Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, Filling Station, the mechanic and his greasy sons are saying, Sure, we’re greasy, that’s what we do, lady, we grease your car, and we are who we are, God loves us; and my good wife, our mother oils that plant you seem to admire so much and she lays out those grey doilies on the table. She thinks we’re okay. Alice, tell the lady.

Thankfully its thanksgiving, the four of them are sitting down to a well-earned turkey dinner, basted in recycled engine-oil, and on the hill specklike children play with fire, an old wrench, beneath the lowering echolalia of a sky, the terms of whose sympathy are difficult to accept.

Alice puts down her sewing needle, it’s carved from a wishbone, she folds the pure white overalls and sits at the table. No grace has yet been said. She says none either, but her three sons thank her quietly for their dinner before returning to their abuse of a pig of a job, another ugly customer.

A headless chicken wanders in from the road, asks if its poor life isn’t worth just a bit more than the poet woman’s abrupt use of it as a splash of colour. The mechanics aren’t listening, as usual. Alice rearranges their words into a song, praising her, hissing sibilants tell you to shh, shh, shh, be quiet about this scene, it’s from a life not your own.
Poor Richard’s Almanac

“Not to oversee workmen is to leave them your purse open.”
—Benjamin Franklin

Open your mind to a scholar
And you pass your baby to grandma wolf
To mind while you stir the pot
Your mind aloof.

How many rungs in a ladder?
How many fish in the sky?
Eat one boiled fish for your supper.
Hold the string of your kite upon high.

Spend a penny on soda pop
That penny is one will please you not
By rubbing shoulders with another
Multiplying by the foot.

Conjugate your farthings!
Good grammar is cumulative
Additionally, may I say
Drink water frugally, on tap: you’ll live.

My mind is like a fine-meshed sieve
That sifts its gold from the silt;
Lets the dross pass right through it,
Puts tiny nuggets in its belt.

A man I know lent his fastest horse
To a fool running a fool’s errand.
That fool was no such fool, he sold it
And ran on foot to Maryland.
O count your losses, slowly
Or count them quick, who cares?
Count them a hundred times, if you please:
But look well to your fiscal affairs!

When riding out to the slave markets
A boy told his plangent tale;
It appeared to amuse him greatly
How a wise man sold shit by the pail.

On such and such a day a ship arrives
In New York harbour, with a cargo of fresh coffee;
Offer your old stock at full price, half price,
A free cup advertises your honesty.

But they've stolen my sharpest of saws,
I put down my saw-book someplace.
A letter's an odd shape, a chicken untoothed,
A saw-horse? No stirrups, no grace.

I may frame my partial insights,
I may say what I wish night and day;
What I say will fall short of the highest truth,
My saws are flexed horses in flight.
An Estuary

I like that part of the county, the way mist rises off salt-marshes, a flat, humpy landscape of pylons appearing to go on forever, circles back on itself

as if it were visible to the naked eye, the North sea hiding concrete watchtowers, each one a great polis which has stood off invading waves and the yachts

of the snaky Deben, scything deep channels in mud on its banks picnics, wanderings with the dog along a raised culvert that pulls you toward land

and the low bungalows, spaced like breakwaters weathered havens, leaning rickety boathouses assembled by centuries of tides, full of bad paintings

and dimple bottles hung in string bags at windows, each winch crowned with its own barnacle knot. Crabbing up a champion crab with nil equipment

then it’s a swift pint or two of Adnams in the snug a light or two bobbing, the land itself uncertain on a weekend with kids, blotto under canvas,

lying back with that filtered light on your eyelids cooking up a big feed of burgers on the sixties camping stove, words trailing off, except to point,

exclaiming at a chain of starfish, a ribbon of kelp: found jewellery requiring no skill, no patience just a glow of happiness holding you for a moment
left behind with this year’s other discoveries
maybe to push up out of the mud of memory sometime
soon, I hope, in the golden days of the future

of tributaries I got lost in, prising with the boat hook
happy enough in your sandals, your sailor suit
dripping with sweat, your forehead wide, untroubled

where your granddad used to live, under the sea,
and where I long to turn back I am joined to others
where it ends I don’t know; in a deep, rough stitch.
A Night at The Crown

Already it was a hymn to the magic of retrospect, a cathedral of nicotine, a country and western band & denizens from the deeps of thirty-two counties in family groups or, collars up, swimming dark tables under dusty gold brocade, columns, ivory mouldings held up by heavy grandfather clocks from the nineties. The crack was mighty at the Crown; they played MacAlpine’s Fusiliers, Spancilhill, The Race Is On.

A heritage mural of day labourers awaiting hire on the far wall – at least it was a job for a painter – and twin low-slung leather settees, a Pole at the bar. Upstairs, once a month: jazz, so it says on a poster. I buy a pint and slip out to peek in through chained doors of the back dance hall: alright, it’s still there as before, shrouded, stacked chairs ready to burst into life again, I hope, at some turn in the weather.

Once in Hammersmith I was accosted by an actor. He was getting drunk at a table of friends. I’d popped in on my way to the Irish Centre, perched a spare seat, and he convinced me he was a relaxing Irish labourer with a wink as broad as a slumming Brendan Behan. I was just being polite, I thought, looking to get away, when he revealed he was rehearsing for a future play. In vague humiliation, I drank up and scuttled out.

I sit here, nurse my pint, wait for the action to start, pull out my Nokia to compose a text message to you telling you where I am right now, just guess, send it off in its little winged envelope, make rings on the bar symbolising those hoops through which I tried and failed to jump. We talked, had a drink, moving back to the vault, and listened to a kicking band playing still in dark places I daren’t enter. Cead Mile Failte.