

Forest Music

Also by Susan Connolly

How High the Moon (with Catherine Phil MacCarthy)

For the Stranger

Race to the Sea

Winterlight

with Anne-Marie Moroney:

Race to the Sea

Ogham: Ancestors Remembered in Stone

Stone and Tree Sheltering Water

Winterlight

Forest Music

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FOREST MUSIC

for Michael, Breifne and Liadan

*Céol caille
fom-ghanad . . .
la fogur fairrge flainne.*

Forest music
sang to me . . .
and the sound of the reddening sea.

ONE THOUSAND AUTUMN OAK LEAVES

One thousand autumn oak leaves
sweep coldly down the path
that's brought you to this day.
Every muscle in your body
warns of a storm brewing.

Get up. Step outside.
Take a deep breath.
Don't you know
you are a garden
you are always digging?

One thousand autumn oak leaves,
ten thousand memories.
Choose one to hold you still
while the sun weaves
light out of darkness.

Why turn your back on everything?
Why this bitter storm?
Everything that's brought you
to this day is like a song
you want to hear.

Now listen to another song,
all that has yet to happen,
all that patiently
waits for you, beyond
eye, ear, tongue.

PIANO LESSONS

1. *Mrs. MacAllister*

Early September, first lesson
with Mrs. MacAllister:
'Let me hear you play.
Play your favourite piece for me.'
Shy, shaky, in slow motion
I try *The Sunbeam Polka*.
She nods and smiles.
I notice her mansize hands,
the kindness in her voice.

Tuesday lunchtime, Mrs. MacAllister:
my name on a brand new
Grade III book.
She plays six pieces.
'Choose three you like.'
We begin: right hand, left hand,
hands together, fingering.
'Though the notes are important,
feeling is everything.'

2. *Piano Lessons*

Notes fall beneath my hands
like flame-coloured leaves.
I want to play with them,
to catch, kick, scatter
and gather them.
Eleven years old, homesick,
I crave the familiar.

Christmas over, hands
and heart numb,
one Tuesday lunchtime
I begin Bartók's
Slovakian Folk Tune.
The first chord sends
a shiver up my spine.

I glance sideways
at Mrs. MacAllister:
'Did I play the right notes?'
'That's a minor seventh
chord,' she says.
'I'll change
the fingering for you.'

What a strange sound
I hold captive in my hands.
What luck to reach out
and find exactly
what I need!
At home at last in the new
and unfamiliar.

My life a piece of music
I have barely begun
to play, week by week
Mrs. MacAllister draws out
the silence at my core.
Teacher and child
each Tuesday lunchtime

side by side,
with a sudden pang I know—
that's my favourite piece of all.

Memory which lightens
and brightens everything.
Heartwarming, comforting
music at my core.

BRIGIT

1.

Run, little fox,
past hermit cell
and derelict castle,
past river and monastery
and quaint rose cottage.
Through oak wooded
centuries
weaving your way—
run swiftly now
in the open air.

Brigit called a wild fox
out of the forest.
That fox was you!
You played for a while
and went safe
through the forest,
the king on his horse
after you.

Brigit hung her wet robe
to dry on a ray of sun.
If they touched
her shadow
the sick were healed.
'Every stranger is Christ,'
she said, and gave
to everyone.

People came to visit her.
A playful fox drew near.

She believed in mercy.
In the doorway of her
mother's house at sunrise
Brigit was born.
A fox howled
the day she died.

2.

Brigit—
we name our daughters
after you,
Brigit, Breege, Breda.
After our mothers, sisters
friends
we call our daughters
Bríd, Bridie, Biddy.

Daylight will be cold
if your name fades
from our lips,
like a fire gone out
forever.

At the edge of Cuan wood
the fox goes,
no king of Leinster with him now,
though the same land
stretches away.

Brigit—
bright stillness in the sky
while I live stormily
below—

bright spark within

Brigit búadach

*Bethad beo.**

for Alison Kelly

*Victorious Brigit,
The living one of life.

A GIFT OF WORDS

Because you followed
pain to its source,
led by its wail
deep into a forest

where you found me
hurt, my life a trap
snapped shut
upon me—

perhaps all
you have gained
is this reaching out,
another's pain

to comprehend,
and a gift of words:
this conversation
between us.

In their own way
two wild yet gentle animals
have also been set free:
trust and friendliness.

At the forest's edge
they hesitate, hollow-eyed,
wait for the right moment
to follow us.