

Courts of Air and Earth

Poetry by Trevor Joyce

New Writers' Press, Dublin

Sole Glum Trek

Watches

Pentahedron

The Poems of Sweeny Peregrine
stone floods

Form Books, London

Hellbox

Wild Honey Press, Bray, Co. Wicklow

Syzygy

Without Asylum

The Gig, Willowdale, Ont., Canada

(Takeover) Undone, Say

Takeover (Undone, Say)

Shearsman Books, Exeter / New Writers' Press, Dublin

with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold

— A Body of Work 66/00 —

Motivex, Poznan / New Writers' Press, Dublin

Dwory Powietrza i Ziemi

The Gig, Willowdale, Ont., Canada / New Writers' Press, Dublin

What's in Store

TREVOR JOYCE

Courts of Air and Earth

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Exeter

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'A Celticist's Note' copyright © Máire Herbert, 2008.

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Acknowledgements

'The Poems of Sweeny, Peregrine' first appeared in the book of the same name, published by New Writers' Press, Dublin in 1976, and was subsequently collected in the author's *with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold* (Shearsman Books, Exeter / New Writers' Press, 2001; 2nd edition, 2003), and in *Dwory Powietrza i Ziemi* (Motivex, Poznan / New Writers' Press). The 'Love Songs from a Dead Tongue' first appeared in *Masthead* and in *Poetry Ireland Review*, and were subsequently collected in *Dwory Powietrza i Ziemi* and in *What's in Store* (The Gig, Willowdale, Ont. / New Writers' Press, 2007). The 'Anonymous Love Songs from the Irish' previously appeared in *Take Over* (The Gig, 2003), and *What's in Store* (The Gig / New Writers' Press, 2007). 'Cry Help' was first collected in *stone floods* (New Writers' Press, 1995), and subsequently in *with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold* (2001; 2003).

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Foreword

These renditions of early Irish poetry cut to the quick. They are wild things, ravaged, and empty of sentimentality, but all heart. I think the key to their force is that they are based in syntax and sound. They move word by word, rather than by phrasing, and so it is the relationship between the words that holds the stanzas (heartbeats) together, not a rush of sentiment. They mediate between tradition and modernity.

Tradition would hold that music expresses a single culture's necessity, the strain of the voice to sing it. Traditionally, speech aspires to song and wants to contain and order the raw lonely voice, to gather it back into a communal texture that is recognizable to all.

Modernity abandons the community in favor of a plurality of interpretations. The fusing of these two approaches to language can only be accomplished by locating the impersonal strain in each line of the poem. The impersonal saves the translation from history.

This is what Trevor Joyce has done in these magnificent poems. They are Celtic in their cells and bones, their knowing of landscape as an interior, while weather and consciousness are a single phenomenon of the outside. Yet the spare syntactical arrangements are also modern in their alienation from comfort zones. Nothing quite adds up.

The beginning of culture is the end of it too. These poems prove that point. They are magnificent in the deepest meaning of the word.

Fanny Howe

**Love Songs
from
a
Dead Tongue**

•

*Worked from
the Late
Middle-Irish*

for George Hitching

Grief in the king-fort?
With Niall gone, small wonder;
all was fast against affliction,
grievous now.

And will grieve on
abandoned by civility,
though a dynasty outlasted
loneliness from there.

All kings but one
in time relinquish rule.
Who'd want the world?
Grief in the king-fort,
grief.

Laughter across the way marks out
the marriage-house;
such loud excess
intrudes a desolation here.

Though happily that bride
may get what she contracted for
some are short-changed
as I hereby lay charge.

You, ruler of the lasting world,
I now denounce,
for killing of my kind, my gentle
loving and most innocent king.

As hostage he'd be worth
thoroughbred herds, goldhoards;
who brought him here would learn
my further kindnesses.

Proper to ransom such a man
could to me show him so kind
delivering me from a one-day's raid
some twelve score head of beef.

Delicate linens, ah! you break
my heart, you, where Niall could sleep sound,
and you, white one, little bed,
you miss him too.

How then should I bear myself
happening upon a shirt

when he it dressed
lies dead in Kells?

Travelling westward from Armagh
Niall put me this:
whichever goes in front,
my love, where should we head?

Straight answer, this, my king,
together in the cool clay
of Ailech, let them lay us
in a single grave.

If you, my love, go first,
in front of me into the earth,
I'll take myself no other queen
but long grieving without laughter
without laughter.

Kells, occasion for blindness,
since I lay with your king;
Kells, grown disfigured
now Niall is gone.

The first kings I wived,
I augmented their glory,
but Niall was far dearer than both;
Kells, occasion for blindness.

My bright Niall ceased,
my man and my king ceased,
here his broad lands continue;
Kells, occasion for blindness.

Well I remember generous Niall
here on this hill
laughing his wealth away;
Kells, occasion for blindness.

I will walk to the grave of Niall:
there is room where he lies
for me to lie next him;
Kells, occasion for blindness,
blindness.

Breaks the heart keening
as the edge keen the king,
keen Niall Blackknee
gracious as great.

[This is doubtful]

Ask what breaks my heart:
keening Niall the bright laughing;
till doomsday the heart hurt
atrociously wasting.

First I came into Munster:
high-king's consort queen
to arch-bishop Cormac
the perfectly-bright.

Then next into Leinster
in which rich realm
though some muttered
I did not starve.

[This transition is difficult]

. . . came Tara's heir,
that true prince,
successor to arch-kings.

Together we shared
childhood in Tara,
concentric city
of the true promised land.

That destroyer of pastures,
that master of plunder,
that fiercest of men,
deepest red amongst Irish.

The place where he fell
broke my heart
[this line is lost]
nor does Donal survive him.

Niall, king, son of kings,
Donal, soft face unfurrowed,
dead detach me from kin,
reduce heart to sheer blood.

I am Gormlaith, the keening:
first husband-king Cormac,
son Donal, fierce Niall,
these three broke my heart.

O King of the stars,
grant mercy to Niall,
O Mary, great queen,
shield this cold keening
breaks.

Empty, a fort
stands forewarning to others;
such desolation in a palace
just one trick among life's many.

I miss the princes
hospitable and brave
and grieve
through so much emptiness.

Soon the rest
will make joint desolation;
is this not sign enough?
an empty fort;
empty.

Rag, patched on patch,
why would I blame you?
not one courtly hand
added craft to your stitch.

In Tara once
alongside Niall of Emain,
happily he honoured me:
I drank from his own cup.

In Limerick once
with loving Niall of Ailech,
my clothes spectacular
among the western chieftains.

When his people gathered
to test their foals for speed
I drank as they drank, wine
from fine horn cups.

Seven score women attended us
in these assemblies
as the race was settled
on the green course of my king.

I am a woman of Leinster,
I am a woman of Meath;
ask which land most dear to me:
no zone of those, but my true king's north.

Brambles snare me,
snarl my rags;

thorn no ally,
briar attacks,
rag.

Mourning Niall I survive;
what pain could exceed this?
surplus such days,
me so disfigured.

Bone-weary tonight, I,
all love-words exhausted;
draped Tara quenched too,
all glamour gone out.

Emain silent and dark
where they played once,
hosts gathered
departed.

Utter silence in Oileach:
no music;
Lough Foyle's speech is hoarse;
disfigured, I die.

To the west to the east
each kingdom enfeebled,
it grieves me
their grief.

Sad this north too
my voice strange to its soldiery;
the south dwindles away,
grief blurs my face.

My king, son of kings,
who gave away gold,

dead, stuns the woods;
grief endures.

King Niall Blackknee, his queen,
master of armies, his consort,
now has gossip for counsel;
do you question my
mourning?