

John Montague

**SELECTED
POEMS
1961-2017**



Gallery Books

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All Legendary Obstacles

All legendary obstacles lay between
Us, the long imaginary plain,
The monstrous ruck of mountains
And, swinging across the night,
Flooding the Sacramento, San Joaquin,
The hissing drift of winter rain.

All day I waited, shifting
Nervously from station to bar
As I saw another train sail
By, the San Francisco Chief or
Golden Gate, water dripping
From great flanged wheels.

At midnight you came, pale
Above the negro porter's lamp.
I was too blind with rain
And doubt to speak, but
Reached from the platform
Until our chilled hands met.

You had been travelling for days
With an old lady who marked
A neat circle on the glass
With her glove to watch us
Move into the wet darkness
Kissing, still unable to speak.

That Room

Side by side on the narrow bed
We lay, like chained giants,
Tasting each other's tears, in terror
Of the news which left little to hide
But our two faces that stared
To ritual masks, absurd and flayed.

Rarely in a lifetime comes such news
Shafting knowledge straight to the heart
Making shameless sorrow start —
Not childish tears, querulously vain —
But adult tears that hurt and harm,
Seeping like acid to the bone.

Sound of hooves on the midnight road
Raised a romantic image to mind:
The Dean riding late to Marley?
But we must suffer the facts of self;
No one endures another's fate
And no one will ever know

What happened in that room
But when we came to leave
We scrubbed each other's tears,
Prepared the usual show. That day
Love's claims made chains of time and place
To bind us together more: equal in adversity.

from *Summer Storm*

TIDES

The window blown
open that summer
night, a full moon

occupying the sky
with a pressure of
underwater light,

a chill radiance
glossing the titles
behind your head

& the rectangle
of the bed where,
after long separation,

we begin to make
love quietly, bodies
turning like fish

in obedience to
the pull & tug
of your great tides.

King & Queen

Jagged head
of warrior, bird
of prey, surveying space

side by side
they squat, the stern
deities of this place,

giant arms
slant to the calm
of lap, kneebone;

blunt fingers
splay to caress
a rain-hollowed stone

towards which
the landscape of five parishes
tends, band after band

of final,
peewit haunted,
cropless bogland.

Border Lake

The farther North you travel the colder it gets.
Take that border county of which no one speaks.
Look at the straggly length of its capital town:
the bleakness after a fair, cattle beaten home.
The only beauty nearby is a small glacial lake
sheltering between drumlin moons of mountains.
In winter it is completely frozen over, reeds
bayonet sharp, under a low, comfortless sky.
Near the middle there is a sluggish channel
where a stray current tugs to free itself.
The solitary pair of swans who haunt the lake
have found it out, and come zigzagging,
holding their breasts aloof from the jagged
edges of large glinting mirrors of ice.

At Last

A small sad man with a hat,
he came through the Customs at Cobh
carrying a roped suitcase and
something in me began to contract

but also to expand. We stood,
his grown sons, seeking for words
which under the clouding mist
turn to clumsy, laughing gestures.

At the mouth of the harbour lay
the squat shape of the liner
hooting farewell, with the waves
striking against Spike Island's grey.

We drove across Ireland that day,
lush river valleys of Cork, russet
of the Central Plain, landscapes
exotic to us Northerners, halting

only in a snug beyond Athlone
to hear a broadcast I had done.
How strange in that cramped room
my disembodied voice, the silence

after, as we looked at each other!
Slowly our eyes managed recognition.
'Not bad,' he said, and raised his glass:
Father and son at ease, at last.