

Tom French

**THE SEA
FIELD**



Gallery Books

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*Seamus de Paor's Statue of An Athar
Eoghain Uí Ghramhnaigh*

Workers engaged in the preparation of the site have already excavated to a depth of seven feet without finding a solid foundation . . .

— *The Meath Chronicle*, 2 June 1956

They may as well have been sinking a well
when they were searching for solid ground
to take the weight of his likeness in stone
in the grounds of the chapel of the Apostle James
that stands on oak trees felled by The Big Wind.

They had to go down deeper than his grave
because every foot they went became
a foot of water and their shovels and spades
could easily have doubled as oars,
which is only as it should be because

it was between the new world and the old
he put the finishing touches to his *Simple Lessons*
that opens with a note on the best way
to reproduce the sound of the word *tobar*,
and closes with 'a dark mast' and 'a white sail'.

'Basking Shark Currach'

after Dorothy Cross

*Non hi carinas quippe pinu texere
et acere norunt, non abiete, ut usus est,
curvant faseleos, sed rei ad miraculum
navigia iunctis semper ap tant pellibus
corioque vastum saepe percurrunt salum.*

— 'Ora Maritima', Avienus (4th century)

You can see the sea from here.
A pair of butterfly bolts hold
in place a shark skin stretched
on a larch frame that hangs
from her ceiling like a giant shade.
She hung it there to tidy it away.
It basks between 'boat' and 'fish'.
The ribs of shark and craft are one,
the gunwale is a dorsal fin.
It will never touch water again.
Our floor is ocean floor.
Its water is our air.
We are the drowned.

Houdini on Donegall Quay

This the place I nearly didn't escape,
not that their crate or chains were better made.
It had something to do with my jailers

who wouldn't have it said I'd slipped from them
in broad daylight before a gaping throng
while they looked on and held aloft their keys.

Lord knows, a duplicate under the tongue
is hardly the pinnacle of artistry,
and it wasn't death they hankered to see,

just a man being brought on everyone's behalf
to his penultimate breath, a representative
who, operating beyond oxygen and fear,

glimpses the next life, then opts for this
by finding, when all is water, a breath of air.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy at Cobh, 9 September 1953

And then something happened that I can never forget. All the church bells in Cobh started to ring out our theme song, and Babe looked at me, and we cried . . . I'll never forget that day. Never.

— Stan Laurel

It was a homecoming nobody foresaw.
They were washed up, working the music halls
in the backwaters that still remembered them
and coming by water, being too broke for air,

which kept them in touch with the common man —
the ailing waiting for the boat to Lourdes,
the able sailing with their ten bob notes
stitched into the seams of homemade clothes.

There was slapstick on the tender coming in,
the whole impromptu routine on the quay
for all of the people suddenly at liberty
to take in what their eyes could not believe

until, across the rooftops, music came.
Then laughter stopped and tears came hot and strong
as the great carillon of St Colman's rang,
in jubilation and in prayer, their 'Cuckoo Song'.

A Dance Studio in County Monaghan

for Conor Grimes at 50

I hold, like a farrier, as you tip back,
the ball of your heel in the cup of my palm
and feel, until that antique chair can bear

no more, your fulcrum shift imperceptibly
until mortice joints give up the ghost and leave you
motionless, like a martyr, on a pile of tinder.

What do you do when there's no place to sit
but adopt a stance before the mirror
that gives back, to the lake and the trees

and the night, the night and the trees and the lake,
and pick out solos and intros and riffs,
and throw in a lick of the *wah-wah* pedal,

on the air guitar you carry everywhere
that's perfectly in tune, and light as a feather?

Night Snow

Once, I could go years without news from the East.
Now, not a night when I don't hear twice at least
and only sleep delays my considered response.
Jennifer, I am glad that you are glad

that I am on the market for daily ceramic products,
though my ceramic needs are much humbler
than you have somehow been lead to believe —
a cup at dawn for coffee; a bowl for muesli or oats;

at evening, to keep hunger at bay, a single plate.
Allen, plentiful T-shirt supplier, future friend,
though I could be plentiful T-shirt supplier too,
I am touched you want to open a market at my end.

Kelly Ann in the Renwu Building in Shenzhen,
I have been, for Christ-alone-knows how long,
crying out for the surge arresters you burn to send.
It is not beyond the bounds of possibility, Kathy

in Quingdao, that I — a world away — might be
the faithful partner in dried fruits you seek.
Some day, Charles, I will come to Shandong
and out of our lives we will pilfer the time

to walk the cliff-like aisles of granite and say
their names — *Santiago Grey* — and bear on our
fingertips their dust — *Grey Juparanta* — when
the time comes to go, and go — *Night Snow* — we must.