

Michael Coady

# GIVEN LIGHT



Gallery Books

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*to the memory of  
Liam Hogan (1926-2014),  
teacher and friend*



*Hence in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither . . .*

— William Wordsworth,  
'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from  
Recollections of Early Childhood'

## *First Snowfall*

Once upon sometime  
before my First Communion year  
a man across the way  
beckoned me aside  
and said one day —

*Look down, child,  
look down  
at my shoe.*

Years on I'd come to know  
that his black shoes were polished  
and re-polished every day.  
He was a man who'd soldiered  
on the Western Front  
and never after could abide  
the stain of mud  
or sight of blood.

*Look down, boy.  
Look down at my shoe!  
Can you see the first specks there?  
The snow is on the way. The sky  
is full of it, I guarantee.*

I bent low towards the dark  
lustre of shoe leather  
but could find no sign  
of something from on high  
as yet unknown to me —

turned my face to look up  
past his head, towards the sky,  
and thought I felt something

## *It All Depends*

Give greeting as you enter the butcher's this fine morning. The usual cutlets. Look on fearfully as always at the threat of lethal blade to Kevin's fingers as he cuts. Fourth generation in the trade under this slated roof in Lough Street. Talking expertly of Sunday's drawn hurling game. Missed chances. That point in the last seconds gone a bare inch wide of an All-Ireland victory. But younger Tipperary legs might yet prove fresher in the upcoming replay.

One hand steadying carcass of lamb, the other engaged with saw, with blade and cleaver. Time after time such intimate acquaintance between the living hands and blade each morning whetted. How finely may edge be honed before all edge is gone?

Behind all this an archaeology of inscribed scars criss-crossing butchers' blocks through generations. Did forefathers' fingers go unscathed? Cut after cut. Chances and near misses. Bleating and birthing of past seasons. *Little lamb who made thee?* Pasture land of Knocknaconnery out the road. Spurting blood in Cregg slaughterhouse. Friday the killing day.

Lamb. *Un. Agnus*. Latin chant from altar or gallery all of his boyhood in the choir of the big chapel. *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*. Mrs Shelly at the organ. Bloody Sunday 1920, her husband-to-be Jerry Shelly on the Tipperary football team opposing Dublin in Croke Park. Auxies and Black and Tans invading the pitch, random volleys shaping history. Jerry risking all, running from midfield to retrieve a new overcoat from the sideline where already there are dead and dying. Blood congealing on green sward; priests kneeling by the stricken. Jerry snatches up the new coat he's borrowed that morning from his father. Gets home to Tipperary; lives to die another day in years to come.

And she who married him will live beyond a hundred. Her backlit silver hair set against spread pages lamplit in the organ-loft when you were a boy. High Mass or Benediction. Forty Hours' Adoration. The Divine Praises. Tremble of flooring boards within the organ loft. *Adoremus in Aeternum*. All-

encompassing vibration filling sacred space, bespeaking mystery, while in itself a mystery. From high roof ridge and rigging of the nave down to the flooring of the aisles and ageless earth beneath.

Decline *agnus*, second declension. *Agnus agni agno agnum*. Chalky soutane of the teacher you remember in the school up on the hill. The pendulum clock, the weeping rain down classroom windows. Kindly man of Latin, maths and prayer.

*This morning boys we'll plunge straight into the parabola.*

His nickname. *Parabola*. Pupils reinvent their teachers. Custodian of beehives in the monastery orchard and passionate believer in Kilkenny hurling. Proclaiming all-time greats like Lory Meagher, the famed Lorenzo the Great of heroic solo run and dodge through all the field to net a legendary goal in 1935. A witnessed moment of perfection raising the hurler of Tullaroan to the teacher's classroom pantheon of Euclid and Pythagoras, Horace, Cicero and Virgil, Aogán Ó Rathaille and Shakespeare, his order's founder Edmund Rice of Callan and Rita of Cascia, patron saint of the impossible.

*Parabola*. That gaunt man of kindness, now years gone down the lonesome road; believer in a power beyond the possible. The pot of orchard honey he bestowed on you in recognition of your Leaving Cert results. The innocence and sweetness of that gesture from the long ago, returned to ambush ordinary now and here of Kevin, knife in hand, musing on replay and chance.

*You can never be up to the Cats, though their best forward is in trouble since their last meeting-up with Limerick. Bad news, the torn hamstring, in either man or beast. But still you could never be up to them. The black and amber. Always ready with the lightning strike. Just when you least expect it.*

He pauses with the knife in hand, looks up and shakes his head before again addressing the block to make the final cut.

*I'd say it could be close in the finish.*

*It could be very close.*

*It all depends.*