

Derek Mahon

**NEW
SELECTED
POEMS**

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Gallery Books

New Selected Poems

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Contents

Glengormley	page 11
Carrowdore	12
Day Trip to Donegal	13
An Unborn Child	14
An Image from Beckett	16
Lives	18
Afterlives	21
Leaves	23
A Curious Ghost	24
The Snow Party	25
The Last of the Fire Kings	26
The Mayo Tao	28
Ford Manor	29
The Banished Gods	30
A Refusal to Mourn	32
A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford	34
Going Home	36
The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush	39
North Wind	40
Courtyards in Delft	42
Derry Morning	44
Rock Music	45
Everything Is Going to Be All Right	46
Tractatus	47
A Garage in Co. Cork	48
The Woods	50
Craigvara House	52
The Globe in Carolina	55
Girls on the Bridge	57
Beyond the Pale	59
Antarctica	60
Kinsale	61
Dawn at St Patrick's	62
from New York Time	
1 WINTER	65
16 KEY WEST	67



17 ST BRIDGET'S DAY 70
18 RAIN 72
from Decadence
2 AXEL'S CASTLE 75
18 A BANGOR REQUIEM 77
Ghosts 79
Roman Script 80
Shapes and Shadows 84
Lapis Lazuli 86
The Widow of Kinsale 87
Calypso 90
Brian Moore's Belfast 94
A Lighthouse in Maine 96
Research 97
A Quiet Spot 98
The Thunder Shower 99
New Space 101
Beached Whale 103
At the Butler Arms 105
A Country Kitchen 107
Balcony of Europe 108
Monochrome 109
Here in Tenerife 112
The History Train 113
Palinurus 115
Montaigne 116
Dreams of a Summer Night 117

for Sarah

Glengormley

'Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man'
who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
and grasped the principle of the watering can.
Clothes pegs litter the window ledge
and the long ships lie in clover; washing lines
shake out white linen over the chalk thanes.

Now we are safe from monsters, and the giants
who tore up sods twelve miles by six
and hurled them out to sea to become islands
can worry us no more. The sticks
and stones that once broke bones will not now harm
a generation of such sense and charm.

Only words hurt us now. No saint or hero,
landing at night from the conspiring seas,
brings dangerous tokens to the new era —
their sad names linger in the histories.
The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain,
dangle from lamp posts in the dawn rain;

and much dies with them. I should rather praise
a worldly time under this worldly sky —
the terrier-taming, garden-watering days
those heroes pictured as they struggled through
the quick noose of their finite being. By
necessity, if not choice, I live here too.

Carrowdore

(at the grave of Louis MacNeice)

Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,
however the wind tugs, the headstones shake.
This plot is consecrated, for your sake,
to what lies in the future tense. You lie
past tension now, and spring is coming round
igniting flowers on the peninsula.

Your ashes will not fly, however the winds roar
through yew and bramble. Soon the biographies
and buried poems will begin to appear,
but we pause here to remember the lost life.
Maguire proposes a blackbird in low relief
over the grave, and a phrase from Euripides.

Which suits you down to the ground, like this churchyard
with its play of shadow, its humane perspective.
Locked in the winter's fist, these hills are hard
as nails, yet soft and feminine in their turn
when fingers open and the hedges burn.
This, you implied, is how we ought to live —

the ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,
each fragile, solving ambiguity. So
from the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
of the blind poet and the bombed town you bring
the all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.

Day Trip to Donegal

We reached the sea in early afternoon,
climbed stiffly out; there were things to be done,
clothes to be picked up, friends to be seen.
As ever, the nearby hills were a deeper green
than anywhere in the world, and the grave
grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave.

Down at the pier the boats gave up their catch,
a squirming glimmer of gills. They fetch
ten times as much in the city as there,
and still the fish come in year after year —
herring and mackerel, flopping about the deck
in attitudes of agony and heartbreak.

We left at eight, drove back the way we came,
the sea receding down each muddy lane.
Around midnight we changed down into suburbs
sunk in a sleep no gale-force wind disturbs.
The time of year had left its mark
on frosty pavements glistening in the dark.

Give me a ring, goodnight, and so to bed . . .
That night the slow sea washed against my head,
performing its immeasurable erosions —
spilling into the skull, marbling the stones
that spine the very harbour wall,
muttering its threat to villages of landfall.

At dawn I was alone far out at sea
without skill or reassurance — nobody
to show me how, no promise of rescue —
cursing my constant failure to take due
forethought for this; contriving vain
overtures to the vindictive wind and rain.

An Unborn Child

(for Michael and Edna Longley)

I have already come to the verge of
departure; a month or so and
I shall be vacating this familiar room.
Its fabric fits me almost like a glove
while leaving latitude for a free hand.
I begin to put on the manners of the world
sensing the splitting light above
my head, where in the silence I lie curled.

Certain mysteries are relayed to me
through the dark network of my mother's body
while she sits sewing the white shrouds
of my apotheosis. I know the twisted
kitten that lies there sunning itself
under the bare bulb, the clouds
of goldfish mooning around upon the shelf.
In me these data are already vested;

I know them in my bones — bones which embrace
nothing, for I am completely egocentric.
The pandemonium of encumbrances
which will absorb me, mind and senses,
intricacies of the maze and the rat race,
I imagine only. Though they linger and,
like fingers, stretch until the knuckles crack,
they cannot dwarf the dimensions of my hand.

I must compose myself at the nerve centre
of this metropolis, and not fidget —
although sometimes at night, when the city
has gone to sleep, I keep in touch with it,
listening to the warm red water
racing in the rivers of my mother's body;

or the moths, soft as eyelids, or the rain
wiping its wet wings on the windowpane.

And sometimes, too, in the small hours of the morning
when the dead filament has ceased to ring,
after the goldfish are dissolved in darkness
and the kitten has gathered itself up into a ball
between the groceries and the sewing,
I slip the trappings of my harness
to range these hollows in discreet rehearsal
and, kicking at the concavity of my caul,

produce in my mouth the words 'I want to live!' —
this my first protest, and shall be my last.
As I am innocent, everything I do
or say is couched in the affirmative.
I want to see, hear, touch and taste
these things with which I am to be encumbered.
Perhaps I needn't worry. Give
or take a day or two, my days are numbered.