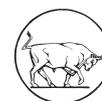


Tom French

MIDNIGHTSTOWN



Gallery Books

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*to the memory
of Anne Kennedy*

The Delivery Room

James Henry French, b. 20.11.2003

They had wheeled your mother to theatre
in a plunge-back gown for the performance
of a lifetime, and left us to keep company
at her bedside after the bed was gone —

you on the flat of your back in an incubator,
a spaceman, minutes old, taking it all in
and taking your time about sampling the air.
Someone is going to tell you, so let it be me —

because the blood and the heat were too much
I lifted the sash window and, slipping my head out
for a breath of air, took in the cemetery — the skip
parked inside the gate for withered wreaths,

the far corner, filled with innocents, still green,
row upon row of neat marble and granite,
the only sound a car on the Bridge of Peace
and an ambulance idling at A&E.

We will never be in a room as full or as empty.
The first voices we heard were voices off —
night sisters whispering, nearing their shift's end,
that the night just gone had felt like an eternity.

Flock

for Andrew Bennett

All this week, between us
and the sea, starlings
in their thousands have been

flocking, darkening
the sky in the hour before
the sky itself darkens.

Three floors up, above
the stage of *The Peacock*,
weeks before you get

to grips with lines and text,
in a rehearsal room
the furniture's pushed back

and a cast is taking
time out of its life to flock,
all banking and turning

when one banks and turns,
mimicking birds to make a play
because the smoothness

of their flocking depends on trust.
An hour south of us
daylight, like house lights, dips.

Starlings on the roofs
of *The Plough* and *The Tide*
are startled by a flash of faces,

a phalanx of backs,
as a draught happens
and the curtain lifts.

A Roll Call

i.m. Peggie Kerbey (1923-2012)

A whole half-century before you told
your grandchild she'd been out before
and she said, 'I was, Peg. And I'm going
out again', we find ourselves searching
on the morning of your last day on Earth
for you in the rolls of Kentstown Girls'
National School, and find you at last
close to the door on the morning of your first day,
hiding behind your maiden name in Irish
in the old *cló* beside the *X* that makes you
present and correct, the wise child taking
things in, being taken in by nothing,
who was out before, and is going out again.

Fires

1

My mother told me how the church was saved
by someone in the small hours spotting smoke.
She said that marble cracked, organ pipes glowed
white hot and belched like chimney stacks,
stone fonts ran bone-dry. She went into the dark

weeks after — steeplejacks abseiling like saints
in the air above the altar, cleaning the ceiling
with *J Cloths* and squeegies to stem the soot-rain —
into the pains they took to lift the dirt and leave
the mural's beautifully executed wounds untouched.

I believed she was speaking the antiphon to me —
'This is my son, my beloved, in whom is my delight' —
as we wished each other peace and stepped into the light,
and the great rose window blossomed into flame.

2

All those nights we slept, he fought the blaze.
Out every road, for days, summer fires burned.
Now it's dawn. He smoulders in the yard,
cupping a *Gold Bond*, bearing our shovel,
his bull's wool tunic drapes from a shoulder.

I've come to the back kitchen door to see
what the weather is doing on The Devil's Bit,
and close it again against turf smoke, burnt furze,
my father, turning his black face towards me
as if to speak, bent double, returned, beyond words.