

John Montague

**SECOND
CHILDHOOD**



Gallery Books

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PART ONE

Second Childhood

Summer Snow

*I dreamt a dream of madness
beside a sunstruck sea:
the snow lay thick in August,
chill flakes cloaking me.*

*To you alone could I tell it
for you alone could know
how by the sea in August
the sky was full of snow.*

(1948)

*for Elizabeth,
my wordfount*

I

The Afterlife of Dogs

I tried to come between
my dog and his dying
in a dark corner of our barn,

cajoling him
to wag his tail
(as he had always done)

but he wanted none of it,
though he licked my hand.

Next morning he was dead.
We buried him in a corner
of our garden. I did not know

then that dying is an art
which dogs have mastered:
their frail show of love

a final dignity.
Over the years several
would follow him,

even old Flo, drowsing
in front of the house, lumbered
over by the Post-Office van.

Seven dogs beneath the rhubarb,
beside our lorry-laden road.

Star Song

The stars still sing,
even if, clamorous mortals,
we cannot hear them
chorusing their silver music,
silent nocturnes.

A new astronomy is needed —
to marry the scientific
and mythical,
the musical and magical,
the gleaming mathematical.

As a child I lay,
trying to hear them,
like the astronomer princes
of the Old World:
keeping a vigil,
attending a miracle.

Fowl Play

My aunt sits on the hillock
while the turkeys assemble
to peck from her hand
or the metal bucket or shallow basin
until all the feed is gone. But still
they *gobble, gobble*

until their rattle startles the rooster
which struts triumphant in the farmyard,
having speared a young hen
in a flurry of feathers,
with a strident *Cock-a-Doodle-Do*.

But when, lord of the farmyard,
he stalks over to chasten the turkeys,
swiftly they surround him,
plying their long stabbing beaks —
eating the head off him!

The bright red rooster staggers,
his wattles laced with blood,
his trumpet call silenced,
while the hens settle in the sand
indifferent to their much offended lord.

Only my aunt attends,
to soothe the victim,
to cleanse his ragged comb,
and smooth his wounded wattles.
Silence reigns in the farmyard.