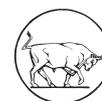


Tom French

# THE LAST STRAW



Gallery Books

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*for my care*

## *The Last Light*

Everything that can be is disconnected.

Our fire dies. The starlings, nested  
in the eaves, have settled. We have cut  
the house adrift to sleep. Now, before

I turn the key, I listen again to my life —  
wind in the roof space, a maternity case  
settling on the rafters, waves breaking  
three fields away, a freight train slipping

southwards towards the port; at the stairs,  
our stray stretched out in her shadow;  
upstairs, my wife, all my care, asleep.  
Above us, a flight banks in the dark,

beginning its descent. The road, this night,  
goes quiet. I extinguish the last light.

## *Ben Head*

*When the red flag is flying at Ben Head  
firing is actually taking place.*

— Military notice

The gates to *Shangri La* are closed.  
The razor shell trawlers are out in force.  
The throes of the old year are over. Like geese  
the pangs of the new arrive on cue —

*. . . what I have done, what I have failed to do . . .*

From the Refugee Accommodation Centre  
sounds of children going about their play.  
A graffiti artist has sprayed on the wall

built for the soldiers simulating war —  
*There is somewhere else that is worse than here.*  
We walk the back beach to the firing range  
and take in at the Head what last night left —

the two duck-down duvets and the *fáinne*  
of stones are a *Toraíocht Diarmuid agus Gráinne*,  
their fire gone out before it even got going,  
their single can of cider shared and crushed.

Love thought nothing of sleeping outdoors  
to catch the blessing of the year's first sun.  
We'll never know how dangerously they lived,  
sheltering their flame at the edge of the abyss,

risking exposure for one lasting kiss,  
in flight, in love, taking what ease they could,  
taking for clouds the snow-covered mountains,  
for snow-covered mountains the clouds just south.

## *In a Coastal Classroom*

'Angels walk into rooms with us. We cannot see them' —  
she wrote in the jotter I sign and tick correct and date,  
but there will be no more learning metaphor today  
because the *cigire* with his metronome has come

to hear the junior orchestra and choir play and sing;  
no more for everyone except for this frail one.  
Tone-deaf, rhythmless, she gets more English classes  
than the others, and loves them, especially metaphor.

The day we opened the windows she wrote — 'The sea  
is a blanket the earth is struggling to cover itself with.'  
I open the windows to set her loose upon the sea again  
as, somewhere in a classroom overhead, the rosinning

of bows, throat-clearings, tuning of violin strings ends  
as the girls she came to English with break into a hymn.

## *Station*

Some evenings  
a nearly empty northbound going through at speed  
between the lit-up platforms  
leaves me feeling inexplicably bereft,  
as if it were my life;

and others  
it is the locomotive by itself,  
flat out, trying to catch up with  
all that went ahead, or going on ahead  
to ensure the coast is clear.

It is gone  
even before I register its coming.  
I am buffeted, buffeted, then stilled.  
That is the one that rips the heart from me,  
racing, placing all its faith  
in one more mile of track.

## *'It is written . . . '*

It is written by the Commissioners that a pauper will pass  
a half bushel of bones through a quarter-inch sieve  
to keep him and his flesh and blood from starvation,  
that those bones will enrich, in their turn, the earth.

The Commissioners' *sieve* is the poor man's *riddle*.  
After every half bushel, as the ground around him  
grows more and more fertile, a fresh half bushel is found.  
But riddle me this — how many half bushels must pass

through that mesh? The same man might crush  
the bones of a million animals and more, and still  
that sieve will be a *sieve*, and that riddle a *riddle*.

And how can the bones of the hand that holds the hammer  
break the last bones to pass through that mesh  
when the last bones to pass through it are its own?