

Derek Mahon

# ECHO'S GROVE

*Translations*



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## Exequy

*from the Italian of Petrarch*

The eyes of which I spoke so warmly once,  
the face and figure, shoulders, hands and knees  
that once deranged my rational faculties  
and made me different from the usual bunch;  
the quick inviting smile and generous breast,  
the streaming hair with its angelic glow  
that seemed to make a paradise below,  
are now a whisper of insentient dust.

Yet I live on, in grief and self-disdain,  
bereft of the light I loved so earnestly,  
as if on a lost ship in a storm at sea.  
Now there will be no more love poetry:  
the vital flow has dried up in the vein  
and the strings whimper in a minor key.

## Night and Day

*from the Italian of Ludovico Ariosto, 1474-1533*

Brighter and clearer to me than mere daylight  
are crafty night-for-day and day-for-night  
when sun and stars, conspiring with the dark,  
relax their vigilance and fade to black.  
Cloud cover, shadow; the world goes to bed  
and leaves two lovers only wide awake,  
one caped and hooded down a colonnade  
furtively flitting on invisible wings  
where a door opens with a faint squeak  
audible only to the intent sex maniac.  
I'm still not sure if I'm imagining things  
when your hand guides me to a secret spot  
where hips and thighs like vines reticulate,  
I quench my thirst in your wide-open mouth,  
we gasp the quick rush and exchange of breath  
and tremble in the metaphysical love fight.  
These images will persist until life cease,  
exploding like the sulphurous candlelight  
which showed us clearly what was taking place,  
pre-coital fever and post-coital peace,  
consensual chiaroscuro and thumping heart.  
No love can be complete with the light out  
— so much better to have the gaze rest  
on gaze, flesh tones and cherishable breast,  
the speaking ears, the flickering and the moist  
and the rose-petal lips unknown to thorn,  
so satisfying the senses that each one  
comes into play and none is left forlorn.  
So precious the night-time and so brief,  
and so severe the hardships of this life  
when day breaks, banishing your dozy lover,  
can we not live in a world of love for ever?

## Art and Dust

*from the Italian of Michelangelo, 1475-1564*

How can it be, as long experience shows,  
the image hidden in the calcium carbonate  
lasts longer, lady, than the artist does  
who turns to dust again as at the start?  
The cause yields to the outcome and withdraws;  
nature is conquered once again by art  
and, proving this, my very sculpture knows  
death and time, faced with the work, depart.

A long life to the pair of us I can give  
in either medium, whether in paint or stone,  
to keep our living countenances alive  
so people centuries after we have gone  
will see your beauty and my wretched plight  
and know in loving you I got it right.

## Oisín

*from the Irish (16th century), anonymous*

Wind chimes on wave and wood.  
Niamh, daughter of ocean,  
knows the naive Oisín  
has gone to his true reward.