

Frank McGuinness

**IN A TOWN OF  
FIVE THOUSAND  
PEOPLE**



Gallery Books

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## *How to Build Your Gondola*

*after Canaletto's 'Rio del Medicanti'*

*for Brian Friel*

Don't beggar yourself settling in Venice.  
Avoid glitzy squares and bejewelled bridges  
leading to more glitzy squares that connect  
bejewelled bridges with mansions hewn from air.  
The doge and all his courtiers, scheming,  
scholarly, dressed in furs of their wildest dreams,  
flaunting all they have — it is all they have —  
when they pass, ignore them, they'll be removed.  
Bear in mind you've come to Venice to learn  
how to build your gondola — a working craft,  
a vessel, to ferry ancestral milk  
and furniture, bed linen, bits of time  
they scavenged and tied to their humpy backs  
when they charged the Grand Canal and rested,  
turning up their noses at Torcello's spuds,  
refusing to dine on food fit for tinkers.  
Their like provides wood for your gondola  
fashioned into clothes lines of shirts and socks,  
togs and trousers, rags of your livery.  
You've served your time, you've survived in Venice.

## PART ONE

### *The Town Next To Us*

Never liked it much — the town next to us.  
They had the works — ambulance, hospitals.  
Not even their signposts showed where we live.  
Their bosses were model, their bakeries gold  
as wheat plundered from our ovens to feed  
the all, the sundry of Inishowen,  
Tyrconnell, every art and every part  
of godforsaken, glorious Donegal.

The people right plasters of Paris,  
the streets long white streaks of gypsum,  
take the eye from your head, bite from your mouth,  
tyres and wheels under your vehicle.  
There were twenty-three hours in our day —  
those bastards had stolen a march on us.  
They thrived on big feeds and mountains of wine;  
never put their hands into their pockets.

It's said the same hands were strangers to water.  
Soap was rare as a word of welcome.  
It snowed at Easter — their Christmas was shite.  
The heat of summer brought them out in hives.  
Too mean to scratch their scaly hides, they scrimped —  
they saved a fortune hoarding dirty cans  
of beans and peas to feed their families.  
Bad weed grows well; they thrived in poisoned fields.

They rented out the holy church to Moonies  
and to Hare Krishnas — could they have luck  
dancing nude before the tabernacle,  
speaking in tongues as false as their teeth?  
Any wonder their sons and strange daughters  
defied their mad marriage beds, divorcing  
in Satanic worship of the four winds  
that blew their breed ashore to the next town.

They cut the throats of innocent women.  
They drank their blood from skulls of virgins.  
They kept as pets a pack of wolves — no child  
was saved from their temptation of fancy  
biscuits — Jaffa Cakes, USA Assortment,  
Kimberley, Mikado, Coconut Creams —  
Jacobs and Japs, South African miners —  
I swear to Christ that kip was jammed with them.

It had to come to a very bad end.  
It did when lightning struck twenty-three times.  
Who can explain the sympathy of fire?  
It took a scundering to the town next to us.  
Its flames did clothe their naked shamelessness.  
We heard them weeping in alien words.  
Ambulance, hospitals did not save them.  
There being no signposts, what could we do?

### *Portrait of Myself with My Imaginary Wife*

Mother died of starvation.  
In the photograph we sent Father,  
taken in orange, taken in grey,  
dressed entirely in pink, dressed in white,  
her veil her face, her face two lips,  
lips do not move, they do not eat,  
saying the colour grey, the colour orange.  
In the photograph we sent Father  
she bandaged her famished hands  
and fed them to the son who survived her.  
Did he?  
Every woman I meet now I marry,  
saying, let me feed you,  
let me be your mother.

## *The Fox Fight*

*in memory of Eileen McDaid*

At five in the morning  
I heard the fox  
who settled in my garden  
have a fight to the death  
with her own shadow,  
her wails an iron cross  
she'd feed to her cubs  
instead of her blood.

I carry in my shoe  
the clay of my garden,  
my feet two hungry cubs  
devouring my belly,  
wailing through my veins,  
looking for their mother,  
looking for her blood,  
at five in the morning.

I felt the same blood  
run through my veins  
as I stood alone  
at my aunt's grave  
lamenting her first and last,  
the weight of her coffin  
dislocating  
my shoulder blades.

May I take as my tribe  
the starving vixen's belly  
dining on clay,  
gargling on grief,

in battle with our shadows,  
my weapon an iron cross  
dislocating  
my shoulder blades.