

John Montague

**NEW  
COLLECTED  
POEMS**



Gallery Books

*New Collected Poems*  
is first published  
simultaneously in paperback  
and in a clothbound edition  
on 28 June 2012.

The Gallery Press  
Loughcrew  
Oldcastle  
County Meath  
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

*All rights reserved. For permission  
to reprint or broadcast these poems,  
write to The Gallery Press.*

© John Montague 2012

ISBN 978 1 85235 538 8 *paperback*  
978 1 85235 539 5 *clothbound*  
978 1 85235 540 1 *limited, signed edition*

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.



## Contents

### *The Rough Field* (1972)

- 'Old moulds are broken in the North'* page 23
- I HOME AGAIN 25
- 'Lost in our separate work'* 25
- 1 *'Catching a bus at Victoria Station'* 25
- 2 *'Hearing the cock crow in the dark'* 27
- 3 *'Between small, whin-tough hills'* 27
- 4 *The Country Fiddler* 29
- 5 *Like Dolmens Round My Childhood* 30
- II THE LEAPING FIRE 32
- 'Each morning, from the corner'* 32
- 1 *The Little Flower's Disciple* 32
- 2 *The Living & the Dead* 33
- 3 *Omagh Hospital* 35
- 4 *A Hollow Note* 36
- III THE BREAD GOD 38
- 'I break again into the lean parish of my art'* 38
- Christmas Morning* 39
- Late-comer* 40
- Crowd* 40
- After Mass* 41
- Penal Rock: Altamuskin* 42
- An Ulster Prophecy* 43
- IV A SEVERED HEAD 44
- 1 *The Road's End* 44
- 2 *A Lost Tradition* 47
- 3 *Ulster's Pride* 48
- 1 *Con Bacach, 1542* 48
- 2 *Seán an Diomas, 1562* 49
- 3 *Hugh, 1599* 49
- 4 *After Kinsale, 1604* 50
- 4 *The Flight of the Earls* 51
- 5 *A Grafted Tongue* 52
- 6 *Even English* 54
- V THE FAULT 55
- 1 *Stele for a Northern Republican* 55
- 2 *The Same Fault* 57

- 3 Sound of a Wound 57
- 4 The Cage 59
- VI A GOOD NIGHT 61
  - 1 The Last Sheaf 61
  - 2 The Fight 63
  - 3 Salutation 64
  - 4 The Source 65
  - 5 Roseland 68
- VII HYMN TO THE NEW OMAGH ROAD 70
  - 'As the bulldozer bites into the tree-ringed hillfort' 70
  - 1 Balance Sheet 70
    - 1 Loss 70
    - 2 Gain 71
  - 2 Glencull Waterside 72
- VIII PATRIOTIC SUITE 74
  - 1 The Lure 74
  - 2 'The mythic lyre shrunk to country size' 75
  - 3 '*Smell of appleblossom in the air*' 75
  - 4 'Symbolic depth-charge of music' 75
  - 5 'The tribes merged into the hills' 76
  - 6 The Enterprise 77
  - 7 Coole Park & Abbey Theatre 1951 78
  - 8 'World-witnessed, our spiritual empire' 78
  - 9 The Siege of Mullingar 79
  - 10 'The gloomy images of a provincial catholicism' 80
- IX A NEW SIEGE 82
- X THE WILD DOG ROSE 91
  - Epilogue 95

*The Great Cloak (1978)*

'As my Province burns' 97

- I SEARCH 98
  - Mount Venus 98
  - The Hunt 98
  - The Huntsman's Apology 99
  - Do Not Disturb 99
  - Tracks 100
  - Caught 101
  - Closed Circuit 102

- Talisman 103
- Don Juan's Farewell 103
- Love, a Greeting 104
- II SEPARATION 106
  - '*Your mistake, my mistake*' 106
  - The Screech Owl 106
  - Late 106
  - Darkness 107
  - Childless 107
  - Tearing 108
    - 1 'I sing your pain' 108
    - 2 Pastourelle 108
    - 3 Never 109
    - 4 Refrain 110
  - In the Dark 110
  - She Walks Alone 111
  - She Daydreams, by the Blue Pool 112
  - Separation 112
  - Wedge 113
  - L'Adieu 115
  - No Music 115
  - The Blue Room 115
  - She Writes 116
  - She Dreams 117
  - Liadan Laments Cuirithir 118
  - Lament 119
  - Herbert Street Revisited 120
- III ANCHOR 123
  - A Meeting 123
  - A Dream of July 123
  - The Same Gesture 124
  - Allegiance 125
  - Walking Late 125
  - Song 127
  - Working Dream 127
  - Blessing 128
  - When the Wind Blows 128
  - The Wanderer 129
  - After a Quarrel 129

Sunset 130  
Waiting 130  
Gossip 131  
Protest 131  
The Great Cloak 131  
Child 132  
The Point 132  
Plea 133  
Edge 133

*The Dead Kingdom (1984)*

I UPSTREAM 136

Upstream 136  
A Murmuring Stream 137  
A Last Gesture 139  
Abbeylara 140  
Process 141  
Gone 142  
Invocation to the Guardian 143

II THIS NEUTRAL REALM 145

'I cast a pebble down, to' 145  
Bog Royal 145  
A Slight Fragrance 147  
Red Island 148  
*Crannóg* 149  
Sword Land 151  
This Neutral Realm 152  
The Music Box 153  
The Well Dreams 155

III THE BLACK PIG 158

The Black Pig 158  
Border Lake 159  
Border 159  
The Plain of Blood 161  
The Web of Man (*A Curse*) 162  
Red Branch (*A Blessing*) 163  
Deities 164

IV THE SILVER FLASK 167

Gravity 167

Northern Express 168  
Intimacy 169  
Molly Bawn 170  
A Muddy Cup 172  
A Christmas Card 174  
At Last 175  
The Silver Flask 176  
Last Journey 178  
What a View 179

V A FLOWERING ABSENCE 183

Family Conference 183  
Procession 183  
Northern Lights 185  
A Flowering Absence 188  
The Locket 191  
A New Litany 193  
Back 194

from *Poisoned Lands and Other Poems (1961, 1977)*

The Water Carrier 197  
The Sean Bhean Bhocht 198  
Sick Call 199  
A Drink of Milk 200  
Murphy in Manchester 201  
A Royal Visit 202  
Old Mythologies 204  
A Footnote on Monasticism: Dingle Peninsula 204  
Soliloquy on a Southern Strand 205  
Dirge of the Mad Priest 207  
Rhetorical Meditations in Time of Peace 208  
    1 Speech for an Ideal Irish Election 208  
    2 Caledon Castle 209  
    3 Slum Clearance 210  
    4 Emigrants 210  
    5 Incantation in Time of Peace 210  
Wild Sports of the West 211  
Poisoned Lands 212  
The Mummer Speaks 213  
Nursery Story 214

Cultural Centre: Musée Imaginaire 215  
Bus Stop, Nevada 217  
Above the Pool 217  
Irish Street Scene, with Lovers 218  
Woodtown Manor 219  
Tim 220  
The First Invasion of Ireland 221

from *A Chosen Light* (1967)

ALL LEGENDARY OBSTACLES 224  
In Dedication 224  
1 Obsession 224  
2 The Trout 225  
3 Country Matters 226  
4 *Virgo Hibernica* 228  
5 All Legendary Obstacles 229  
6 Sentence for Konarak 230  
7 Loving Reflections 230  
    1 *Amo, ergo sum* 230  
    2 The Blow 231  
    3 Pitch-dark 231  
8 That Room 232  
9 The Water's Edge 232  
10 A Charm 233  
11 A Private Reason 234  
12 Return 235  
A Bright Day 236  
Witness 236  
Hill Field 237  
Clear the Way 238  
Forge 239  
Time Out 239  
A Chosen Light 240  
    1 *11 rue Daguerre* 240  
    2 Salute, in passing, for Sam 240  
    3 Radiometers in the rue Jacob 241  
The Broken Shape 242  
    1 Enclosure 242  
    2 The Centenarian 243

The Split Lyre 244  
Coaticue 245  
Division 246  
Sweetness 247  
Beyond the Liss 248

from *Tides* (1970)

Premonition 252  
Summer Storm 253  
    1 A Door Banging 253  
    2 Mosquito Hunt 253  
    3 Tides 254  
The Hag of Beare 255  
Coming Events 259  
Medusa 259  
Special Delivery 260  
Life Class 262  
The Northern Gate 265  
To Cease 266  
James Joyce 267  
Sea Changes 268  
    'Each rock pool a garden' 268  
    1 Boats 268  
    2 Net 269  
    3 Undertow 270  
    4 Wine Dark Sea 271

from *A Slow Dance* (1975)

1 Sweeney 273  
2 The Dance 274  
3 Message 275  
4 Seskilgreen 276  
5 For the Hillmother 277  
Courtyard in Winter 278  
Small Secrets 281  
Homes 283  
    1 Famine Cottage 283  
    2 Victorian Ireland 283  
Dowager 284

Views 284  
 1 Back Door 284  
 2 Kerry 285  
 Almost a Song 285  
 The Errigal Road 286  
 Windharp 288  
 The Cave of Night 289  
 1 Underside 289  
 2 The Plain of Adoration 289  
 3 Cave 290  
 4 All Night 291  
 5 Falls Funeral 292  
 6 Ratonnade 292  
 Killing the Pig 294  
 Hero's Portion 295  
 Hunter's Weapon 297  
 The Massacre 298  
 Mother Cat 298  
 A Graveyard in Queens 300  
 All Souls 304  
 Ó Riada's Farewell 306  
   '*Roving, unsatisfied ghost*' 306  
 1 Woodtown Manor, Again 306  
 2 'Abruptly, closer to self-revelation' 307  
 3 'I sense the magisterial strain' 307  
 4 'A door opens' 308  
 5 Samhain 308  
 6 Hell Fire Club 309  
 7 The Two Gifts 310  
 8 Lament 312

from *Mount Eagle* (1989)

Pacific Legend 314  
*Up So Doïin* 314  
 Springs 315  
 Hearth Song 316  
 Moving In 318  
 Postmistress (*A Diptych*) 318  
 1 Brigid Montague (1876-1966) 318

2 Winifred Montague (1900-1983) 319

Semiotics 319  
 Cassandra's Answer 320  
 A Real Irishman 321  
 Respect 322  
 Husbandry 323  
 Turnhole 324  
*Sheela na Gig* 325  
 Gabriel 325  
 Fair Head 326  
 Deer Park 327  
 Matins 328  
 Crossing 329  
 Harvest 330  
 Discords 331  
 The Well-beloved 332  
 She Cries 333  
 Sibyl's Morning 334  
 Tea Ceremony 336  
 A Small Death 336  
 Nest 338  
 The Black Lake 338  
 Luggala 339  
 Survivor 339  
 Mount Eagle 340  
 The Hill of Silence 342

from *Time in Armagh* (1993)

1 Guide 347  
 2 A Bomber's Moon 348  
 3 Peephole 349  
 4 Extra Mural 350  
 5 Lunatic 351  
 6 Time in Armagh 352  
 7 Waiting 355  
 8 *Deo Gratias* 356  
 9 History Walk 357  
 10 Absence 359  
 11 A Welcoming Party 359

12 Outside Armagh Jail, 1971 360  
13 Stone 361

Border Sick Call (1995) 363

*Smashing the Piano (1999)*  
    ‘Fierce lyric truth’ 377  
    Paths 378  
    Within 379  
    Fairy Fort 381  
    Still Life, with Aunt Brigid 382  
    Kindertotenlieder 383  
        1 Time Off 383  
        2 Crossroads 384  
    Prayers for My Daughters 386  
        1 Le Bain: An Answer to Balthus 386  
        2 Guardians 387  
        3 Last Chance 387  
        4 The Sick Bird 388  
    Between 389  
    The Current 390  
    Dark Rooms 393  
        1 Wrath 393  
        2 Nightjar 393  
        3 Lying Figure 394  
        4 Stand In 394  
        5 The Blade 395  
        6 Postscript 395  
        7 Chain Letter 396  
    Honey Harvest 396  
    Brigid O’Neill 397  
    Talking with Victor Hugo, in Old Age 398  
    There are Days 399  
    Dumbshow 400  
    Poor Poll 400  
    Captain Greacen 401  
    The Yachtsman’s Jacket 402  
    Claddagh Raga 403  
    Robert, Old Stager 404

Summer School 405  
In the Pool 406  
A New Art 407  
On Hearing Kamaladevi Speak Again 407  
Araby, 1984 407  
Sun Hymn 408  
A Charm for Europe 410  
Sonnet on the Opening of Wrixon’s Wine Cellar 411  
The Two Seáns 412  
    1 Seán Ó Ríordáin 412  
    2 Seán Ó Riada 413  
Sweet & Sour 414  
Starspill 415  
Raptors 415  
    1 Conservatives 415  
    2 Nature 416  
    3 Balor 417  
Remission 418  
Flower, Stone, Sea 419  
    1 The Smell of the Earth 419  
    2 Flowers 420  
        Carnac 420  
        Rocamadour 420  
    3 At Teilhard de Chardin’s Grave 421  
    4 Lullaby 421  
    5 The Well-wrought Urn 422  
The Family Piano 422  
Looking Glass 423  
The Straying Blackthorn 424  
Civil Wars 425  
    1 Unapproved 425  
    2 Internment 426  
    3 Shadow 426  
    4 Sands 427  
    5 Place Names 427  
    6 Weeds 427  
    7 A Response to Omagh 428  
    8 Sunny Jim 428  
Magic Carpet 429

Lost Worlds 430  
Landing 431

*Drunken Sailor* (2004)

PART ONE

White Water 434  
The Hag's Cove 434  
Roethke's Ghost at Roches Point 437  
Hermit 438  
Last Resort, Normandy 439  
Coast Road 440  
The Absent Limb 440  
Sea Bed 442  
Horizons 443

PART TWO

Letter Valley 444  
    1 Mary Kate's Kitchen 444  
    2 Scribe in the Woods 444  
    3 Replay 445  
Head or Harp 445  
Pilgrims 446  
The Deer Trap 446  
Clabber: The Poet at Three Years 447  
Heart Land 448  
West Cork Annunciation 448  
Prodigal Son 449  
Elements of the Luberon 451  
A Fertile Balance 452  
A Holy Show 455  
Demolition Ireland 455  
The Listeners: Elizabeth's Dream 456  
Last of the House 457

PART THREE

Legerdemain 458  
Scraping the Pot 458  
Family Rosary 459  
    1 'The rasp and scrape of wood on stone' 459  
    2 The Trimmings 460  
Wreaths 461

    1 A Good Bye 461  
    2 Civil War Veteran 462

Grave Song 462  
Last Court 463  
First Landscape, First Death 466  
Slievemore 469

PART FOUR

The Plain of Blood 471

*Speech Lessons* (2011)

I PART ONE

One Bright Sunday 479  
Speech Lesson 480  
Adam's Apple 482  
A Memory of Nuala 483  
The Wild Irish Goat 483  
Scarecrow 484  
Baldung's Vision 485  
A Resigned President 486  
Leap 487  
A Long Line 488  
Leisure Centre 489  
Silences 489  
Vendange 490  
A Hit at Hardy 492  
Grandfather God 493

II IN MY GRANDFATHER'S MANSION

Prologue 494  
In My Grandfather's Mansion 496

III PATIENCE AND TIME

Many Mansions 505  
Disappointments 506  
Fodder 507  
Patience and Time 508  
Home Coming 509  
Devotions 511  
Hillside 512  
The Long Hangar 512

*from*  
**POISONED  
LANDS**  
AND OTHER POEMS

*The Water Carrier*

Twice daily I carried water from the spring,  
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;  
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets.

A bramble-rough path ran to the river  
Where you stepped carefully across slime-topped stones,  
With corners abraded as bleakly white as bones.

At the widening pool (for washing and cattle)  
Minute fish flickered as you dipped,  
Circling to fill, with rust-tinged water.

The second or enamel bucket was for spring water  
Which, after racing through a rushy meadow,  
Came bubbling in a broken drain-pipe,

Corroded wafer thin with rust.  
It ran so pure and cold it fell  
Like manacles of ice upon the wrists.

You stood until the bucket brimmed,  
Inhaling the musty smell of unpicked berries,  
That heavy greenness fostered by water.

Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylize it,  
Like the portrait of an Egyptian water carrier:  
But halt, entranced by slight but memoried life.

I sometimes come to take the water there,  
Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing,  
Some living source, half-imagined and half-real,

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.

## *The Sean Bhean Bhocht*

As a child I was frightened by her,  
Busy with her bowl of tea in a farmhouse chimney corner,  
Wrapped in a cocoon of rags and shawls.  
'The Lord have mercy on his soul:  
'Go ndeanaidh Dia trocaire ar a anam.'  
She rocked and crooned,  
A doll's head mouthing under stained rafters.

'The fairies of Ireland and the fairies of Scotland  
Fought on that hill all night  
And in the morning the well ran blood.  
The dead queen was buried on that hill.  
St Patrick passed by the mound:  
There is the mark of a footprint forever  
Where he stood to pray.'

Eyes rheumy with racial memory;  
Fragments of bread soaked in brown tea  
And eased between shrunken gums.  
Her clothes stank like summer flax;  
Watched all day as she swayed  
Towards death between memories and prayers  
By a farmer's child in a rough play-box.

'Mrs McGurran had the evil eye,  
She prayed prayers on the black cow:  
It dropped there and died,  
Dropped dead in its tracks.  
She stood on the mearing and cursed the Clarkes:  
They never had a good day since,  
Fluke and bad crops and a child born strange.'

In the groove a running-down record,  
Heavy with local history:  
Only the scratching now, the labouring breath,  
Prophecy rattling aged bones.  
Age is neither knowledge nor authority,

Though it may claim both,  
Weaving a litany of legends against death.

But in high summer as the hills burned with corn  
I strode through golden light  
To the secret spirals of the burial stone:  
The grass-choked well ran sluggish red —  
Not with blood but ferrous rust —  
But beneath the whorls of the guardian stone  
What faerie queene lay dust?

## *Sick Call*

*for Seamus*

When the doctor disappeared  
Under the thatched lintel  
To tend a farmer who had  
Fallen under his tractor,  
I tramped moodily back  
And forwards in the snow

Meeting my own drowning  
Footprints, as I turned,  
Seeing, as the dog barked,  
The trees, isolated and black  
Against the grey, whirling  
Bowl of the sky.

From the oblong of light  
His wife called me over  
To relate, *confidentially*  
(The cur whining at her apron),  
How hard it was, having  
Her husband 'in a bad way'.

As my brother's car rocked  
Down the rutted lane  
Scattering a powder of snow  
The dog resumed its yelping,  
Plunging at the wheels  
And back to safety again.

### *A Drink of Milk*

In the girdered dark  
of the byre cattle move;  
warm engines hushed  
to a siding groove

before the switch flicks  
down for milking.  
In concrete partitions  
they rattle their chains

while the farmhand eases  
rubber tentacles to tug  
lightly but rhythmically  
on their swollen dugs

and up the slim cylinders  
of the milking machine  
mounts an untouched  
steadily pulsing stream.

Only the tabby steals  
to dip its radar whiskers  
with old-fashioned relish  
in a chipped saucer

and before Seán lurches  
to kick his boots off

in the night-silent kitchen  
he draws a mug of froth

to settle on the sideboard  
under the hoard of delph.  
A pounding transistor shakes  
the Virgin on her shelf

as he dreams towards bed.  
A last glance at a magazine,  
he puts the mug to his head,  
grunts, and drains it clean.

### *Murphy in Manchester*

He wakes to a confused dream of boats, gulls,  
And all his raw present floats  
Suddenly up to him on rocking rails.  
Through that long first day  
He trudges streets, tracks friends,  
Stares open-mouthed at monuments  
To manufacturers, sabred generals.  
Passing a vegetable stall  
With exposed fruits he halts  
To contemplate a knobbly potato.

At lunchtime, in a cafeteria,  
He finds his feet and hands  
Enlarge, become like foreign lands.  
A great city is darkness, noise  
Through which bright girls move  
Like burnished other children's toys.  
Soon the whistling factory  
Will lock him in:  
Half-stirred memories and regrets  
Drawn into that iron din.

## *A Royal Visit*

*Tara, though she be desolate today,  
Once was the habitation of heroes . . .  
— from The Book of Leinster*

1

The deep cooing of doves  
As we move towards the earthen fort  
Is a subtly insidious music  
Designed to exhort:  
Axehead of the intellect washed  
In hovering fragrance of hawthorn,  
The primary colours of a summer morning.

2

This martial extravagance of mounds  
Cannot be approached simply:  
Through ritual sagas it resounds  
With din of war and love.  
Devious virgins and fisty men  
Gesturing against the sky  
Invoke the seasonal crucifixion.

3

Gaelic Acropolis or smoky hovel?  
In the enormous osiered banquet hall  
The sotted bards rehearse  
A genealogical glory:  
Stately assonance of verse  
Petrieves wolf-skinned warriors  
In galleries of race.

4

Who longs for subtler singing,  
Muted vocal of the dove,  
Seeks erotic terror ringing  
Over stony beds of love:  
Couple and landscape blended,  
Till beneath the hunchback mountain  
Plunges the boar of death.

5

A battle of miracles  
Proves the Christian dispensation,  
Druidic snow turning  
To merciful Christian rain:  
Christ is the greater magician.  
No more the phallic stone  
Screams for its ritual king.

6

A mournful St Patrick surveys  
This provincial magnificence;  
He sees what twitching sentries saw  
When five regal roads  
Across a landscape drew:  
The central lands of Meath dissolve  
Into planes of royal blue.