

Dermot Healy

**A FOOL'S
ERRAND**



Gallery Books

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*for Helen, Inor and Dallan
and in memory of
Peter Galligan,
musician and friend*

1 *The Leavings*

Since I began to
look up

at your psalm
all of the instruments

have turned into birds. I cannot watch a man in song
without wanting to draw his hand flung open.
With a pencil in the dark I mark the long neck of the cello
that flies ahead like a swan.
The bass joins the banjo — they swing low over Carney —
as the page turner

stands guard, ready to lean down and flick over when the
pianist nods
at the waves. A skein rises offstage, and always out there to
the left
is the straggler, the lone straggler, a violinist flying in from
the side, eyes darting from the script,

to the quartet,
then back to the page to fill in the grave

as he leans to the left with one shoe jumping
on the ear of a spade.

What to do with the umbrella?
Lay it in the aisle?

Stand it on the knee-rest?
Lay it out on the seat?

Instead the soldier rests his forehead on it in prayer, as the
 footsteps of communicants
go to and fro to the tap of the hymn, keeping time in shoes,
heels, coughs, steps, the slow shuffle

and poignant sounds of little knocks from afar.
A woman's firm heel. Quilts, coats; the echoes gather up
in a tremolo as the priest approaches the silent box on wheels,

tripping on a foot-rest as he goes.
Then the soldier in front salutes,

lifts his chin off the head of the umbrella
and, with a whisper, kneels.

A little finger
and one thumb

pick at the bass, and send
a line that drums

from the tip of the bow across to the lamp in the corner.
Another quick thread goes up and down the thrashing hair
of the singer as she faces into the screech,

mouth open, dress to the side. Away to the left, in the dark
 on the cliff, sits
the other singer whose turn has yet to come. And as she
 listens to the hum
of baroque her unflinching eyes are constantly fixed above
 our heads

on the lighthouse
out the rock of John,

turning off,
turning on.

In April when the first lobster
boat appears in the bay

laying pigs'
trotters in pots

offstage the orchestra of memory is tuning up in front of
the scarecrow
for their final appearance. They edge closer in their frocks,
and sweep and glide and land
in a rehearsal for leaving. We sit in our cars, or out the rocks,
in the dumb hall, ready for a signal that is never given. Fifty-
seven swans
cross with a slow beating flag. The first swallow is on the
horizon. Down in a hollow
the gaggle of geese gathers before the conductor who holds
his stalk up, ready to begin.

There isn't a sound. Like nuns in shawls
the geese walk the mission

with white beads running
through their wings.

If you're
on the headland

and stop
to look

up, it's as if you were turning down the leaf
of a book, so you might know where you stopped
reading that evening the geese shot out into the dark.

The book remains unopened for months, a whole summer.
The story of what happened is left unfinished, till one day
you stand out there on the rocky V of the alt, the quilt is
shook,

you look up, in the library of coincidence
and, by chance, find the leaf

turned down
at the sound of the mark.

They knit joy
to terror

north of the torn seam.
The needle travels

through the evening sky as they come in beautiful stitches
along a thread, and another thread. The fire is lit.
Memory is at the gate and waves time through.

We gather in the ticking reeds, the fork of wind, the leap of
the white mare
and stand by the battered gable trying to get our breath
for the journey that's left,

all of us
trying

to enter
the receding waters anew.

This was his jawbone.
This was his bed.

Here are his ashes,
hard now as lead.

The hills sit on an horizon made of clouds. The sea was a fire
that her hand lit. His seeds are pebbles. The head of the
black bush rises into the blue.
Her offspring slope up against the sky and walk like camels

into the inlet. His white skull is a torch under the heap of
shale.

The goose looks down on her shadow, the air is cold,
the dog rises off his rock, the moon tide rushes, we down
tools

and go indoors
to light fires

from the leavings of a story
that cannot be told.