

Derek Mahon

AGAINST THE CLOCK



Gallery Books

Against the Clock
is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 17 August 2018.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

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ISBN 978 1 91133 742 3 *paperback*
978 1 91133 743 0 *clothbound*

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

Against the Clock receives financial assistance
from the Arts Council.



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for Sarah

Olympia

We commune, she
and I, in silent privacy,
ribbon and paper glimmering. I wait,
she waits, for a first word to communicate
itself with a hesitant beat
to the white sheet.

A second word,
a short pause, then a third;
and now there comes a fluent stream of them.
The two of us together find a rhythm.
So we begin the dance
of keys, the trance

of composition.
Quick and slow, we fashion
what was demanding to be said in words.
A sumptuous black register records
the notes of the concerto.
On we go,

clickety-click
(each imprint an antique
ever so slightly out of the true as if
handwritten, as if with its own personal life
stretching back to a past
lost in the mist,

old dust and fluff
hiding with other stuff
in the dark places), page after rickety page,
two crotchety relics of a previous age
jazzing it up again as
in the great days.

A Clearing

A clearing in the wood
beyond technology, with two
car doors disintegrating in a ditch;
a listening light, domain of fox and witch
and, stiff with sudden tension, you
who dubiously intrude,

fondly imagining
like someone in a fairy story
strange beings — *sídh*e, *fianna*, dwarves, elves —
will part the leafy boughs to show themselves,
to shed light on the mystery
and let the magic in.

The glade, an open space
alive with immanent potential, pours
impersonal warmth into your narrow field
of sense; but something vital is withheld.
You wait, but nothing notable occurs
in this mysterious place —

or seems to occur, although
a wood-wide web is hard at work
reporting on your mischievous invasion
while secret presences obscured by sun,
revealed by shade, define the dark
and shine with their own glow.

What on earth shall we do
with this silent conventicle?
Install a picnic table, a building site?
No, this is where the angel will alight.
Just let it be, let be, until
the avatar is due.

Dead of Night

Arc lamps so bright tonight the thrushes sing
as though at daybreak or the start of spring
thinking it's sunrise, and in fun or fright
pursue their thing at dead of night
in light of or perhaps in spite of it —

a pop group piping in the branches, one
clear blackbird noticeable above the din,
not like McCartney's learning how to fly
with broken wing and sunken eye,
but loud and clear in its anxiety.

He'd rather be presaging lousy weather —
a downpour or a storm, one or the other;
but the blaze gets him going, the gold beak
wide open with a frightened shriek
in a far, hidden corner of the park.

Not for the lying light and not for us
he sings, distinctive in the midnight chorus,
but for the living shadows whited out,
his fierce song an indignant shout
in the bright piercing dead of night and light.

Fitzwilliam Square

Botany

Wildflowers familiar once to 'country folk'
we only recognize from the botany book.
I couldn't identify (say) tormentil,
eyebright or scabious, not until
I've checked the pictures on the page
where I first make the acquaintance
of self-heal, heartsease, leafy spurge —
these never to be known at a quick glance.