

Derek Mahon

# AGAINST THE CLOCK



Gallery Books

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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.