

Derek Mahon

**LIFE ON
EARTH**



Gallery Books

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The Clifden Road

(after Michel Houellebecq)

West of Clifden on a cliff
where sky changes into sea
and sea to memory as if
at the edge of a new world

on the long hills of Clifden
the green hills of Clifden
I will lay down my grief.

To accept death it must be
that death changes into light
that light changes into sea
and sea into memory.

The far west of human life
lies on the Clifden road
the long Clifden road
where man lays down his grief
between the waves and the light.

Research

An actual conch
like a human head on its side,
washed up and left here by the ebb tide,
a magical sculpture, perfectly arbitrary,
lies as if dropped from orbit.
Oh, they will launch

research to find
ice in the Sea of Rains,
a first dubious twitch of mud and plants,
signs of life on the other planets,
whispers of inchoate mind
and flickering brains.

Meanwhile on Earth
we've mud, plants, pleasure, pain
and even real lives to be getting on with;
seasons for this and that, the works and days
of many mice and men
as Hesiod says.

Best to ignore
'the great ocean of truth',
the undiscovered seas of outer space,
and research this real unconscious conch on the shore
with its polished, archaic face
and its air of myth.

A Country Road

Above rising crops
the sun peeps like an eclipse
in a snow of hawthorn, and a breeze sings
its simple pleasure in the nature of things,
a tinkling ditch and a long field
where tractors growled.

Second by second
cloud swirls on the globe as though
political; lilacs listen to the wind,
watching birds circle in the yellow glow
of a spring day, in a sea stench
of kelp and trench.

Are we going to laugh
on the road as if the whole
show was set out for our grand synthesis?
Abandoned trailers sunk in leaves and turf,
slow erosion, waves on the boil . . .
We belong to this —

not as discrete
observing presences but as born
participants in the action, sharing of course
'the seminal substance of the universe'
with hedgerow, flower and thorn,
rook, rabbit and rat.

These longer days
bursting with sunlit fruit
and some vague confidence inspire besides
skittish bacteria, fungi, viruses, gastropods
squirring in earth and dirt.
Dark energies,

resisting gravity,
fling farther the red-shifting gas
but the lone bittern and the red grouse,
crying 'Go back!', have got the measure of it.
Animal, vegetable, mineral watch
as we walk their patch;

and a bath in the woods,
its brown depths where once
a bubbling foam of soap and juniper.
Now tar-water of Cloyne, cow faces, clouds,
ice of the winter months
and nobody there.

Nobody there
for days and nights but our own
curious thoughts in a storm or before dawn.
Bird, beast and flower, whatever your names are,
like the wind blowing through
we belong here too.