

Michael Hartnett

**COLLECTED
POEMS**

Edited by Peter Fallon



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'All that is left and definite . . .'

All that is left and definite
is the skull;
the dull fibres and flesh are gone.
The long femur survives perhaps,
or the wreck of ribs,
but nothing plasmic.
No alien could figure how it loved,
longed to avoid death.
He could perhaps by reconstruction
see it stood,
see, if the tarsals were intact,
it fled, it grasped.
But how could sight be guessed at,
the eye-bowls empty?
How could he envision blood,
arteries and heart
flaked down and dusted?
Or hair, wave-long and starred,
that sparkled out under fingers,
under amber?
All that is left and definite
is the skull full of cockroaches,
and hollow fragile strands in twos
rayed like tendrils
out about a root.

'Beside the vulgar chairs . . .'

Beside the vulgar chairs,
the matted lace
of the reign of George the Sixth,
a woman on a balcony across
lacerates her face.
Beside the moss
in potted soil
she and an old man wait
charitable bread
in silver foil
from the charitable state.

I should have married
in my early years
a Cumberland shepherd
with winking shears,
and lived where sparrows
are extinct.

‘“Yes,” she screamed . . .’

‘Yes,’ she screamed, ‘call me no good!’
and she became hysterical
and killed herself.
At a deliverance up of death,
the shamed pelvis
unburdened itself of a stillborn,
and then the mouths angry at fate,
the angry hands,
lit up in the room, outpushing the walls;
and the curtains, old oil-globes and Chinese bowls
stood, ears open,
and absorbed the overtones.

After a hundred years,
on a similar night,
a new couple aired a petty disagreement,
and the curtains, old oil-globes and Chinese bowls
stood, mouths open,
at the similar chord of circumstance struck,
a wraith, transparent, obviously female,
beat the floor,
and before the cowering couple,
‘Yes,’ she screamed, ‘call me no good!’
and she became hysterical
and killed herself.

‘This friend, an old man . . .’

This friend, an old man
bearing slow gentility
with his crippled walk
and smell of senility,
moved among his treasures,
tusks and lyres from India,
wooden masks from Africa,
and shook and smiled and spittled.
Spiked iron waved before my face.
‘This is a Norman mace,’ he said.
And the old man
bearing slow gentility
swung it violently
and killed me,
bone insplintering my brain.
Lit with no surprise,
soft upon the floor, my eyes
fell out.

‘“Don’t go,” they said . . .’

‘Don’t go,’ they said,
‘the night will be dark,
the road white with rain
and you will lie there,
eyes close to a reflected light
and wonder “Am I dead?”’
And I will be dead,
metallic form no longer form
nor the body a body,
twisted into death;
and trapped there,
not knowing whether that shape
smelling of blood and rain
is still a body or something dead;
and at the first sound,
perhaps a fall of split glass,
you will remember and breathe,
all the entire uselessness of your life
in a fearful rhetorical monosyllable,
‘Yes?’
and a huge black bird
will rise in flight on its quiet wings.

Green Room

This cell we keep unlocked,
for here is a gentle man tending ferns,
to whom there is no world
but the mute fern world,
where all is green and delicate
and there is no strife,
save the stems thrusting at the earth
the spore being loosed on the air
in silence, and coming to ground
as silently . . .
We do not allow him a trowel:
you notice he breaks the loam
with his fingers.
Do not attempt conversation:
he will ignore you.
There is no voice for him
but the fern-arms gentling to the window.
It is so foamed with green lace here
that we call his room
‘the green tapestried room’.