

Derek Mahon

**RAW  
MATERIAL**



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## Contents

*Author's Note* page 11

Ariadne on Naxos 13

### SEXTUS AND CYNTHIA

A Night with Cynthia 15

Epic Love 17

Love Not War 18

The Midnight Note 19

To Cynthia in the Country 20

... and at Baiae 21

Immortality 22

A Quiet Orgy 23

Cynthia's Ghost 25

### RIVER OF STARS

The Long Road to Sichuan 27

The War Zone 28

A Kettle of Wine 29

The Thatched Hut 30

A Shabby Welcome 31

Thinking of Li Po 32

Autumn Fields 33

An Aspiring Spirit 35

Sceilg Bay 36

Winter Morning 38

Antrim Road 40

The Lady from the Sea 41

Romance 43

The Cupboard 45

The Hitch Hiker 46

Simulacrum 47

A Window 48

Mediterranean 49

A Hot October 50

*for Jacques Chuto*

The Aspern Papers 51  
Antarctica 52  
The Same Ardour 54  
Silhouette 56  
Autumn in Grignan 57  
Loango Strand 58  
Sensation 59  
A Year of Grace 60  
The Clifden Road 61  
The Dark Garden 62  
Whatever 63  
The Peace of Objects 64

RAW MATERIAL

A Child of the Forest 65  
Asphalt Roads 66  
Raw Material 67  
Plant Life 68  
Dharma Bums 69  
A New Earth 70  
Water 71  
Mark Rothko 72  
Recycling Song 73  
Coco-de-Mer 74  
The Great Wave 75  
Up at the Palace 76

*Index of Authors* 78  
*Acknowledgements* 79

## Author's Note

An extension of *Adaptations* (The Gallery Press, 2006), the present volume adds new versions of Propertius and the principal T'ang poets, previously published, and of Rimbaud and Guillén, published here for the first time, and includes, as an appendix, a sequence 'translated' from the Hindi of Gopal Singh, my own invention. These owe so much to real Indian poems that they must be considered unoriginal work and so qualify for inclusion. An important school of thought (Nabokov and Ted Hughes for example) has always insisted on *literal* translation. Hughes wrote (*Modern Poetry in Translation* No.1, 1965): 'As soon as devices extraneous to the original are employed for the purpose of recreating its "spirit", the value of the whole enterprise is called in question.' Better, he says, 'the very oddity and struggling dumbness of a word for word version.' My own versions, looking to recreate the spirit and employing some extraneous devices, belong in another category, that of poems *adapted* from their originals, relying for instance on the scholarly work of A. C. Graham for the T'ang poems, and that of Lucy Rosenstein for the Indian ones, to make something not only respectable but also readable, and perhaps re-readable, in a different language.

My thanks once again to Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha; and to Cathal McCabe.

## Sceilg Bay

*from the Irish of Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin, 1785-1848*

One fine, soft morning — St Michael's Day —  
Communion-bound in the Sceilg Bay,  
we watched as the breakers multiplied,  
rain threatened and a strong wind blew.  
We wisely decided on turning back  
and finding harbour beyond Bray Head;  
starting up when I heard the crew,  
I who'd been dozing was wide awake.

Our seine-boat was a delight that morning,  
high in the waves, six oars at work,  
the sail full and the rowlocks slick,  
every board alive and singing.  
We'd held her fast in the flying foam  
surging and sparkling beneath the beam;  
no stir on the water from here to Dingle  
until we made for St Michael's Rock —

when Sow Cliff there on the port side  
shrieked fit to be tied, Gull Sound  
roared aloud like a bull in pain,  
the Groaner groaned in the howling wind.  
Thanks be to Jesus we weren't drowned  
and stretched in the dark depths of the tide  
but spared for another, quieter run  
when, please God, we can try again.

The priest prayed loudly in the stern  
to spare the boat and save the men,  
and he must have been heard in heaven above  
as the white wave-crests crashed over us  
for we cleared Rincarragh in due course  
with the Narrows a flat calm after the sea;

so we kept on till we came to shore  
and broached a barrel at Seán Magee's.

God, we were shook, so we sat all night  
and emptied the porter, watching the gale  
from a warm room until first light  
and giving thanks for our lucky escape.  
Ribbed, tarred and finished by Seán O'Neill,  
that little boat will never know harm:  
where would you find a finer ship  
to deliver you safe from such a storm?

## Winter Morning

*from the Russian of Alexander Pushkin, 1799-1837*

A magic morning, frost and sun  
while you, my love, dream on;  
but it's time now to rise.  
Open those dopey eyes,  
yourself a morning star,  
and wake to a northern dawn.

After the wind last night,  
when a thick fog came down  
and, a mere yellow blur,  
the moon shone through cloud,  
you sat with your head bowed;  
but now, look at the light! —

snowlight from clear blue skies  
glistening where it lies,  
a miraculous white varnish.  
Where its drift finishes  
pines in the winter wood  
are green, and the streams dance.

The house gleams with radiance  
and the birch-burning fire  
blazes up for a new day.  
Oh, we could sit and stare,  
but let's get out the sleigh  
and bridle the sorrel mare.

Scattering the squeaky snow  
our steaming pony races  
through lonely field and meadow,

forest too thickly grown  
in the hot months, and down  
to the river, our favourite place.

## Antrim Road

*from the French of Charles Baudelaire, 1821-1867*

I can still see that first suburban house,  
whitewashed and tiny, tiny but at peace,  
a 'Dresden' figurine next to the clock  
holding her skirt out as she reads a book.  
A fiery evening sun, intensely hot,  
burns at the window from a garden hut,  
a curious red eye between two clouds  
silently watching mushy peas and spuds,  
and throws out long, imposing shadow shapes  
on the white homework and the bottled ships.

## The Lady from the Sea

*from the Norwegian of Henrik Ibsen, 1828-1906*

*She* Born in a lighthouse, I still find it hard  
as wife to a doctor ten miles from the coast.  
My home is a pleasant one but I get bored;  
the mountains bother me. Now, like a ghost,  
you show up here, severe and adamant.  
What are you anyhow? What do you want?

*He* I am a simple man upon the land,  
I am a seal upon the open sea.  
Your eyes are of the depths. Give me your hand,  
give me your heart and come away with me  
to the Spice Islands, the South Seas; anywhere.  
Only the force of habit keeps you here.

*She* Even up here, enclosed, I sniff the brine,  
the open sea out there beyond the beach;  
my thoughts are waves, my dreams are estuarine  
and deeper than an anchor chain could reach.  
I knew you'd come, like some demonic fate  
glimpsed at a window or a garden gate.

*He* How can you live here with no real horizon,  
someone like you, a mermaid and a Muse,  
a figment of your own imagination,  
the years elapsing like a tedious cruise?  
Your settled life is like this summer glow;  
dark clouds foreshadow the approaching snow.

*She* Sometimes, emerging from my daily swim  
or gazing from the dock these quiet nights,  
I know my siren soul; and in a dream  
I stare astonished at the harbour lights,