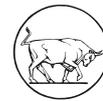


John Montague

**SPEECH
LESSONS**



Gallery Books

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The Wild Irish Goat

I have met a bearded billy in the heather,
horns curving back like scimitars,
and once high on the flank of Mweelrea
I came face-to-face, to our surprise,
with one of Ireland's rarest ladies.

Through the amber embrasure of her eyes
the she-goat surveyed me, then leaped
away down the rocky mountainside,
snorting. To warn her flock to move on:
she had seen and smelt a human.

Scarecrow

for John Shinnors

Scarecrows grow scarce
since we no longer till fields.

Funereal figures
standing in the midst of harvest,

they flapped wildly in the wind
though never moved.

They wore the old clothes
of the dead men of the household

with sometimes a cap or a hat
which would often blow off.

Crossed staves in a field,
a home-made crucifixion,

or the gaunt autumnal brother
of the rotund snowman.



But I forgot the shrewdness
of the carrion crow. Before
the crop was gathered in
I swear I saw more than one
of those jagged black birds
happily settle on the arm
of that structure meant to warn.

Baldung's Vision

I saw a tiny Christ
caper on the cross

silent as a salamander
writhing in fire

or a soldier triumphant
when the battle's lost;

*wine bursts from
his body's grapeskin:*

'The suffering you see
is our daily mystery,

so follow my body
as it sings mutely

(a lantern, a ladder,
a window, a pathway)

of pain calcined away
in a dance of ecstasy.'

A Resigned President

On a summer evening, beyond Sneem,
we discuss your resignation,
the memoir you hope to write. Again
I observe your gentleness,
that absence of meanness, or of malice
which left you helpless

before the silent bite of the terrier
with his small teeth,
the arid legality of the Law Professor,
putting you in your place,
who held our highest, where honour shines,
a credit to our race.

We joked lightly about your bardic name,
a disgrace to the Ó Dálaighs,
you laughed, *not even a poor poet,*
and I felt the shame
of your being slighted by a Maenad
citing Dante's Celestine.

Maundy Thursday. As in the old dispensation
we saw the floodgates open,
that same valley cowed in mourning,
as your resigned body
was laid down, the spirit leaping towards
the light you believed in.

All night blue flames flickered in
the de Vere stained glass
above the high altar, the oak coffin,
and in the chill morning
hosts assemble across Ireland to attend him,
like a murdered king.

With Chopin's funeral march resounding in
the hushed streets of Sneem,
that watchful ring of snowy mountains,
a solemn salute of guns
as a still young nation comes to attention
to honour him.

But military pomp and precision dwindle
in the wind's fierce requiem.
As Hillery speaks, the fury of the rain
hardens to hail:
our land's grief is manifest; they offended us,
offending him.

Cearbhall, *duine uasal*, open-minded Christian,
generous, unjudging spirit,
your merry smile made all the clichés true:
blossom of the sweet branch,
delightful, for a summer while, to have broken
bread with you

who spoke over Ó Ríordáin, who spoke over Ó Riada
in St Gobnait's of Ballyvourney,
and now you have joined that ghostly procession
always moving on
from our still unresolved republic of pain,
rehearsing the problem.

Leap

i.m. John Berryman

John, I refuse to dilate upon
your *saltus dei*, your leap to death,
but merely attest to a coincidence:
I read of it on the Aer Lingus plane
that ferried me away from my first wife.
I retreated to a corner seat and cried
while a telegram arrived at my forsaken
Paris flat, from chill Minneapolis,
codenamed: *Death by Ice*.