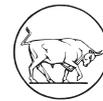


Tom French

**THE
FIRE STEP**



Gallery Books

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for Fiona

Moving Out

In the countdown to the date for surrendering keys
we've been eating our way through the deep freeze

that leaves, like a frightened pet, a puddle of water.
There is nothing left to read now but the meters.

For the first time in years, in our final week,
we are on first-name terms with the whole street.

Everything we possess is in transit. Suddenly
the space we thought of as elsewhere is here.

On our last night we hear what we heard on our first —
the echo that lives here, voices coming back to us.

The Blood Line

I

For each step back we sacrifice
a cemetery, a birth place,
a townland name, until just
before the page goes white,

the great-great-great progenitor
and his teenage bride slip
from the hall on their wedding night
to turn down the covers on a blank sheet.

2

When I call my younger brother
by my first son's name
with my father's voice
he answers me with mine.

Namesake

My father's brother, for whom I am named,
was named — if what his people claim
is to be believed — *The Brain of Ireland*.

He had the Presidents of the United States
like a song, the names of the Great Lakes,
the genealogy of Niall of the Nine Hostages.

If we ventured again to ask they would say
that he succumbed to a brain haemorrhage
among the turnip drills or the drills of borage,

which is where they found him, keeled
over, an age after he'd been called for his tea,
one ear pressed to the earth, still on his knees,

like the man who knew too much
keeping an ear to the music of the spheres.

'He has built himself . . .'

He has built himself a seat by the sea
from pallets, election posters, pro-life billboards,
hammered together and freighted with stones
so that it can withstand Atlantic storms.

He boils water in the windsurfers' kitchen
for the tea he brews in a mug that reads
Dad — Simply the Best!, which leads us
to believe that someone has adopted him

and that it's only a matter of time
before we stop hearing his key in the door
and he starts to treat us as strangers with whom
he can really get down to some serious talking.

Until then we will have to satisfy ourselves
with pictures of him in this place he chose
to make his mark with a permanent structure,
where only the sea visits and the old slogans

Choose Life and Vote Republican caption him,
where the words of encouragement he bellows
to the surfers are borne away by the wind
when it fills their sails and they find themselves

blown beyond earshot and the windbreak
of the bay, so far offshore that they can take
his seat for a landmark and steer by it,
and he in turn can take them for his own.

The Race Field

September 11th, low tide

A *Transit* towing a load of furlong markers
whose tracks, the farther it goes, grow fainter.

*

A tractor and a harrow preparing sand
to plant and harvest before the tide turns.

*

On the Race Field gate, that lovely extra *s* —
mulled over and gone with — in *Horses Boxes*.

*

Punters eyeing the horizon, like fishermen;
the fishermen, fishing offshore, study form.

*

Neck and neck on the straight for home,
our hands touch; they have lives of their own.

*

No wind; or no wind worth mentioning;
and still the VIP marquee billowing.

*

He drives the final furlong and digs a hole
that the sea fills, for the final furlong pole.

A Lift

Hitching a lift back to where I was living
I pretended once to be my dead brother.
After the ice-breakers on where I was going
and coming from, instead of my name I gave his;

then, instead of correcting myself, I just kept going,
switching to the first person about a new life
in The Netherlands, the loneliness of the first weeks,
growing accustomed to a flat landscape and guttural

language until, before I knew it, it felt like home.
I gave myself a wife who spoke fluent English,
children being raised in two languages
who started a sentence in one and ended it

in the other and, dreaming in both,
slipped between them without noticing,
skating in winter and fortnights in Ireland,
a love of the Dutch and no desire to return.

By the time I'd finished fleshing out his life
we'd travelled as far as our lift was going.
We were close enough to home to walk the rest.
So my brother got out. And I stayed going.