

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.