

Derek Mahon

ADAPTATIONS



Gallery Books

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A D A P T A T I O N S

Human Wishes

*from the Latin of Juvenal (Decimus Junius Juvenalis),
c.AD 50-c.127, Satires X*

No one in his right mind would want to be
a big fish gobbling up the smaller fry;
it's the big fish who attract hostility
like Seneca and the rest in Nero's day.
You're better off to sit tight in your room
than be conspiring in the rising steam
among the towels of the baths and gym;
take change if you go out walking after dark,
avoid the war zones and the periphery
and keep your wits about you in the park
where a knife gleams behind each shadowy tree.
All pursue riches in our modern Rome,
gardens, a coach-house and a second home
bought with the revenue from untaxed income
at Capua, Aquinum, Trevignano or Tivoli;
but poison's seldom served in wooden cups.
Beware the crystal glass and golden bowl,
be careful when you raise wine to your lips
dining with colleagues on the Palatine Hill
or old friends in the Caffè Giovenal'
on swan and flamingo, antelope and stuff.
So which philosopher would we rather know
— the one who, staring from his portico,
laughs, or the one who weeps? Easy to laugh,
if we started weeping there'd be no end to it.
Democritus would shake with continual mirth,
even in his primitive times, at life on earth
and showed that stoicism spiced up with wit,
some candour and good sense, can mitigate
even the thick air of a provincial city.
Binge sex and fiscal heroin, discreet

turpitude flickering in a brazier light —
all anyone does now is fuck and shit;
instant gratification, entertainment, celebrity
we ask, but mumbling age comes even so,
the striking profile thick and stricken now,
the lazy tackle like a broken bough,
the simian features and the impatient heir.
What else can you expect from your white hair,
your voice like cinders under a kitchen door?
What use to you the glittering cleavages,
the best box in the house above the stage
when blind and deaf? Now fever and disease
run riot through our waste anatomies,
the old mind dithering in its anecdotage,
the joints all seizing up with rheumatism,
seek guidance of the heavenly gods who treasure
our lives more than we do ourselves. Subdued
by protocol and the fear of solitude,
you wed in haste and now repent at leisure
even as your hands shake in their final spasm.
Ask for a sound mind in a sound body
unfrightened of the grave and not demented
by grief at natural declension; study
acceptance in the face of fate; and if
you want to worship mere materialism,
that modern god we have ourselves invented,
I leave you to the delights of modern life.

The Bangor Blackbird

from the Old Irish (9th century), anonymous

Just audible over the waves
a blackbird among leaves
whistling to the bleak
lough from her whin beak.

Spring Song

from the Occitan of Guilhem IX d'Aquitaine, 1071-1127

At the first warmth of spring
the forest fills with leaves;
each bird in its own tongue
whistles a new tune:
time now to look again
at our own lives and loves.

She sends no word of hope
to set my heart at ease.
I neither laugh nor sleep
nor can I concentrate,
not knowing if the upshot
will be the one I choose.

Our love is a hawthorn branch
shaking at night against
a sky of wind and rain
until the rising sun
spreads itself and glows
among the leaves and boughs.

One morning sticks in the mind:
while we lay dim and fond
she made me the gift of her
intimacy and fervour.
Soon may my busy hand
be in her skirt for ever.

Cheap rumours left and right
threaten our fierce desire
and force us far apart.

Danger, what do we care?
No malice, no envious spite
can spoil the thing we share.

Dawn Songs

BLUE SKIES

from the Occitan (12th century), anonymous

Just like the nightingale for ever
whistling fiercely to his lover
I whisper to you all night,
my whispering flower —
until from a high tower,
like a new voice, dawn light
announces the time to rise.
Day breaks with its blue skies.

ON THE ROAD

from the Occitan of Jaufré Rudel (?1120-1147)

When in spring the days grow long
I listen to birds' distant song;
out on the road again I go
crippled with vain desire,
losing her, to imagine
the hot wars of religion.
Neither bird nor mayflower
pleases me more than ice and snow.