

Eamon Grennan

OUT OF BREATH



Gallery Books

Out of Breath
is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 13 September 2007.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

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ISBN 978 1 85235 428 2 *paperback*
978 1 85235 429 9 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.



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Wildflowers in a Glass of Water

(Signorelli, *Pala di Sant' Onofrio*)

Cross-legged, a child angel
sits on the bottom step
of the throne of the merciful
Madonna and her human child.

Flanked by four saints—
rapt in their own sphere
of sanctity and paint—the angel
tunes his lute, holding its belly

close to his own plump
drum of a belly. Next
to his bare angelic foot
stands a glass of water

in which (drooping a little
but still alive) lean
three wildflowers
with exuberant petals and pale

exactly modelled stems: one
a dark March violet, the others
pink campion, their bladders
deftly rendered, so we may see

that in this grand, sanctified zone
where the infant god
shoulders his lily
like a pike or a white rifle

the painter had time
and knew the world had space
for these light morsels
of the ordinary, these

atoms of the everyday
to hold their own
and anchor us, gracing
the big picture.

What It Is

It is in the smallest leaf—of oak, maple, elm, dogwood, birch or Chinese redwood. In the way leaves droop in the air of this rain-laundered time of day, each involuntary drip a pearl-drop earring. Shadows of barn gable and pin-oak tree live in print on the avocado green of grass. What it is

is that *Amen* stuck in Macbeth's throat, or the road one wheatear didn't take, or the child you didn't have the right time or space to have, all its dark-eyed answers—eyes glittering behind each twig of the persimmon, fleshlights igniting every fruitglobe. What it is is ripening, so

inhale the immaculate late afternoon as you pass through the garden: fruit, dust, moist fungus, a fine distillate of finality you keep breathing, being in your own way a part of it, wanting its laden air to leaven your lungs, letting the heart be a small box of beaten gold that holds

secrets and hopeless promises. It is rife with promise.

Like

Like that feral black hat on Vermeer's cavalier (a panther prowling the parlour where the girl sits smiling into the eyes of departure); like that rustling in the bushes

where the child sees a dream of pointed teeth flashing for wolf-fox, bear-cat, anything, a blaze of yellow eyes; like the sense that softens your bones as you step out

on a stretch of ice, imagining its fragility, its depths of dark, and how wet cold would close over your breath, your ears drown in the sound of singing sheet-ice, the high-pitched

moan of its fracturing; like any minute of innocent sunlight suddenly ruptured, ransacked by blackout—this hysteria of nearness keeps my head on the edge of flying to bits

through the window in particles of light, millions of them winging it like all lost causes, like something off by heart.

Workman

He stands, first, on a mechanical platform, higher than this high window. At his own level, fenced-in, he leans to dab dashes of mortar at a crenellated granite angle of the library tower. Stepping on the border rail he swings one leg over the fence to get at a tricky inch and balances there: flicking mortar, smoothing and pointing, the strap stretched to its limit, holding him. Legs braced against metal, his left hand dips, takes, leans, spreads, points. His white hard-hat gleams. Simply a thick shadow on the blue canvas of a clear November sky, he seems relaxed as anyone on *terra firma*, though only scraps of steel and a leather belt prevent him plummeting. Entirely focussed, he gets on with the job, and I feel my heart clenching, unclenching, just to see his shade making shapes on the stone: how he might be dancing.

(13. xi. 01)

Bee Fuchsia

At the first brief lull
in terrible weather
bees are back, each
entering headfirst
the upside-down open
nectar-heavy skirts
of wet fuchsia flowers
and seeming to stay
quite still in that laden
inner space, only
the smallest shudder
of the two together
when the bee-tongue
unrolls and runs
its tiny red carpet
into the heart
of what is no mystery
but the very vanishing
point and live centre
of the flower's instant
irrevocable unfolding,
then stillness again
while this exchange
(layer after layer of
dusty goodness lipped,
given) is taking place—
the flower flushed
and swelling a little,
the bee gently but
hungrily clutching.