

Derek Mahon

HARBOUR LIGHTS



Gallery Books

Harbour Lights
was first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
in April 2005.
Reprinted 2008.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

*All rights reserved. For permission
to reprint or broadcast these poems,
write to The Gallery Press.*

© Derek Mahon 2005

ISBN 978 1 85235 384 1

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



Contents

PART ONE

Resistance Days *page* 13

PART TWO

Lucretius on Clouds 21
High Water 23
Lapis Lazuli 24
Heathrow 26
Hampstead Graves 27
'Things' 28
The Cloud Ceiling 29
During the War 31
Langue d'Oc 33
A Game of Cards 35
Jean Rhys in Kettner's 37

PART THREE

The Widow of Kinsale 41
A Garden God 44
The Enchanted Wood 45
Bashō in Kinsale 46
Shorelines 48
Where to Hide 51
New Wave 52
Red Cloud 54
White Cloud 55
On the Beach 56
Calypso 57
Harbour Lights 61

PART FOUR

The Seaside Cemetery 71

Acknowledgements 77

A Garden God

A bomber fly flits from the ruined mouth;
from the eye-socket an inquisitive moth.

The Enchanted Wood

(after Valéry)

Amid rustling leaves and leaf-shadows her moist
breath rises and falls in the silent hall;
magpies alight beside her glittering wrist,
her lips almost compose one coral vowel.
She listens neither to the quiet raindrops
tinkling the coin of the submerged decades
nor to the flute-wind in the dreaming copse
where the horn-note of a distant hunt subsides.

To these dwindling echoes she faintly sighs,
grown indistinct among the light brambles
waving and tapping at her buried ear;
and the slow rose whispering to her eyes
never discountenances the warm dimples
secretly conscious of the sunlight there.

New Wave

On the first day of principal photography
they sit outside at a St. Germain café
with coffee cups between them on a round
table of chequered oilcloth red and grey.
The hand-held camera looks for natural light,
mikes pick up traffic and incidental sound.
A mid-week noon and the hot bridges sweat;
from ice buckets, from windows, watches, knives,
life flashes back at them their glittering lives.

Silence, the first thing they have in common,
creates a little precise hole in the uproar
and the vague sorrow between man and woman
changes summer to autumn as they conspire
like scientists working from the same data.
When they reach Cabourg beyond a darkening road
and a white hotel room shaken by white waves
in a cloud of powder and brine, they run baths
and stare at the moon through open windows.

While the lamps go off along the promenade
they wake to a dawn silence, curtained light,
mist and roar of the sea, vast dazzling cloud;
but the stripped mind, still moist and nocturnal,
flinches from confrontation with the infinite.
The sky, its racing stripes and ice-cream colours,
thin cries of children from the beach below,
and the hurtling gulls, are too heartbreaking;
they shut the shutters and return to the dark.

They live the hours as others live the years.
A plane sky-writes, sails flock on the horizon,
their sheets stretch to the white lines of surf
and they doze as if on their own patch of sand
with wind and sun combing their backs and thighs

in a dream of dune-light and rustling quartz
worn smooth by night winds since the dawn of time.
Air reigns, mother-of-pearl; flies come and go;
they open and close their fists like the newly born.

He has given up even on the death of language
and a shower of dots relieves his final page . . .
A singer, tonight she sings in the casino
to a shiny ring of bourgeois, but her heart
has already taken flight from the car-park.
Tide-click; starry wavelengths; aquarium light
from the old world picks out in a double row
their sandy prints where, orphans going home,
they climb back into the waves in a snow of foam.