

***Corners of Green:
Irish Voices of Faith and Doubt***

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Corners of Green
Irish Voices of Faith and Doubt

U. Milo Kaufmann

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Cuyahoga Falls, OH

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PREFACE

Why call a collection of Irish voices, drawing upon more than a thousand years of history, lore, and Christian devotion, *Corners of Green*? The word *green* in the title is, I concede, ambiguous. It is meant to conjure up not the preternatural lushness of the island's countryside nor some early anticipations of the now-current environmentalism but rather the pristine wonderings of the child, the novice, the saint, and all beginners in understanding the strangeness of things given. The word *corners* is plain enough, once one realizes that featured here are four Irish counties—Sligo, Clare, Cork, and Wicklow—that roughly approximate the four compass points of the island.

No one disputes that through its monastic missionaries Ireland reclaimed continental Europe for the Christian faith, but also noteworthy is the trademark Irish childlikeness that has always reported on things that perhaps are the case—or perhaps not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

U. Milo Kaufmann has been a long-standing faculty member of the English Department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His scholarly interests comprise seventeenth-century British Literature, fantasy and science-fiction literature, and the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Among other books, he has authored *Pilgrim's Progress and Traditions in Puritan Meditation* (Yale University Press, Yale Studies in Literature 163) and *Paradise in the Age of Milton* (English Literary Studies Monograph Series 11). His first book of poetry, *Measures of Breath*, was published in 2004 by Edwin Mellen Press.

FOREWORD

Down by the Dargle (Where the Magic Salmon Lives)

Down in Dargle River
Where sad Katie lost her ring,
Lives the crafty ancient golden fish
Who taught the rocks to sing.

And the rocks, they sing of elsewhere,
Of the waters long gone by,
With their tales of distant Glendalough
And Enniskerry nigh.

And the rocks, they tell of lost things,
Like the ring from Katie's hand
And the heart she gave her lover
Before he left the land.

And should she find that golden fish
With powers to charm the stone,
She must learn from him the secret
Of singing what is gone.

Part I: County Sligo

The Storyteller

I traveled these lanes as a mender of pots,
hearing much in the course of a day,
And I learned several versions of what I now tell,
each of them true in its way.

Three men came south from Donegal
with a pick, a spade and a chest.
They searched for a certain spot, they said,
where the lay of the land was best.

There they would make a ring of stone
and work a wonder great,
For once within they'd fade from sight
and be off to their fairy fate.

Now the silent stones lie all about
in Sligo's timeless fields,
The remnants of a magical race
so ancient the spirit reels.

And no one doubted the strangers three
when they said the power was vast
When stone was aligned with earth and sun
like the burial mounds of the past.

So there gathered a crowd on market day
when many folks left their stores
To see if the three could vanish away
like the mist upon the moors.

But one of the three had slipped into town
with a mind for easy plunder,
And he filched and stored in his canvas bag
while the simple folk waited the wonder.

The circle of stone was laid on a hill
just off the Sligo shore
And the mist was thick on that chosen day
as on many a day before.

And the two had found, as they hoped to find,
a simple lad they could pay
To call out “Fire” on the edge of town
while they fled for their boat in the bay.

Now that is the gist of the tale I first heard,
but versions there are many,
With endings three that offer the choice
of common, or rare, or uncanny.

In one the three are caught in their boat
by a fisherman home with his catch,
And in one an eclipse of the sun occurs
and they flee though a thousand eyes watch.

But the one with a shape that fits the tale
to a truth that is deeper than fact
Is the ending that says the two in the ring
find the fairy power intact.

For the circle they make is indeed on the site
of an ancient other-world portal
And they fade like mist from the world of men
as the elvish swallows the mortal.

And the thief in town who escapes in the boat
returns in the spring of each year
To see if the father and brother he lost
will ever again appear.

The Woodcarver

A butcher by trade, I respected the bones
that were frame for the living creature,
And I learned to see bones where others did not,
with nature my book and my teacher.

For a tree is all bones with a body of green
that's renewed in the turn of the year,
And a mountain's stone is the lasting bone
with the forest as flesh most fair.

Then I read with surprise the stories of old,
of Maeve and Cuchulain fierce,
For it seemed I had found the bones of our flesh,
the common flesh of our race.

Though thousands had lived their joys and their tears,
and died as mortals do,
The tales lived on as the ancient bones
to be clothed in flesh anew.

So I left the cares of the butcher's shop
where one meets the morning trade
With the hurried work of an early hour
when the stars are beginning to fade

And I gave my heart to another craft,
testing the grain of the ash,
To see how the bones of the timeless tales
might be given another flesh.

And to see my work, since my skill would not suit
the eye of the connoisseur,
I would offer each piece with a spell of words,
telling of things most sure—

Of ancient races unspeakably tall,
and queens ever braver than kings,
Of heroes whose passion and courage took strength
from the fire at the heart of things.

On a distant shelf, removed from my shop,
and the spells my words could weave,
I suppose my works with their amateur's nicks
might hint of a mind to deceive.

But I'll take no blame, for tales are still there
to be savored when one is alone
And the words that I use in my humble craft
are the flesh to go with the bone.

The Mother of Rosses Point

They said I'd been given a fish's heart
since I could not love my brood;
Though I knew them to be adept of speech
and as fair as they were good.

My sons in time grew slow of tongue
however quick their minds.
They learned to stammer and search the floor
for the words they could not find.

And my daughter small said nothing at all
after four years at our table,
Though her eyes were deep as any well
and I knew her wit to be able.

I loved them not, these three of mine,
for I loved not the man who gave them.
He ruled my body with violent hand,
and his angers—I dared not brave them.

So I grew cold and punished the lot
with a silence of my own,
Stilling the mother's impulse within
and keeping a face of stone.

But my children three were blessed in time,
for a fiddler down from the hills
Taught them to dance in the ancient way
with the face and the arms all still.

So they learned to leap like a fish from the stream
and turn like a flicker of light.
Their fame spread far as the magical three
who danced upon Rosses Point.

And the viewers who came said their bodies spoke
a wisdom older than words,
The dance of the blood in the mortal flesh
and a joy akin to the birds'.

My silent three came to teach their craft
to many far and near.
With speech of the body they mainly taught
for words they still found dear.

And I learned, too, though not to dance,
nor to speak in words of the heart,
But to say with a gesture or nod or glance
that my blood was warmed by their art.

Now the waters are cold at Rosses Point
and the winds blow fresh and chill,
But the hearts are warm of those who recall
my three and their magical skill

The Shopman

The battle line ran through my store
in the heart of Sligo town,
For tourists came from distant lands
not distinguishing right from wrong.

They'd buy their parasols and wraps
and pretend that the world was fair,
So I'd ask if they'd heard of the occupied North
and the troubles that festered there.

I'd tell them straight that Ireland was green
and Ulster was Irish, too,
And sad it was that a clan like mine
had some of the orange hue.

For green is the color of living things
and orange the color of death,
Of fungus, toadstools, and rotting wood
with odor to stifle the breath.

Now argument proves both life and wit,
and I'd promise while selling a cap
That I'd outfit the man that could show me why
we needn't rework the map.

The best riposte that ever I took
was once when a priest from Spain
Swore that all hues were the gift of God,
the orange as well as the green.

For melons and flowers and redheads, too,
and the yeast that ferments the brew,
And the warm sands of Spain where the Irish sunned
were all of the warmer hue.

We took a cup at the coffee shop
and relished the blue of the bay,
As well as the green of Ben Bulben Hill
and the orange of the evening sky.

And plain it was that orange and green
met where the sky touched the land,
Together a sight to give some pause
to the most polemical man.

I paid for his cup and learned of his name
and his home with its welcoming door,
And told him that though he did not persuade,
he posed me a riddle, and more.

The Clerk Speaks of the Bishop

The bishop I served was a man of grace
who answered to callings three.
One was to heaven and one was to town
and one was to mountain and sea.

The last was the first that ever he heard,
and he heard it all of his days,
Like anyone nurtured in Ben Bulben's shade
with its forest and loughs and bays.

He answered that call by loving the land
and naming the wonders unnamed,
For he knew that man's work, like God's, goes on,
and the wild outnumbered the tamed.

But I doubt that he loved as the pagans loved,
for the woods were a second scripture,
And the water that powered the turning wheel
was mastered by careful measure.

His call to the town was the urge to heal,
by teaching and living the good,
While the politic sins of the public life
were evils to be withstood.

So he passed up the gifts of merchant and lord
and the bribe of the poor man's brew,
Saying to all that if virtue were sold,
the Fiend would be virtuous, too.

But Heaven's call was the clearest of all,
as all who knew him would say.
The child's eager listening and wide-eyed trust
were his to his final day.

For serving the truth was his endless joy
as he knit the new with the old,
Matching the fathomless depth of the world
to the fathomless depth of the soul.

I loved him best of all mortal men,
this model of heavenly good,
And I'll serve him still, if serve I may
when the fare is heavenly food.

The Bishop Speaks of His Clerk

I'll say this word for my humble clerk,
the saintliest man I knew.
He was more himself each year that passed,
and younger and kinder, too.

He gave up his farm on Sligo's shore
to serve at a meager wage,
And while others slept he learned to read
the wisdom writ on the page.

And he learned far better than any I knew
to read the truth of the sky—
That good once given returns again
in a circuit eternally.

If the good rain fell on Drumcliff Bay,
it would rise as the mist again,
And when did ever the bright sun fail
to follow upon the rain?

He thought each soul an ocean of light
and a promise that could not end;
Though why God saw fit to create his soul
he never could understand.

So he gave what he had with a generous heart
and ever had more to offer,
For bounty returns in a thousand ways
to one who will empty his coffer.

And well he taught that becoming oneself
is a matter of trusting heaven
That after one dies the daily death,
another life will be given.

In the high halls of the world beyond
I hope the task will be mine
Of serving this man as he served me,
This proof of the love divine.

The Sexton

The poet whose marker I care for here
said, Cast a cold eye on all.
The passing horseman should not even pause
outside the churchyard wall.

I grant that the stories these gravestones tell
are as grim as any ones told,
For brides have outlived their husbands and sons,
and the brutish outlived the good.

And who can guess what all is summed up
in the wintry rhymes of age?
But another tale is most surely told
by the grass and the saxifrage.

Green things, it seems, are ever renewed,
and the grass must cover the stone,
Or creep with the water along the stone's crack
and makes a design all its own.

That massive tuft by yonder high cross?
Be sure there lies something beneath,
For greenness will master the fallen stone
with its rigmarole of death.

Those crosses and stones that tilt like the drunk?
It's not the dead that have stirred them,
But the living earth and the greening year
that work with a timeless leaven.

So in death I shall choose no stone nor slab
with a text the young would find odd.
No, I shall be burned to a fertile ash
and be spread on some nearby sod.

The Maintainer of Hedges

I worked thirty years on Ben Bulben's slope,
and learned its magic well,
Though not the magic that ancients ascribed
to the ring of stones or the spell.

Not once did I glimpse the midnight door
which served the fairy gentry
When, eager for sport in the world of men,
they conjured their secret entry.

Another magic it was that I found
as I worked at my country trade,
For I was the keeper of hedge and of ditch,
maintaining what others had made.

I learned to love edges of many sorts,
of forest and lane and field,
Where marsh was met by the meadow sweet,
or glade was by stone wall sealed.

For where forest meets field red campion grows,
and cress loves the water's edge,
While windbreaks thrill with the blue self-heal
and the fragrant Jack-by-the-Hedge.

And wonders, too, are wrought by the birds
where wood joins stream or meadow,
For the wagtail's nest is built under the bridge
and the bullfinch loves hedgerow-shadow.

Often I'd tend a wayside ditch,
walking a mile and another,
With an edge of bright water and brambles beside,
and no path from one world to another.

I'd think that such edges that beg to be crossed,
though wild with a tumult of green,
Are one with those edges that mark off this world
from the worlds of all that has been.

And the edges, too, that mark off this world
from all that is yet to come,
When the oldest magic of all takes hold
and breaks the spell on the dumb.

Heaven and earth are like field and field
with only a hedge between,
While many a gate and easy stile
must open to all the unseen.

The Keeper of the Peace

If you take that stool you'll have my good ear
for I'll hear what you think of my telling.
That very stool was where Liam sat
when he sang out some words most galling.

For he said that my son, my studious John,
had no heart for a patriot's duty,
And that young men could shrink from a noble cause
was never a thing of beauty.

Yes, Liam was drunk, but I am a father
and my son was hearing a calling.
His spirit said no to a pointless war,
though his strong Irish heart was willing.

So I laid Liam out on the pubhouse floor
with a blow to help him think better,
But all unintended I robbed him of sight
and blind he will be forever.

Then it was I never could sleep
for to close my own eyes was a portent
That blind I might wake, in the wisdom of God,
and so share poor Liam's torment.

To sleep, I offered the blind man a chance
to do me some harm with his fist.
I would stand willing to take his best blow
and so I would stand if he missed.

My right ear's the one I turned toward you,
for my left ear's the one he deafened.
And we hugged and wept and wept some more
as if we had both learned a lesson.

My studious son, my peace-loving son,
will soon be in priestly study,
And I keep the peace in this brawling place—
I've an ear and two eyes for the duty.

The Worshiper at the Innisfree Spring

Faith must have water, the churchmen say,
along with the holy Word,
And though word masters water, and ever shall,
the water was first, I've been told.

Water of sky and water of sea
and waters of greenest land,
All seven forms that water takes
I loved on the Sligo strand.

When small rain dimpled the mountain pool
where it mirrored the celandine,
I felt the call of the mountain's soul,
the fit of its mood with mine.

And the mists that brushed the cheek and brow
of the wayfarer on the hill
Were proof enough to me of a way
that matched the world to the will.

The ocean's face was a mystery deep
that tested the scryer's skill,
Yet I learned to read that countenance,
whether troubled by tempest, or still.

And Sligo's lakes with their thickety isles
and swans as peckish as thieves
Held waters so pure even Eden's streams
were not edged by greener leaves.

River and brook and roadside rill
were waters hurrying by,
Perfecting a task from the dawn of time,
marrying earth and sky.

Yet what I loved best was the water beneath,
the treasure of well and spring,
And I worshiped best at the little shrine
where Innisfree's thrushes sing.

For waters deep mark the ancient vow,
the same as the rainbow's arc,
That all the goods are ever renewed
as surely as light follows dark.

And the secret springs, like the primal Deep,
serve a providence wide and free,
As firm as the Word that summons the rain
and girdles the boundless sea.

The Seer of the Hollow Hills

Sometimes when I slept my dreams were as clear
as the sights of the waking man
And I'd follow my whims as the landscape loomed
whether woodland or salty strand.

I could soar like a hawk over meadow green
or swim like a trout in the brook,
All answered to wish and the curious eye
like turning the page of a book.

But my strangest dreams were of hollow hills
beyond my stone-fenced fields,
With cavernous chambers lit by a light
no heavenly body yields.

These were not caves with chilly damp
and rivers as cold as death,
No, but bright rooms as of homes outgrown,
yet empty of all that has breath.

Just as many men tell of dreamed returns
to houses they knew when small,
Only to learn of unknown stairs
and attics and secret hall,

So here I would savor the hidden depth
of a past concealed under hill,
With chambers full of memory's ghost,
though memory's voice was still.

And waking I knew, and know quite well,
that fairies are creatures of story,
But who or what lived in the hollow hills
with their hint of ancient glory?

Does memory lie when it hints of things
one never knew in the act?
And what of those dreams, those riddling dreams
more true to truth than fact?

The Lover of Horses

I once saw the soul of a noble horse,
 dead from a fall at the pond,
Rise like a mist on the green hillside,
 glowing before it is gone.

So horses have souls, I have often said,
 and have argued the point with a priest,
Though he scoffed and said, “Then pigs are blest,
 if we grant a soul to the beast.”

I make no claim for pigs or goats
 or even for monkeys thought clever,
But I claim that the horse, the noblest beast,
 has a soul that will last forever.

I have seen a horse in the thunder’s roar
 tremble and hold his place,
Heeding the rider’s voice and hand
 though terror was on his face.

And I’ve marked the horse that kept his trust
 with a master daft and cruel,
A proof of virtue faithful in trial
 and of wisdom serving a fool.

For the first horse tamed took the servant’s role
 and has lived it ever since,
The model of what is first in heaven
 where the lowest are served by the prince.

Let the bishop’s clerk say I am touched
 and risking the fires of Hell,
Yet horses have souls, and a heavenly work,
 for all that I can tell.

Part II: County Clare

The Girl at the Innhouse

I was the princess of Ballymote
though princess only in jest,
For it wasn't a prince with whom I must sleep,
but the innhouse's current guest.

Whoever that was, whether rich or poor,
had he but a punt for the night,
I'd offer my bed just under the eaves
and I'd share with him my plight.

For a good farm maid, once given to shame,
has only two choices for life.
She can give her soul to God as a nun,
or pretend at being a wife.

So I'd play the game with the one-night spouse
and spell out my misery,
While the guest would listen and look so kind,
and then speak his mind to me.

An honest whore may be bad, he'd say,
but a devious nun is worse.
So, honest, I'd tell him I'd marry him—
and he'd leave my bed with a curse.

Now I wouldn't be singing the song that you hear
had I not more to tell—
That a lame man came to my inn one day,
a buyer and seller of wool.

And he searched for women like me, he said,
for he set them to work in his town,
Since God had shown him a truth about maids
as he traveled up mountain and down.

And that was the error of good St. Jerome
when he called us the fountain of ill,
For how could our Lord come by woman's womb
if the fairer sex was so foul?

And if Adam and Eve together made one,
married in Eden's garden,
Then only when both partook of the fruit
did the Fall place on all its burden.

He claimed there was peril in seeing the weak
as ever the curse on the race,
For the lame like himself, and children and maids,
were the heirs of a special grace.

So he vowed he would mend the fault of Jerome
by giving a decent wage
To honest maids who would shed their past
and write on a brighter page.

Now a life I've had, and a bit of pride
in the work of my hand and eye.
My body was cheap on a thousand nights
but my soul no money can buy.

The Deaf Girl

In a tiny plot of my brother's farm
I nurtured the wayside flower
Speedwell and ladysmock, primrose and pint,
and the daisy that loves the spring shower.

On the rocks of the wall I had creepers and wort,
and cress by the bank of the rill,
A splendor of bloom with wonders for all
who traveled that side of the hill.

I could not hear love in the tone of a voice
or joy in the cry of surprise
But love and joy I saw in the hues
of a language made for the eyes.

The white and the yellow were muted desire,
while ardent, the blue and the red.
And the blooms streaked with jet suggested the love
that joins sorrow and joy in its bed.

My simple life changed when my brother was joined
to an ambitious woman from town.
She demanded my plot for a flowerless yard
and darkened my days with her frown.

A terrace she made with gravel and tiles
and she dammed up the stream near the door,
But the flowers she left to be sown by the wind
and called it a waste to do more.

But the wind was my friend, and the birds of the air,
for the flowers they spread up the hill,
On path and on rock and by quick mountain stream,
they carpeted all with a will.

So I had my say, though my tongue was tied,
in the wilderness riot of bloom
And wayfarers asked if fairyland's door
might be hidden uphill from our home.

And babes soon came, to my brother's delight
and their mother in time grew mild,
While the blooms on the hill where we took our walks
showed the ways of love in the wild.

The Man of Words

I lived by words as a poet should
though my living I earned as a tutor.
Words were my food and drink and love
and I loved as a life-long suitor.

For me bright words ever flashed at the gate
and blessed words thronged at the door,
The dazzling words so apt and true
that spoke to one's heart, and more.

For words have power to open or shut,
power to keep or betray,
Stone to build houses as firm as the hills,
and the river to wash them away.

Numbers, too, have power immense
though might of a different kind—
To measure and reckon, and cut and divide
the straight and exact and fine.

But long before Greeks took the measure of man
with the straightedge and the square
Good words were telling the deeper truth
that is more than number can bare.

For where words are welcome, the soft-edged words
that point to the yet-scarcely-seen,
One moves in the child's world of presences
where all waits a summoning.

So I gave myself to the poet's craft
though with little wisdom or skill,
But the eager words still came to my door
and I hope that I heard them well.

The Man With the High Cross in His Field

Old Cul said his bid was the last one made—
That the auctioneer did not cheat—
So he got the best of the feisty young bulls
I wished for my heifer's next heat.

I'd fenced off my land into two good fields,
No lack of old stones to make halves.
The east one is spoiled by gorse and a cross,
but the west one would welcome some calves.

And my heifer is ready for breeding this fall.
She's been ready before, I could swear,
For her bellow could frighten even magical folk
who sour the milk, so I hear.

Cows, you know, are more righteous than goats
So roundly cursed by our Lord,
Though I've never yet seen a cow so good
she could halt the march of the gorse.

And the old high cross is a nuisance too
with the nettles that thrive at its foot.
No matter that biblical monsters and saints
are carved there to quiet one's doubt.

Just why should Cul prosper at every year's auction,
with his fields free of nettles and gorse?
It's enough to make a simple man wonder
if that cross is a blessing or curse.

The Dead Man on the Hill

I walked this island's hills and vales
for fifty years and more,
And I told my tales by any fire
where folks would set me store.

For I'd seen the Devil himself one eve,
it was Easter's eve, for sure.
And the Dark One soared like a giant bat
over the church's spire.

He cried out like a summoner,
calling the souls of men
And the souls of all in the village around
rose up and came to him.

He danced with them on the church's spire,
a hundred or two, or more,
And the music they made as they spun about,
it froze my heart to the core.

For it spoke of lust and greed and hate
as only the Hell-bound know,
But all the best souls of the town were there,
joining the Devil's show.

I've told my tale at many a fire
where folks would take me in,
But I knew their kindness was but a dress
for their darkness and their sin.

And the time it came when the doors where shut.
No ear would welcome my word
Of black despair and a swollen Hell
and a world as rank as a turd.

So I lie as bones on a desolate hill
and my soul in limbo waits
For the Easter light to dawn once more
on the dead beyond the gates.

The Tale of the Innkeeper's Wife

Two strangers came to my door one night,
both cold and trembling of limb.
They said they were needing a cup and a bed,
and an ear for a tale most grim.

Sheep they had lost on the mountain behind,
and had chanced on an ancient well
Where an elf-light shone and song could be heard
like a tune from a far-off dell.

And they hoped a coin would gain them a wish,
for their sheep had been lost so long
That mere mortal luck would not turn them up—
and the fairy power seemed strong.

So an unchristian prayer they offered there
and watched a vision unfold
Of a high green meadow, a shepherd's dream,
and the air around them seemed cold.

They saw their sheep in the secret fold
where a thief had schemed to conceal them,
And the thief they knew as a neighbor and friend;
the last they would guess to steal them.

But that was not all, for there then appeared
what neither could wish to be seeing.
The high green meadow was a grassy stage
where the future of each was playing.

They saw the delights and the griefs that would come
and the turns that they'd be taking,
Surprise that was boon and surprise that was bane,
and the thirst that would never have slaking.

Even the moment of death they saw,
and the grieving of those they loved best.
The future in all its fullness played,
and it left them no joy in the quest.

When the vision dimmed they sought out my place
and vowed they would leave on the morrow
On a way they knew, and knew too well,
for that knowledge was lasting sorrow.

The Man of the Sea

I knew the sky like the face of a friend
whether season was fair or foul,
And a hundred stars I knew by their names
from the sea's rim up to the pole.

And what did I fear in my life on the sea?
Neither monster, nor wave mountain-high.
My only fear, and an honest one,
was losing my sight of the sky.

For the watery floor is a moving one
and the fog bank, a moving wall,
So one hopes to find in the sky above
what's firm when the waves are tall.

In the heart of the storm, when the planks underfoot
are groaning and white with foam,
One knows too well the flaws in the floor
of his ocean-going home.

And many are those who would trust what's beneath,
putting trust in the good green land,
But ground can be riven and quake like the sea
that pounds on the moving sand.

So the sky I heeded while loving the sea
as one loves a person wild,
With ways too deep to be understood
and impetuous like a child.

And what though the land, like the sea, be strange,
and stranger at every turn?
The sky is home to a million stars,
as many a soul has learned.

The Singer at Moher's Cliff

These climbers don't want the local news
Bereft as it is of magic,
So I write no songs of the Boston man
whose loss at sea was so tragic.

Rowed he had the thousands of miles
to visit his grandparents' coast,
But a nasty squall just miles off shore
meant all but his boat was lost.

I've made no tunes for the Wicklow man
who'd lost his wife to a tumor.
His cliff's-edge leap was a test for God,
for he'd heard some Irish rumor.

No, such deaths are fare for evening telly
or for Galway or Dublin papers,
With their standard stuff of suicides
and the Taoiseach's latest capers.

I choose old songs to be sung at this cliff
where old things are always the lesson—
Stony steps, and love, and partings in tears
and the lover's last confession.

So Galway's bay will be my theme,
and Derry's ancient grieving,
While Kathleen, as always, is promised home
before the stars' last leaving.

These discs are nothing but memory
to be played in your distant setting.
But you'll hear old songs in another voice,
and this cliff means no forgetting.

The Wild Man of the Burren

I lost my Jane to a seafaring man
and in cards I lost my fiddle,
While my soul I lost in a storm of doubt
to the weather-making Devil.

Now what of the weather? The devil's or not?
The priests are far from agreeing.
And what good my reasons, for I am the simple,
the outcast who lives on the burren.

But the devil's wind was to blame for all,
for its blast took my Jane out to sea,
While my fiddle I lost on a stormy night
with the devil's wench on my knee.

Just one good I'll claim for the devil's wind,
for the rain and the bite of the rime—
You're most alive in the weather's grasp
and your body's enough for the time,

But what of the thousands who've weathered away,
their bones under stone pile and dolmen?
The thousands who lived in the pagan time
when fairy folk danced on the burren?

They heard no bells, no monkish chant,
no hint of some bookish preaching.
They knew only moaning wind and the rain
and the body's naked reaching.

If only the devil's wind is heard
and only the Irish weather,
What hope could ever there possibly be
of trading this life for another?

A Follower of the Fairy Light

I followed a light in the thickety wood
that stretches for miles below Croom.
The thin roads are ancient, with brush in so close
a horse cart can scarcely find room.

With thickets that dense one stays on the road
but the light I followed was errant,
And I gave myself up to a fearsome thing,
a way where no way was apparent.

What man could say that he's never done such
whether choosing a wife, or a living ?
You measure your lust, and your chances, too,
and hope the way is forgiving.

So into the wild of maze and thorn
I followed the various light—
Now white, now ruddy, now harebell blue—
So I followed it through the night.

And when the day came—this I'll tell till I die—
I came to a highway and town
Where the pub keeper laughed and poured me a mug
and swore I'd been given a sign.

“What's red, and blue and white,” he asked,
“but the flag where my brother has moved?”
You've been given a sign to take to the sea
and settle where magic is proved.

And so it has happened, for kinfolk, not me,
in the land of the blue, red, and white,
While I've chosen to stay in our magical land
where the will-o-the-wisp is still bright.

The Piper

My mind's not right, I've heard it said,
though my piping has never been better
And my words, they too must make good sense
to all but the dimmest doubter.

I lie in the poorhouse preparing to go
to a land where all are musicians,
A place not built on limestone or dirt
or staffed by mere priests and physicians.

If all's to be praise in the halls beyond time,
with the harp and fiddle and drum,
Then I shall be blessed as I play my pipe,
with a skill that could quicken the dumb.

For I played thirty years in town and field,
but often as not on the Burren
Where few souls strayed and the beasts were few
but the stones awaited a stirring.

So I roused the bedrock out of its bed,
and the gravestones too from their slumber,
A light-footed throng, given my song,
like the stars in the sky without number.

How we danced, the clints and the scallops too,
the cairn-stones and the cobble,
All in such joy that a chance passerby
would find lifted the weight of his trouble.

Now heaven is high, the highest of all,
and heavy things fall, that's for certain,
So all that's of heaven must be lighter than air,
that trembles my poorhouse curtain.

The heavenly stuff must be light as the notes
that I blew on my Irish pipe,
And even the gold beneath one's foot
must be ready to rise from its sleep.

It's music all in the heavenly hall,
the tune and those who enjoy it.
Like stars we shall make great harmony
with never a tongue to destroy it.

Here, take my hand and lift me up
from this lumpy straw-filled pad.
I hear the fiddles now striking up,
and my pipe has a part to add.

Part III: County Cork

The Coast Rescue Oarsman

We ten set out in our open boat
on the heavy sea that night,
With the great English liner calling for help,
like a foundering city of light.

Five miles out and mortally breached,
she called for the help of the shore,
Lest her lights be quenched by the surly waves,
a thousand souls, or more.

Now a rescue boat is a brave device
for riding an angry sea,
With oars for ten strong men to use
in practiced camaraderie.

And though my land has suffered great hurts
from the servants of the crown,
You're not intent on the ugly past
when a city is apt to drown.

So into the dark in an open boat,
each oar stroke another death,
As you fight the monster sea and the wind,
and the need to find your breath.

But three miles out and we catch a sight
to tempt one to despair,
For the prow of the liner now points down
and her stern lifts high in the air.

No ship that's made can stand on its head,
so we knew the fight was lost
With the city of light and its many souls
beyond the help of the coast.

Yet ten souls were saved, I'll swear to that,
ten souls were saved that night,
For not one of us in the rescue boat
could have faced the Last Day's light,

Knowing we'd stood on the Irish shore,
with our fellows in despair,
Not lifting a hand to ply the oar
pretending our selves to spare.

The Mother of the Changeling

Was he a changeling boy or not,
Some others must help decide.
For my heart's too troubled by recent news
to serve me well as a guide.

At birth he was lean as a dried-up fruit
and his eyes were a slatey gray,
So I thought I must test him upon the fire
in the ancient country way.

But the lady of nearby Castle House
told me there was no need—
She had seen many a wizened child
grow up to prove good seed.

Still the lad was strange, as child and youth
not taking to country ways,
And questioning both father and priest,
not looking for common praise.

Then he went off to London town
and we scarcely had a letter,
Except his saying he loved us both
and his country even better.

That should have told us the truth, I guess,
but one so hard to bear.
Like a changeling born of alien seed
he knew things he would not share.

And on a bridge in London town,
with its busy traffic and trade,
He blew himself up with a little bomb
that the IRA had made.

What I have now of my changeling son
is a ring and his baby shoes.
But what I have lost some others must say,
as they pardon or accuse.

The Pugilist's Wife

He was great with his hands, my surly man,
and great on the bar's high stool.
The beatings and drink I could take all right.
but I hated the role of the fool.

He called me witless, a kitchen drudge,
steeped in the old-time lore,
And if he should hear me speak of such
he'd box me out the door.

He prospered in all his fisticuffs
at the pub or the village green,
Winning some fame as a nasty piece
as cruel as the county had seen.

Meanwhile the cowardly men about
would buy him rounds as protection.
Getting him safely asleep was the point,
not spending to win his affection.

So a winter passed, and the drink was free,
but my husband's luck turned sour,
For visions began of hellish scenes,
that threatened each nighttime hour.

"Help," he would scream in his drunken sleep,
"Help, there's great danger near.
There's rapping and bumping under the floor."
And his voice would tremble in fear.

Till one night at the dawn of spring,
it came to a nasty head.
"Help," he screamed out, "it's the devil himself
standing beside my bed."

“Get the priest,” he cried, “with the holy words
to rid me of this demon.”

“Not so,” I said. “I see and hear naught,
but your moaning and your screaming.”

“As for the priest,” I said, “why should he come?
The devil’s only a nightmare
Like all those crusts of old-time lore
you told me were simpleton’s fare.”

And so he died, thrashing about
like a wild horse in his bed.
Was it the devil? How should I know,
I with my empty head.

The Man Who Lived on His Boat

I left a world that my father filled,
so full it would stifle a son,
And I tried my hand at making a world
where I was the man who won.

But win or lose it came to the same,
I had no heart for the test.
So I took to my boat on the West Cork shore
a marginal man, but at rest.

A boat is a sort of world to itself,
and moored at the edge of the land.
Its boards are wet by the restless sea,
though it's close to the world of men.

And any child who has read of the Ark,
or of floating isles on the sea,
Or of tree houses high that move in the wind
knows the passion that still moves me.

For my heart's desire is the mystery
summed up in the moving floor,
The fluid that's fixed, and the fixed that's free,
the floating that's yet secure.

My father's world was his dragon-skin
or maybe his carapace,
A thing that could no longer grow with him
once he had filled its space.

But I choose a boat that can take me to sea
into the broad and the deep,
Or snug me close to the sheltering land
when I choose a quiet sleep.

And who knows, a father whose world is tight
like a skin to be outgrown,
May yet find a way to shed his skin
and look for an errant son.

The Ironsmith-Monk

The Abbot gave me a silver cup
to give away again.
He would not keep such gifts about
as a stumbling-block for sin.

And I hid the cup in a cellar niche
and lied with a likely tale
Of passing the silver cup along
to a pilgrim before his sail.

But at night there came the vividest dream
that ever a mortal had.
A demon arose with a grisly tale
and a bargain for me, he said.

Thirty pieces of shining silver he held,
the price of the Savior's blood,
And the price of the Potter's Field where lay
the vagrant and the wild.

And ever since these coins had power
to purchase the heart's desire,
However hot and wild might be
the flame of the inner fire.

A mitre they bought for a lowly priest
who cherished the bishop's chair,
And a rack secured for a torturer
who'd know what a martyr could bear.

They corrupted a queen who sold her love
and watched a kingdom fall,
And dazzled the eye of an honest knight
who had heard the religious call.

So for years beyond count and in countless trades
they had entered both church and palace,
And the coins were mine to use as I wished
in exchange for the silver chalice.

But I saw with dread where the bargain led,
whatever the cup might be,
For my soul, I knew, was part of the trade,
and so for eternity.

And I woke in a trice with a pounding heart
and a vow to confess my error,
For no joy that cup or coin would bring
would come without final terror.

The Greasy Maid

When I was a girl, at harvest time
we'd hang up a hog by the hocks,
And dress him clean with tubs and barrels
for guts and bacon and chops.

The tubs we'd boil over an open fire
for sausage meat and lard,
And the hams we'd hang in the smoking shed
where winter would turn them hard.

The kitchen yard was a greasy place,
with a shine on bench and wall.
It was where I learned to love good pork,
and the fat of it best of all.

Then many years at the manor house
I cooked for the master's table.
I skimmed the lard from the sausage pot
and shared with the dogs at the stable.

Thick hot stew was my special dish
with a dollop of fat for the flavor.
For grease holds the essence of onion and leek,
and the cabbage-pot needs it for savor.

In the dark of the year when tempers would flare
and chairs would go crack on the wall,
A good greasy dish from the pot on the fire
would quiet the men in the hall.

And I grew big from my tasty fare,
as big as a mare, they said,
For I sampled all that I put on the board,
and sopped up the grease with my bread.

But the man I loved for thirty years,
 who walked with the horse and plow,
Grew larger still, as big as a shed
 for housing the farrowing sow.

He died in peace at just fifty years,
 as happy as babe in arms,
Enormous and sleek and full of the food
 I had fixed with my greasy charms.

I raised a son as lean as a rail
 and a daughter willowy tall,
But the one I loved best was my sweet plowman
 who cherished me, grease and all.

The Naked Gardener

No virgins in vows to convent sworn,
walled up from the world and its sin,
Ever found fault with my gardening skills—
rather, they faulted my skin.

How much I loved the work of a man,
and turning the compost and soil,
What though the smear and the grime made me black?
God loves the dirt, after all.

I had little school but I've heard the old tales,
how God made a man from the earth,
And, if you please, how he took up the dirt
when he came in a human birth.

And I had a thing about good bare skin,
like Adam's in Eden's garden,
When gardening-work was no work at all,
and God was your friend, not your warden.

So an Adam I was, in the garden-state,
naked, and covered with grime.
The Sisters were wed to Christ, I knew,
and safe they were from all crime.

But the Mother Superior found me one day
and said, with her head turned aside,
When gardening here you must cover your loins
as our good Lord's were when He died.

For though Adam the Second he kept on clothes,
even in death's dark moment,
And you are no better than Christ, good man,
while we, though his bride, are still women.

So I put on the clothes such as others would wear,
some shoes and a workman's suit.
Though loath I am to cover my skin
as if I resented the dirt.

The Abbott

I wanted no sin in my valley wide
so I gathered virginal men,
The sort who would work, and pray, and work,
and pray and work again.

We cleared the fields of their granite stones
and built good walls for our keeping.
Though sin might abound in the hills around,
we would take pure hearts to our sleeping.

So the skies took fire with sublimed desire
and our gardens bloomed with our passion,
As my monks grew wise in the ancient ways
of a life above sin and fashion.

But a crazed man knocked at our gates one day
asking for food and shelter.
He came without coat, or shoes for his feet,
but with tale to make the heart falter.

A fever was raging in nearby town
and many were dead or dying,
And who could tell if river or wall
would keep us from what he was flying.

To the end of my life I heard that voice,
the voice of the visiting stranger.
The world had come to our gate that day,
with its sin and its mortal danger.

And we fled our walls, though not for the hills,
but for work in the nearby town.
Many we buried and some we cured,
though few had we truly known.

We opened then the gates in our walls
to townsman and to stranger,
Whoever might come for food or rest,
or respite from worldly danger.

And sin we knew to be near at hand
in the heart of both host and wayfarer,
But grace is vast and correction kind,
even for monkish error.

Healing, we taught to all who would hear,
was in herbs and waters pure,
And always the sad and fevered heart
might find in love its cure.

The Budgie Fancier

I returned one night to a quiet loft
and not one of my birds to be seen,
just one sleek and well-fed cat
who'd torn out the window screen.

There were my savings and hope for gain
gone for a tomcat's feast,
So I paused to give the most careful thought
to a suitable end for the beast.

I hired a friend with no love for cats
but who owned an old-fashioned wringer.
He turned the crank while I entered the cat
tail-first, while I minded each finger.

The sound I heard was not so fine
as a choir of well-tuned birds,
But it made a tune my ear desired,
though it lacked a penitent's words.

Now the Good Book says that even the mercies
of the wicked man are cruel,
But what of the deeds that make no pretense
of setting the good to school?

I had my revenge, and my loft is clean.
It will never be stocked again.
For sure, cat-lovers will curse my act,
but they slight the poor budgies' pain.

The Comic Taxidermist

Until my dream St. Steven's Day
I practiced a curious art,
Not merely stuffing a fish or bird,
for that was the business part.

My skill was best shown in a comic way
as I took the tiny beasts,
Like stoats and shrews and woodland mice,
and set them to indoor feasts.

Oh, they'd be dead and stuffed with skill,
and tricked out with little vests,
to sit in the miniature banquet hall
much finer than their nests.

Or I'd trick them up in tiny suits
for a courtroom scene with a trial,
And they'd look as grim as a minister
ready to go to jail.

Or I'd do up a scene at a country school
with a marten as the teacher,
While the bad little mouse wore the tall dunce hat
as suited the mischievous creature.

But the dream I had after Christmas last
gave a new turn to my art,
For I dreamed the tables were turned, you could say,
and the beasts played a different part.

Little men, and their ladies, too,
sat stiff in their anxious thought,
While a great gray rat sat at table's head
and ordered that food be brought.

With that a door opened and a nasty stew
was brought from the old rat's stove—
Bits of bug and of rancid nut
that only a rat could love.

And the dream's other scene was a country school
with a weasel at the head,
And the stiff little lads and girls sat about
filled with a nervous dread.

“Now, class,” says the beast, with a toothy smile,
“our lesson on war will begin
With the truth about beasts who got here first
and who will remain at the end.”

“And if any mad and churlish child
thinks the war is theirs for winning,
He must go to the back of the class and wait,
and hope for another beginning.”

That was not all to my dream that eve—
the rest was even more dreadful.
But what I have shared is quite enough
to give one a sorry heedful:

No more jokes made on tiny beasts
as if they yearned to be human.
Let beasts be beasts while the great world stands—
they need no comic grooming.

I'll stuff your fish to make it huge,
as big as the tale you tell.
You take my tale as true, if you like,
and the world may yet go well.

The Shepherd

I lived with no purse on a high green hill,
and I lived there, it seems, forever,
With my sheep and my dog and a firm resolve
to learn to love God and the weather.

Good wool I traded for food and fuel,
and lambs for my lodging's hire
And made all else with a pair of strong hands,
whenever the need would inspire.

Money is easy to love, they said,
for you're loving yourself in the end,
But God and the weather made strange demands,
and one's love is harder to spend.

The wind on the height has a various will
and the sunlight defers to the rain,
While the storm, when it comes, likes to tear the thatch
with never a mind to explain.

But I've learned to love the moods of the sky
for what is a world without weather
But a plotless tale without grace or surprise,
and I would not live without either.

My dearest friend has been Jack my ram,
as rude as an untamed Scot,
But loyal too, and gentle enough
when not in the fury of rut.

And the question I'd pose the chapel-wise
who are expert in Heaven and Hell,
Is, Does the Lord who cradles the lamb
have arms for the ram as well?

And what of that sheep, the maverick ewe,
who is most at ease when alone,
Inclined to follow her errant whim
till lost on some windswept down?

Mountains won't speak, and the sky is mute,
but my heart is a shepherd's heart.
And I would guess that the final fold
is greater than men report.

Part IV: County Wicklow

The Man with the Blackthorn Cudgel

I had many a use for my blackthorn stick,
and not just the cracking of heads,
Though I did crack a few over twenty-five years
so others could rest in their beds.

I've learned that a rap on the cherry in bloom
brings a shower of bright color down,
So one feels like a king with a carpet beneath,
and petals of pink for a crown.

And held overhead, with your cap on the top,
your stick makes you ten feet tall,
A help when you're leading the youngsters from school
on a tour of the jail and the wall.

With my stick I once poked a rat from a chair
at the church in a Sunday's service,
And laid him out for the churchyard cat
before even the priest could be nervous.

You come to feel the length of your stick
as an extra joint of your arm,
And though it be wood and without a soul,
you tremble at thought of its harm.

And the finest hour that ever I had
in keeping the village's peace,
Was once when a fierce and distempered fox
came to the marketplace.

Plain it was he had lost his wits
and was waiting a chance to bite,
While a hundred women and children too
were trying to hide their fright.

But I sent the fox to his lasting rest
with a blow of my cudgel long,
And thankful I was for each inch of its length
and for wood that was gnarly strong.

Now I've heard that abroad the Irish are known
as a people of courage and pluck,
Who love a good fight when all is fair
and you're counting on skill more than luck.

But I wonder sometimes if my small Wicklow town
of Shillelagh, where blackthorn grows,
Has ever been heard of beyond county's edge,
beyond where the Derry flows.

The Poacher

I wonder still at the naked maid
I met in the Glenmalure wood.
I never shall know the town whence she came
or if she was evil or good.

On my neighbor's land I was checking my snares
for a grand Whitsunday meal,
The day when the Holy Ghost comes down
and visits the honest soul.

But my snares were sprung and the birds all flown
so I doubted my skill in the setting,
And how should I feed the dozen guests
who would want good meat with their pudding.

Then out of the glade there came a lass
as white as a fish and as shining.
Her hair was black like an inky pool
and her eye was sadly pining.

Could I help her search for her robe, she pled,
for a thief had found her bathing
Out on the stones of Glenmalure Stream,
and teased her and taken her clothing.

So I searched with her, and felt her breath
soft as a kiss on my shoulder.
And I fain would have shared my manly strength
had my lust but made me bolder.

Of robe we found nothing, and soon she was gone,
leaving no track to follow.
And in truth, I never did find her again,
that maiden of Balderry hollow.

Now neighbors had said they saw a strange lass
who came down the Glenmalure valley,
And some have said they saw her as far
as the high moorlands of the Sally.

She was dressed in green with a girdle of gold
and her song would quicken the dead
While the wild birds whistled and followed her
and a chaffinch perched on her head.

Come Whitsunday, my guests had poor fare
while we swapped our tales of Faerie,
And I never did snare or eat a bird
after meeting the maid by Balderry.

The Girl of the Brayhead Shore

I knew the shore like a creature would
if it were both fish and maid.
I loved the edge where the two worlds meet
and I was of both, they said.

Silkee, they called me, and lass of the sea,
though neither in truth was I,
But a lover spurned by one who sailed
with never a word of goodbye.

I grew wise in the ways of the shore
and could coax the gull to my hand.
I knew the tides and the ocean swells
and the lugworm that bored in the sand.

So wise grew I that they thought me fey
and feared me, and crossed the breast,
Though all I knew was the magical edge
where the waves sweep up to their rest.

In time there came a fisherman
who gathered the salmon and sole,
And he fetched me out to sea with him
and taught me the first mate's role.

He knew the deeps like I knew the shore
and together we prospered well,
For always the sea must join the land
as even the simple can tell.

We prospered enough to buy the slope
that snuggles in Brayhead's lee,
And raised our young to cherish the edge
where Wicklow goes down to the sea.

The Hermit

A tree, a cave, and a beehive hut
were my homes for three score years.
I learned to love the wind on the hill
and I learned to shed good tears.

Though the life I lived was the hermit's life,
my heart was a pagan's heart.
For I heeded my love for the wilderness
when I chose a place apart.

The world of green was a buxom lass
with victuals for the soul,
And the tree that sheltered my back from the rain
seemed fit to make me whole.

The root-draped cave that kept me next
was the earth grown mother-kind,
And I loved the hardness all about
that taught firmness to the mind.

The gray stones then that made my hut
were a promise from the past
That naught would fail till the end of time
since nature was true and just.

But the world of men was a different world
distempered with hot desire,
For the new and the rich and the womanly soft
as fire was heaped upon fire.

So I wept the tears of the penitent
as I shared in the griefs of all,
But I truly loved the simple gifts
of tree and cave and cell.

Now the heart is the deepest of mysteries
and the will is stranger still,
As I learned when called to shepherd the monks
who lived upon Glendalough's hill.

For I heeded a voice more ancient than wind,
more urgent than mountain stream.
It spoke in my heart as my truest desire,
and it conjured the grandest dream.

An abbey would stand with churches nine
and a school to cherish old lore,
And throngs would go out to teach the world
while other throngs came to the door.

Full six score years I spent in all
as lover of wild and tame,
But finally I heard but a single voice
for grace is ever the same.

One of the Unholy Three

I was the third of the unholy three
who lived down Kilkenny Lane.
William would mock and Michael loved maids,
and I thieved, though not for my gain.

William had wit as quick as a knife
and a laugh that could trouble a saint.
Like his father before him, he argued and swore
that the truth was not for the faint.

While Michael had maids on every hillside
and a bastard or two in the town.
His brow was fair, and his beard was black,
and his cheek like the blossom new-blown.

It was I with my thieving who made us all pause
for I stole from a widow in Bray—
She came to her garden, found me and my bag,
blessed me, and sent me away.

But what did I need with the trifles I took—
and egg or two, and a bowl?
It was danger I loved, and the joy of the game,
and the widow had stricken my soul.

The end of the game was I mended her fence,
and William, he rehung her gate,
While Michael set onions in rows in her yard,
and we mused on her early and late.

Now William does law in a village nearby
and Michael tells tales to his brood,
And I wed the widow, nearly double my age,
trading theft for the lure of the good.

The Rider at Stepside

It puzzles me still how I lost my road
on that golden morning in May,
When I rode where the hills south of Dublin town
rise to the Wicklow Way.

It was near the hamlet of Stepside
where I stopped in a blossomy lane.
I asked for help from an apple-cheeked maid
who gave me no time to explain.

She fixed me with eye both bold and bright
and swore she would not be my guide.
Could I not see that just up the way
was the hamlet of Stepside?

So I turned and found it was just as she said,
though I longed to find her once more,
To ask how her lane met lanes that I knew,
and had she an open door?

But finding is mystery, as much as is loss,
and all of my searches were vain,
For every third lane was a cul de sac,
and I never could find her again.

Yet that's not the whole, no, not by half,
for next year, by chance, one might say,
It was she who found me in my saddler's shop
on the road from Dublin to Bray.

She had come to find a mount like the one
secured near my stable gate,
But what she found was a husband instead,
in a most curious turning of fate.

And the deepest of wonders is how one is found
when his hope has long since died,
As I was found by the maid I met
when I wandered near Stepside.

The Frustrated Lover

I followed a maid into Doonbeg town
for she cast a glance at me
That said she had many a secret to share
with a man who followed the sea.

Her heels they clicked on the cobblestones
as she led me down street and lane,
And soon she stopped at a yellow door
where a dim light shone from within.

The key in her hand and the smile on her face
assured me a port for the night,
But the matter is moot for a great black dog
appeared in that strange half-light.

He was tall as my waist, with massive chops,
and he barred my way to the door,
While the maiden paled and shouted his name
and scolded him most sore.

But the brute would not move and took her blows
without so much as a flinch,
And she soon left off, and gave me a scowl
as she opened her door an inch.

The beast pushed in, with her following,
but I feared to test my luck,
So I retraced my steps to a nearby pub
with the sign of the Roasted Duck.

There I took sup and shortly asked
if a great black dog was aprowl,
For I had seen one on a nearby street
with a temperament most foul.

Yes, I was told, there was such a beast,
though harm he had never done.
He was owned by a maid who had lost her man
to a stranger who came with a gun.

And the gist of the tale was that nobody knew
which of her lovers it was,
So the case was closed with never a proof
though with many a probable cause.

The dog she had bought to guard her flat,
and guard it well he did,
For the tale was abroad she'd grown virtuous
and many a lover had fled.

And strangest of all, she called the dog
by the name of the husband she'd slighted,
Though why this was no living soul knew,
for his love had gone unrequited.

So I finished my plate and asked bed for the night,
and kept my side of the tale,
Though many an eye was turned my way
and I knew that my brow was pale.

I have no patience with those who deny
that the dead are on hand to aid,
For I know that a dog with a Christian name
denied me my night with a maid.

The Lapsed Monk

I am the monk who lost his faith
while hiding in Glendalough tower
For the devils who came from the icy north
unmade my world in an hour.

They burned my bench and broke my bowl
and ravished and reaved and swore,
While they took what they liked and ruined the rest—
even Satan could do no more.

But these madmen, they stayed on the nearby coast
and they married our country maids,
While the wandering monks who slipped away
were changed by such pagan raids.

For some were made strong and prayed elsewhere
or returned to rebuild again,
While others like me gave up the faith
when their manuscript work was gone.

And what is a man without his work
though it be in a celibate cell?
And what is a calling from God, I ask,
when the voice that called is still?

The Lodging-Keeper at Greystones

I kept a house for single men
in Greystones by the sea,
And I tapped every bit of the joy in my soul
to deal with those men at tea.

For one was grim as a child bereaved,
and another was mad as a hare,
While a third swore women were the curse of the world,
and the fourth was wed to despair.

They all were writers, or so they said,
and scribbling I saw on their desks,
But why would one write with nothing to say
but stories that puzzle and vex?

Their words, I admit, were strange and fine,
and soared like birds in their flight,
But how sad that among the four of them
they could name only sorrow and blight.

The saddest of all was a hollow-cheeked man
who said my joy was a wonder—
How could I hum and sing at my work
when all was a cosmic blunder?

And I said that my words were not equal to his,
He could name me horrors unknown.
But I had one word to put in the fray,
a word I had long made my own.

“Forgiveness,” I said, has a power to heal,
“forgiveness by God and by man.
And if God needs forgiving for the world you describe,
forgive Him too, if you can.”

He took my hand with a dry little laugh,
and claimed my hope was most queer.
But said he would try to pardon the God
Who made him and put him here.

And the writers four talked into the night,
shouting and pounding the wall,
Disputing the sense of forgiving God
for making a world at all.

The Village Priest to the Barn Preacher

Surely you know what these travelers are—
gypsies and idlers and vagrants.
They do us no good like the hardworking Poles
and the other industrious migrants.

Why would you pay them to come when you preach,
as the locals tell me you do?
It's a puzzle for all the good parish folk
and for me, their pastor, too.

So I've come just to hear the message you bring,
and I'm moved by the tale about Jerry,
That pale lad healed of faintings and fits,
with never a doctor for caring.

I'm moved as well by your personal tale
of living for years as a hiker,
Hitching your rides on American roads
and doing your time as a biker.

But why come here to our civilized land
to preach in sheep barn and stable
Offering gimcracks and biscuits, I learn,
with only a bench for a table?

Why promise healing with only a touch
when the Church has its prayer books and unction,
And the town has its registered medical men
properly paid for their function?

What shall I call your evangelist thing
with its pleas for trust and confession?
It's something like old Irish wishing, I guess,
though hardly a trade or profession.

The Builder of Bridges

I built three spans over Wicklow's streams,
my last on the Avonmore.
All three should last for a thousand years,
as part of the good land's lore.

No river exists but was made to be crossed,
and trade knows no limit or bound,
So roads must pass from the near to the far
however a way can be found.

I swear that most stones I set in my trade
were called to the task I gave them,
For upstream and down they lay ready-made,
and no need to chisel or shave them.

I could read that call in the shape of the stone
as I turned it about in my mind,
Seeing how weight would work against weight,
once the one with the others was joined.

And I've danced with stones one could turn on a point,
though they'd crush you to death, should they fall,
And the trick was to tip them, end over end,
to their age-long rest in the wall.

I've raised stones high, like the dolmen-slabs
that the ancients left in our land,
For the human hand can lift any weight
that the mind can fit to a plan.

Now some say a bridge is an unholy place,
home to the mischievous sprite.
But I say all bridges are as holy as shrines,
or altars, or Easter's first light.

For a well-made bridge, like the bow in the sky,
 reveals some exalted connection
Between what's at hand and what's more remote,
 the land of the heart's affection.

And bridges span limits that do not confine,
 but mark off what's near from what's far,
Whether the work is a Wicklow span
 or a bridge to the nearest star.

The Old Wife

Have you heard the news of the Wicklow lanes?
There's a new house by the mill,
And the stones that once walled old William's field
have tumbled along the hill.

The priest has said mass for a homeless girl
who leapt from the Dargle Bridge.
And many have left for a better life,
down at the ocean's edge.

A Japanese man came to Glencree's park
where the German flyers lie,
And an Englishman looked for his mother's roots
in a stony dale nearby.

So the wide worlds come to Wicklow's hills,
and the heavens too, I hear,
For falling stars drop on Glencullen's slope
as they do in the spring of each year.

But my Michael now sleeps by the village church
where a high cross stands alone,
And my heart knows well that the weighty news
is the news that is writ in stone.

The Host of the Dance

The magic glows in our public hall
where Katie stands in her golden gown.
The charmed beholders look on in awe,
and each lad hopes he's the chosen one.

But the ancient law of the magical realm
is that grief and joy are ever wed
And three stout lads with an eye for her
declare they'll fight until two are dead.

Soon Pat he's bloody, and Sean he's bruised,
and Liam is gasping in black-eyed fear,
So they all go off for the healing brew,
which leaves shy Michael beside the stair.

Michael is meant for the priestly life
with half a year of school to go
And Katie's magic that takes his eye
is devil's dart and devil's show.

But Katie is new to the magic-craft
and knows the glory of Michael's clan:
Three priests, three nuns and a bishop too,
along with a wealthy Protestant man.

So she tells him softly she knows his choice.
Does God speak oft to him, she asks.
And Michael turns, so full of love,
he doubts he is equal to priestly tasks.

But music begins, with its different spell,
and the fighters return, full of alcohol's fire,
The party goes on, as party's will,
with noisy diversion and mute desire.

Tall Michael he turns to a book on the shelf,
and Katie will dance with a girl from her lane
And battlers three will tell tales by the fire,
while the magic dims with its profitless pain.