

The Waiting Game

*For John Airs, Jimmy McGovern and Ailsa who've
all taught me a lot*



LA LUNE

K.P. McCann

The Waiting Game

" ... but of that which arose out of my living, I felt then, and I feel today, I am but a trustee"

HENRY WILLIAMSON

"No individual can recognise his own humanity and consequently realise it in his lifetime, if not by recognising it in others ..."

BAKUNIN

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LIGHT -SMITH

By the pond.
Near a line of poplar trees
Is an old man:
His brush stroke stills
A shifting sky.

He sees pond skaters
Skim each ripple's
Wind raised spine.

Their movements mirror
His line, his colour :
He seeks a wash
Of birdsong,
Blocked in sunlight,
The silence that precedes
Sudden leaping trout.

MIDSUMMER SEANCE

Mid-Summer's fire
Is mounting,
Its shadow in alignment
With the flexing
Of a star.

A hawk
Hovers on the mind's tolerance,
The day's last arrow
Shot moonwards
Is stilled, a delusion In the instant
Of its fall.

Mordred
Strikes a mortal blow
And Arthur teeters on the edge
Of silence,
Weightless at the moment
Of his fall.

At Glastonbury,
A merchant's staff,
Leant on whilst bartering,
Has split the grain
Of clay
And is, already, growing roots:
Nearby, a boy climbs
Nets of sunlight;
Pausing, he hangs unsupported,
Arms outstretched,
To mark the spot
Where a high altar's crucifix
Will be

THE WAITING GAME

In the side-ward,
Skin growing
On cups of tea,
We sit, my mother and I,
While cancer drains
His scrap of life.

Grandad dribbles
Doesn't know me,
His nightshirt stained
With spit
We no longer rise
To wipe away.

My mother begins to nod,
Where I look out
Crows drift with smoke
From the crematorium
Frost has cast nets
Across the sedge,
Mist begins to ease up
Through the trees,
A breeze edges in
From the sea.

Not six months ago
He'd have turned the heads
Of silent nurses
Who now lift him
like a shopping bag:
I listen
Begin to hope
Each choked wheezing
Is his last

KES (For Barry Hines)

Close winged.
He stoops.
Then arcs to fall.
Wind-raked talons
Jabbing the air.
In a playground
Swirling children pause.
Some point.

And one lad.
Wealed hands swelling.
Hovers
As the last echoes
of re-possessing bells.
Rising. glide away.

PONIES

As our train shunts
A rising gradient
And the heat ebbs.
I see ponies
Quenching themselves
On dew soaked grass.
One breaks loose,
Hooves gouging gravel
From between the sleepers:
And seems to stumble
Heftily forward rolling,
Flesh parting
In a measured arc of blood.
White knuckled. I turn away
And - birds rise
From the brush line,
Focus onto flies
Orbitting clustered petals
Shrouded in webs.

LEANAN-SIDHE

In the whistling dawn,
She is a dew reflected tracery
Of gold and green,
Her passing stirs the lees.
Only half-aware at first.
He sifted phrases,
Stones sized and chosen
For their shape, their polished lustre.
She was
A murmur on his page,
Elusive,
A rising breeze.
She became his eyes and ears
Let him assume the transparent ease
Of a blind man
Playing knucklebones.

(In Ireland Leanan·Sidhe [Lan-awn-shee) is
the Muse of poets.)

GHOST STORY

In the spare room
Of a top floor flat,
Old servants quarters
Someone said,
Nothing was seen.
Just heard:
A rustle of crinoline,
Small hours weeping,
Footsteps on the stairs.

He's awake suddenly
Eyes raking through shadows,
Breath staining the air,
Unseen, weight shifts
Off a creaking chair.

Sheets and blankets
Scrape back,
Sobbing fills the bedroom
An icy head.
Dents the pillow,

Hands reach out
And dapple
His sweat matted hair.

EASTER

He is dead at last
The sun is leprous,
Bound in ragged clouds
They are twisting nails
out of the flesh
And coarse-grained wood.

One dawn on.
His sudden radiation
Sears the winding cloth.
The horizon foams
With doves:
Darkness is pierced
By unconditional love.

THE CENTURION'S INQUEST

Three times I saw him,
This cub Caractacus:
Once, as his war host
Broke in waves
Upon our shields;
For seven years
He was a heath fire
Scorching our heels.

The second time,
In Rome,
He silenced gawping crowds
And wore our chains
As laurel wreaths.

Lastly, by chance,
I saw him
Two nights before his death:
A British dawn
Of bronze and grey,
Spilling his wine,
Re-fighting lost campaigns,
Weeping for those
He'd left
On the slopes of Caer Caradoc.

SHELL-SHOCKED

Against the far wall,
Next to a chest of drawers.
Stands a wardrobe,
Bought second· hand
Between the wars.

In the early hours
He dreaming a spare room
Rippled with moon light,
"Bomber's Moon", he yells
Diving into a dusty hedgerow,
Sudden silence thickens
With the roots
He's wedged himself between:
As mayflies blizzard
He kneels to broken statues,
Amongst them is his own

And while he's lapping moisture
From this angel's fractured wing,
Marble fists clench, unnoticed,
Rising shadows cross his back,
And, circling, close in.

WITHOUT HONOURS

The interviewer
Waves in for close-up
As an old woman
Mimics foreign words
Her father overheard
In France,
A few miles behind
Allied lines
Seventy·odd years ago;
Breaking his stride
Outside the high-walled courtyard
As a boy, not seventeen
He later learned,
Pleading in English
Is hauled out
To a pock-marked post
Facing a Khaki line,
Moments later
He is silent,
A single volley's echo
Hammering the sky.
She turns
To face the camera,
Her voice blurs
In re-creation:

"I want me ma,"
She cries. .

STILLED LIFE (NAGASAKI)

As the bomb's outer casing
Swells and splits
A child's hand is scattered,
She shrieks her incandescence,
Around her feet
Soil is translated,
Into glass

In the aftermath,
On rare walls
Are the shadows of grass,
Contact prints,
A ball to be caught,
A man seated,
Watching perhaps?

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

KEVIN McCANN was born in 1954. He has lived in Liverpool for the past twelve years and at present teaches English and Drama at Quarry Bank. This is his second collection of poems, the first being " The Trouble With Wings" published in 1981 bt Toulouse Press.

WINDOWS

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