

Fifteen
Contacts
Macdara Woods

I

Deep in the unknown
empty quarter
of that country

There is a lake
and in the middle of the lake
there is an island

And in the middle
of the island
stands a mountain

And from its top
the oceans of the world
are visible:

We are less different
from each other
than islands from the land

II

This is how we
came here
like the cormorant

Inhabiting two species
the water and
the stone walls on the mountain

Peruvian marks
of lazy-beds
stretched all across the countryside

Sailing out of Roonagh
a red queen and a white queen
dance across the bay

Coming midday
into harbour
with a thin moon overhead

III

Strip away words
less words
and fewer

Seeing things
from nearer to the ground
to focus small:

Grains of salt
around the rock-pool
shell

Stone
flat sea and open sky
is vastness

Is silence
sound and vastness
of everything grown in

IV

Like fence-posts we stick up
on the horizon
figures masts and tower

Over and beyond
islands are like lakes inverted
upside down

The sea above
the giant hollow places
far beneath

My father told me
look at mountains paintings
upside down

Over there inside my head
still watching
light and shade on Minaun

v

When you walk around an island
you do not come back
to where you started out

This is the Imram
and the fact:
the day itself has changed

And light and time
the moving measure
of us all moved on

The ritual
of couples landing here
and setting out

At once
on bicycle and foot
to map the edges of this Ark

vi

The tower house is present
as the sea is
always present and the wind

That blows the county flags:
as sheep
as sea gulls up above the wind

And cloud and mountains
blue on grey on blue
all life: and signs of life

A shovel lying on the ground
a coal bag
underneath a bush

Blue clothes-pegs
paint tins
bags of sand cement and stones

VII

Children in the schoolyard
in the sun
girls and boys

With helmets hurleys:
a sliotar in his hand
the teacher

Is explaining all
the expertise
of poc and stance

Above the glittering sea
that stretches out
to Inishturk

And fuschia green and red
is everywhere
all Mayo red and green

VIII

Please do not touch
the curraghs...
the archetypal care

As Liam Brady heard
a woman say
in Connemara

Half a century ago: a mhac
ná bí
ag briseadh bád

Everything comes here
by hand
by sea and history

One way and another:
Terra
Marique Potens O Maille

IX

In the cloisters
of the monastery of Oliveto
there is

A Signorelli fresco
of the angels visiting in mufti
one woman

Cutting bread
another pouring wine or water
from a jug for them:

The stuff of day to day
unconsciously rehearsed
as this

The scene repeated here
a young girl
pouring tea into a cup

x

Sand in the breaking waves
stones talking
in the flow back undertow

The low-tide rolling talk
of stones
along the beach

And the one-eyed dog
who waits
all afternoon in hope

Of stone or stick
thrown in for him to fetch
clocks off goes home

I see him next day
hard at work
driving sheep down to the boat

XI

I saw that red-gold hair before
in Philip's tomb
in Macedon

Burning red-gold
oak branch diadem and filigree
of twigs and leaves

That living artistry of wind
and chance
that crosses time

Comes down to us
like amber
floating on the Baltic sea:

A woven beehive
and a sea-wise cloth
such wisdom Ariadne brought

XII

Standing at the end of Europe
by Grace O'Malley's grave
in the Atlantic

The sea-light
seeping through the stone and windows
the fading painted figures

On the walls and ceiling
reaffirm
the unseen acts of reverence repeated

That we apply
the sanctity we bring to things
are what survive:

These damaged boars and stags
still living here
that sleek elastic hound

XIII

Going the road from
sea to sea
where the valley rises up

Between
Knockmore and Knocknaveen
and a woman on her bike

Comes cycling from the sun
none but us both
in that stupendous space

And loneliness:
the simple endless moment
of being there

And nowhere else
and knowing it: and then to leave
a moment so inhabited

xiv

Arrival and departure
all going to and coming from
in the unending

Business
of ferrying
the present to the present:

We land and gravitate a while
disperse
take credit for the weather

The wooden benches
for the passer by
stare out to sea:

A line of great stone heads
we shade our eyes
looking out to where we were

xv

They do not come again
the flashing lines
these glancing

Points of contact
if we don't
quickly press them to the page

The moments when
each frame becomes another
then another:

Making now for Roonagh
one young woman
hands round sweets

The rolling sea is luminous
a young man spends the journey
looking back