

Derek Mahon

THE ADAPTATIONS

(1975-2020)



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The War Zone

from the Chinese of Li Po

Above the Altai Mountains the moon rises
and drifts in a sea of cloud; a desert wind
blows down the valleys for a thousand miles.
The sons of Han march through Manchuria
while Tatars stare down from the Pamirs
at this old war zone where so many died.
Soldiers picture the homes they left behind
where anxious women watch from upper floors.

A Kettle of Wine

from the Chinese of Li Po

Sitting among flowers with a kettle of wine
I lift my cup and drink to the bright moon.
A party of three: the moon, my shadow and me.
The moon is no drinker, sadly; however
I toast the spring and the spring flowers.
When I sing my shadow bobs in the Yellow River,
when I dance the moonbeams in the water waver.
Sober, we are content here in a group;
when we get drunk my shadow and I break up.
To pledge eternal amity we gather
in cloud depths and in a river of stars.

Antrim Road

from the French of Charles Baudelaire, 1821-1867

I can still see that first suburban house,
whitewashed and tiny, tiny but at peace,
a 'Dresden' figurine next to the clock
holding her skirt out as she reads a book.
A fiery evening sun, intensely hot,
burns at the window from a garden hut,
a curious red eye between two clouds
silently watching mushy peas and spuds,
and throws out long, imposing shadow shapes
on the white homework and the bottled ships.

Scene

from the French of Charles Baudelaire

Blithely to draft these scribbles I need to lie,
like the astrologers, in an attic next the sky
where, high among church spires, I can dream and hear
their grave hymns wind-blown to my ivory tower.
Chin in hand, up here in my apartment block,
I can see workshops full of noise and talk,
cranes and masts of the ocean-going city,
vast cloud-lit photographs of eternity.
I watch a foggy star open and shine
in the azure sky, a lamp at a windowpane,
smoke rising into the firmament like incense,
the moon dispensing its mysterious influence.
I watch for spring and summer, autumn too;
and when the winter comes, with silent snow,
I shut the shutters and close the curtains tight
to build my faerie palaces in the night
and think of love and gardens, blue resorts,
white fountains splashing into marble courts,
birds chirping day and night, whatever notion
tickles the infantile imagination . . .
Rattling the window with its hoarse burlesque
no mob distracts me from my writing desk;
for here I am, up to my usual tricks —
evoking springtime on the least pretext,
extracting sunlight as my whims require,
my thoughts blazing for want of a real fire.