John McAuliffe

NATIONAL THEATRE

Gallery Books

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The End of Fear

1

I walked through its long zigzag cartoon,
heraldic images among mess and chaos:
on one level, pairs of men fought; underneath,
prone, beheaded figures were stretched out.
Still distinct, the dotted armour, bow, sword, baldric,
their bodies absorbed into the sepia fabric
beautiful horses pranced across,
madder and weld for wine-red, chestnut (marron),
mahogany brown. Their manes shone.
Showily combed and draped, bearing each pale rider.
And, above them all, an augur,
the comet like an uprooted sunflower.

2

The school tour, before Bayeux, was the big smoke,
adult France. I clicked through an entire disposable camera
on the Eiffel Tower's viewing deck,
queued for ages around the Louvre,
could not credit the Lego-coloured Pompidou Centre,
snuck off into side streets with classmates for an hour
free of chaperones.
How ill-prepared we were
for liberty. Next day we left Paris
and, on our way back to the ferry,
stopped for a day at Bayeux.
I bought, in the giftshop of the Museum,
a tapestry kit, and a tea towel for home.

3

The hostel had a spiral stair in its central atrium
which exited to a railed landing at each level.
From which you could see the dorms above
and down to the floors below. In no time,
as we shared the alcohol we had bought so easily,
this was an ideal setting for a water fight.
The Paris condoms, filled with water, exploded
on contact above and below. Maybe
the water was not what drew the *gendarmes*.
We'd moved on to using our new lighters on bangers,
as illegal at home as the condoms,
fired fizzling through the banisters.

4

Was it all aggro? The riverboat on the Seine?
Climbing out of the streets to float between the quays,
arrayed on deck, sunstruck, not knowing
one acre of white stone from another. It passed us by.
Another tour clambered on board at a bend in the river.
Who appeared to be speaking German. Bored
by the parade of boulevards, a chorus — 'We won the war' —
started up. A peacemaker approached:
they were Dutch, i.e., their country
had fought with us
against the Germans; us, British?
we explained, *au contraire* . . .

Florida

The birds of the Florida swamps, miles from town,
stir into spring.
To hear them is to know, This territory
owes no one a favour. And: who a bird
knows gets a bird only so far;

how high up in a leafless tree
they sing grants only
a temporary advantage.
That bird up there, as the weather
moves north, is a long way from water.

He is, with spring across his wing,
a waiter in the dining shed a train
no longer serves. The moon ebbs,
moving where it can,
shining fine and valuable distinctions

on prairie warblers and black-whiskered
vireos in St Augustine and Odessa, on Azcan,
on the Valley of Death
six hundred rode into, and on the walking trees
of the Ten Thousand Islands.

A Sign

for Jeffrey Wainwright

Nothing's fanciful in their welling up from the black earth,
the mushrooms' little accented cliffs,
pencil shavings the green moss borders and leans on.

Awkward customers on the earth's cold shoulder,
their frills and petalled cairn fester
by the body of water a boardwalk carries us across.

The moving peat was a test to walk, unlike the boardwalk's
line,
which I hang on to, wishing it were permanent
as the sprawling fire of winter daylight whose argument

brightens what springs up overnight,
the birch branch suddenly alive in the aspiring woods.
How we labour under its high sign.