

Medbh McGuckian

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POEMS**

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*for Patrick, Sofia,
Conor and Julia*

The War Ending

In the still world
between the covers of a book,
silk glides through your name
like a bee sleeping in a flower
or a seal that turns its head to look
at a boy rowing a boat.

The fluttering motion of your hands
down your body presses into my thoughts
as an enormous broken wave,
a rainbow or a painting being torn
within me. I remove the hand
and order it to leave.

Your passion for light
is so exactly placed,
I read them as eyes, mouth, nostrils,
disappearing back into their mystery
like the war that has gone
into us ending;

there you have my head,
a meeting of Irish eyes
with something English:
and now,
today,
it bursts.

Breaking the Blue

Deluged with the dustless air, unspeaking likeness:
you, who were the spaces between words in the act of reading,
a colour sewn on to colour, break the blue.

Single version of my mind deflected off my body,
side-altar, sacramental, tasting-table, leaf to my
emptying shell, heart with its aortic opening,

your mouth, my dress was the scene that framed
your shut eye like hands or hair, we coiled
in the lifelong snake of sleep, we poised together

against the crevice formed by death's forefinger
and thumb, where her shoulder splits when desire
goes further than the sender will allow.

Womb-encased and ever-present mystery without
release, your even-coloured foliage seems a town garden
to my inaccessible, severely mineral world.

Fragments of once-achieved meaning, ready to leave
the flesh, re-integrate as lover, mother, words
that overwhelm me: You utter, become music, are played.

The Shape of This How

The May litany is chanted
in the misty twilight edges of the fields.
They are lighting candles at cemeteries,
priests are whispering.

The village name means 'frostbite',
also 'cuckoo bird'. There was a soldier's city
somewhere on the outskirts of town
past Apple, Pear and Plum Streets

where everything was washed away
and the earth was so intelligent
as not to resist the birth
of the new personality.

We rubbed our cloth shoes with chalk
until they were shining white.
He would observe the weather through
the window, complained only to his diary.

Amid all the useless chatter,
to name one's child 'Belfast',
I sprinkled some unborn poems
over my forest brother's pestered head,

mussing his hair, kneading his knees,
sprayed with holy water.
Such a molten state of mind —
I grew up under his wing.

And now you will see
the frightened shadow of a cloud
scurrying across the sublime
pastoralism of his late poetry.

The poems approach us like a tawny
iceberg. Take the sheepskin
off your soul, watch
the coming and going of ships,

dream peacefully
under chestnut trees,
rest in the silvery sand
of the riverbank.