

Peter Sirr

**STANDING
IN THE RAIN**

Essays on Poetry



Gallery Books

Standing in the Rain
is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 24 September 2026.

The Gallery Press
Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

*All rights reserved. For permission to reprint or broadcast this work,
write to The Gallery Press: books@gallerypress.com*

© Peter Sirr 2026

The use, reproduction, or processing of any part of this work for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems is
explicitly forbidden.

The right of Peter Sirr to be identified as Author of this Work has been
asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988.

ISBN 978 1 91737 124 7 *paperback*
978 1 91737 125 4 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Standing in the Rain receives financial assistance
from the Arts Council of Ireland.



Contents

The Life of the Poet	page 11
Arcane Happenings	31
Walking into Poetry	34
A Question Directed Towards Another Question	45
Happiness	48
Thin-skinned Dreams: Reading Friederike Mayröcker	50
Approximately a Tree: Thinking Like a Poet	58
‘In step with what escaped me’: Seamus Heaney	73
Words for Dennis	98
News from the Swart Planet	106
Saying Something Back: On Elegy and Time	117
The Exhausting Electric Trolley Car: Joys and Perils of the Sympathetic Imagination	132
Lost Poets’ Society	147
‘My poems won’t change the world’: Patrizia Cavalli	168
‘The Names of All That Host’: Poetry in Times of Crisis	182
The Metaphysical Tramdriver: Reading Luciano Erba	197
Age of the Duck-hare: The Poetry of Valerio Magrelli	207
‘The stagger and recovery of spirit’: Thomas Kinsella 1962-1973	217
Kinsella’s Dublins	240
‘How things begin to happen’: Notes on Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin	245
A Surge in the Power Grid: Michael Hartnett	265
Small Dramas	282
Mad About Poetry	291
Epilogue: The Aqueduct	306

Notes 310

Arcane Happenings

Denise Levertov is standing at an intersection in New York. Beside her an old man waits to cross, his weary stillness complicated by his two dogs, one docile, patient, the other restless, seeing no reason why he can't continue his exploration of the city. What else? The lights change; man, dog and poet cross, life goes on. Nothing much has happened, after all. Except, of course, that a lot has happened, so much that I carry this ordinary moment around with me constantly. Did I mention it was raining? I sometimes forget the rain, which is odd, since the poem is called 'The Rainwalkers'¹.

How did I forget that? It's not a light drizzle; it's heavy, insistent rain, and it gets heavier as the poem goes on, and the poem's weather matters:

*An old man whose black face
shines golden-brown as wet pebbles
under the streetlamp, is walking two mongrel dogs of dis-
proportionate size, in the rain,
in the relaxed early-evening avenue.*

I line the poem up in front of me again, and there he is, the rainy-faced man, and there's that line ending in 'dis-' with the rest of the word sprawled over into the next line, and it's funny how this matters, how much I like it. It's slightly daft; it says this is my particular observation, my voice and I like this opening progression of 's' sounds; this is how I see this man and these dogs that otherwise will not exist, will slip off the planet. This is all we know of this man, these dogs, this rainy evening. We can't reach out and touch or see any of them,

except in this little verbal space. I look at them all again, the 'small sleek' dog 'docile to the imploring soul of the trash-basket', the young one whom 'the glistening sidewalk entices . . . to arcane happenings'. I think of my own dog straining at intersections, barely resisting the impulse to plunge into the deadly traffic of Clanbrassil Street, and relish the entry into the canine soul evoked by those 'arcane happenings'. And then I go back to the moment the lights change, which is also where the poem ends:

*The old bareheaded man
smiles and grumbles to himself.
The lights change: the avenue's
endless nave echoes notes of
liturgical red. He drifts*

*between his dogs' desires.
The three of them are enveloped —
turning now to go crosstown — in their
sense of each other, of pleasure,
of weather, of corners,
of leisurely tensions between them
and private silence.*

The avenue's unmoored; we've slipped into a churchy space, 'notes of / liturgical red', and as I register that I'm also registering the casualness of that break between 'of' and 'liturgical'. But then all the lines are like that, prosy and casual, slipping into each other like guests at a chilled party or in the street itself, 'the relaxed early-evening avenue'. And then that stanza break, which is one of the things we come to poetry for, a small illustration of the potency of a little spatial delay. We drift with the man, not quite sure of ourselves. The double space, the formal break between 'drifts' and 'between his dogs' desires' is such a perfect enactment of what it describes that it puts us in exactly the same spot,

where we remain, following the painterly account of their slow exit from the scene 'in their / sense of each other', enjoying the acuity of those concluding observations: pleasure, weather, corners (and how much that adds to the list, the sniffable secrecies of a city), the 'leisurely tensions' and 'private silence'. Everything here is casual yet exact; the apparent easy prosiness of the form is deceptive, everything is actually held in check, the scene is allowed to progress in its slow deliberate fashion, but the accumulating details amount to an intensification and an emotional engagement. We enter that zone of envelopment as we follow the poem, happily turning to wander crosstown in the instant city of the poem.