

## Under Foreign Skies

Here in a foreign land  
I have loved a woman  
Of dark hair and sad eyes  
With a love I could have  
Given to few others.  
Yet as I walk these  
Foreign beaches and  
Listen to the sea  
She loves so well,  
I can find no single  
Star in all the heavens  
That will lie to me  
And say she shall ever  
    be mine.

*Belfast, Northern Ireland*

## Grand Canyon Mules

Mute, infertile, the  
Burdens of others  
Strapped across your backs,  
You labor on in  
Heat and dust and thirst,  
Insofar as known  
Without complaint, though  
Perhaps what seems like  
Dumb resignation  
Is both more and less:  
What point in braying  
Over a karmic sentence  
That admits neither  
Appeal nor parole?  
Better to focus,  
One step at a time,  
On climbing out of  
This life's abyss of  
Pain and penance: *Get  
Out*, back to the rim,  
The cosmic bondsman  
Paid in full for now,  
And rest, in sweet hope,  
On higher ground.

## Cuchulainn Retold

(with excerpts from Thomas Kinsella's translation of *The Tain*)

Lambent with puissance and possibility  
Even at birth, anademed with honor even  
In youth, you shrugged off the doom Cathbad read  
In the entrails the day you took arms – content  
With foreshortened years, you claimed, so long as your  
Name and deeds lived long after, graven with glory.

You followed the telic arc of your destiny  
To Alba and Scathach where warrior-lore,  
Aliment to your need and desire, was grafted  
To your burgeoning power. But all you gleaned of  
Battle skills, craft in arms, stratagems and tactics were  
As nothing to the gift of Ferdia mac Damain.

Ferdia, foster-brother, a like acolyte  
Of wise and wily Scathach, with like skills, courage  
And strength, or nearly so: fit friend and companion  
To Culann's Hound -- he gave the boon, the balm,  
The unexpected anodyne of friendship to  
A heart 'alone and ringed by envy', immured by a  
solitary fate:

*While we stayed with Scathach  
We went as one, with a common courage,  
into the fight.  
Fast friends, forest companions,  
We made one bed and slept one sleep  
In foreign lands after the fray.  
Scathach's pupils, two together,  
We'd set forth to comb the forest.*

Oaths of friendship and fidelity marked your parting:  
You summoned home to the glens, the forests and  
Dark waters of brooding Ulster, he to the barren  
Windswept plains of lonely Connaught, both to the  
Shifting mists and short horizons of your native isle,  
There to feed the mounting gyre of your wynds.

The seasons passed, crowded with laurels and growing fame.  
A lifetime of triumphs in a sliver of years:  
The champion's portion at every feast, bards  
Unspooling tales of glory in the mead hall,  
The love of women, the adulation of men –  
All meet and proper, the just demesne of  
    untrammelled valor.

Then the Morrigan stirred, restless in her eyrie,  
While below a headstrong, grasping queen,  
Formidable in her desires and her wrath,  
Cast an eye on Daire mac Fiachna's Donn Cuailnge.  
No face launched this war, this torrent of blood and gore –  
A prize bull the spark for the conflagration to come.

In an age before Norman keeps and towers,  
Before Yeats' shopkeepers and greasy tills,  
The land succored a pastoral people – bound to  
The cycles of the natural world, attuned  
To the rhythm of the land: the changing of seasons  
And pastures, the waxing and waning of sacred,  
    argent moons.

Bound to the soil as a way of living, and not  
By affectation, they drew meaning as well as  
Sustenance from the wanderings of their herds over  
Dark-loamed earth, under glowering skies; wealth  
Measured in cattle, honor in the bounty

Of a lord's open hand, a warrior's courage.

No wonder, then, that Medb of Connaught coveted  
Donn Cuailnge, Ulster's pride, and what she could not  
Procure with bribe or blandishment she determined  
To take by force, and so was launched the Tain Bo Cuailnge.  
The Morrigan spread her wings and flew to the Plain  
Of Murthemne and there addressed the great Brown Bull:

*Dark one, are you restless?  
Do you guess they gather  
To certain slaughter?*

Enmassed in their thousands on the verge of Ulster,  
Medb's armies were stopped at the ford, barred by  
The Hound's challenge of single combat: morning  
After morn a hero fell by Cuchulainn's hand, for  
'It is no light thing to struggle and strive  
With Cuchulainn on the Tain Bo Cuailnge.'

*I am alone against hordes.  
I can neither halt nor let pass.  
I watch through the long hours,  
          alone against all men.  
Here I stand, an obstacle  
To all the men of Ireland!  
I have stood my ground here  
Through countless single combats.*

Stymied and brooding, Medb took counsel in her tent  
And then sent for Ferdia with deceit in her thoughts.  
He knew her intent and would not come, but she  
Shamed him with bards and satirists until he relented,  
Answered her summons, and was plied with drink, bribed  
With gifts, and Medb's daughter promised for his bed.

Where is honor for a warrior who will not fight?  
Bred to a caste whose code was blood and battle,  
On an isle where tribe trumped nation, with province the  
Furthest horizon the heart could hold, what could Ferdia  
Do but come to the ford with stricken heart? What could  
Cuchulainn do but greet him with recrimination  
and sorrow?

*Don't break our friendship and our bond,  
Don't break the oath we made once,  
Don't break our promise and our pledge.  
Noble warrior, do not come.  
There is no man who ever ate,  
No man that was ever born,  
No joyous son of king or queen,  
For whose sake I would do you harm.  
My high heart is a knot of blood,  
My soul is tearing from my body.  
I'd rather face a thousand fights,  
Ferdia, than this fight with you.*

Matched well in skill and strength, they fought three  
Days at the ford; at night their horses shared  
The same paddock, their charioteers the same fire.  
On the fourth day, the struggle renewed, their fury  
Shook the earth until at last, blood streaming and near death,  
Cuchulainn delivered the final, fatal blow.

*Stupor and sorrow weigh me down  
After the deed that I have done,  
This corpse I have hacked so harshly.  
Alas, Ferdia of the steeds  
Will never draw another breath.  
Ferdia, dead by their deceit,  
Our last meeting I lament.*

*You are dead and I must live  
To mourn my everlasting loss.  
When we were away with Scathach  
Learning victory overseas,  
It seemed our friendship would remain  
Unbroken till the day of doom.  
Shameful was our struggle,  
The uproar and grief!  
Ill-met, Ferdia, like this --  
You crimson and pale in my sight  
And stretched in a bed of blood,  
I with my weapon unwiped.  
When we were beyond the sea,  
Scathach's and Uathach's pupils,  
Who thought of such pale lips  
Or weapon-struggle between us?  
Our famous foster-mother bound us  
In a blood pact of friendship,  
So that rage would never rise  
Between friends in fair Elga.  
Sad and pitiful the day  
That saw Ferdia's strength spent  
And brought the downfall of a friend.  
I poured him a drink of red blood!  
Misery has befallen us,  
Scathach's two foster-sons --  
I, broken and blood red,  
Your chariot standing empty.  
Misery has befallen us,  
Scathach's two foster-sons --  
I, broken and blood-raw,  
You lying stark dead.  
It was all play, all sport,  
Until Ferdia came to the ford.  
Misery! A pillar of gold  
I have leveled in the ford,*

*The bull of the tribe-herd,  
Braver than any man.  
It was all play, all sport,  
Until Ferdia came to the ford.  
I thought beloved Ferdia  
Would live after me –  
Yesterday, a mountain-side;  
Today, nothing but a shade.*

What of glory now, O Hound? What price fame?  
Ferdia dead beside the ford that ever after  
Bore his name; you broken and spent, your sorrow  
Skirling to the sky in immedicable pain --  
The heavens themselves a fane for your grief.  
What of glory now, O Hound? What price fame?

No more single combat with Ferdia dead and  
You nearly so: armies flung at one another  
In deadly earnest, bodies thick upon the ground,  
Carrion crow feasting amid the carnage.  
All play, all sport, until Ferdia came to the ford;  
All changed forever thereafter. All for a bull,  
a queen's pride, for nothing at all.

Life as epilogue after the ford – you never  
Looked back, the skein of your destiny uncoiling  
To its condign and lonely close amidst a fecundity  
Of woe: *geasa* broken, strength fading in the  
Face of exigent need, theurgies which once  
Upheld you sapping your waning powers.

Credit where credit is due: even at the last  
You asked no quarter, strapping yourself to a  
Menhir so as to face your doom standing up:  
A warrior to the end, defiance in the face  
Of death the final proclamation of your



Virulent pride, your undaunted courage.

Generation to generation thereafter  
Your legend lived on; boys suckled on the tales told  
By bards at court and -- when there were no more courts --  
By shanachies around turf fires, behind hedges.  
The land's new masters knew nothing of you,  
But the people – dispossessed, invisible – remembered.

Submerged in collective memory, in the language  
Of a conquered race, you entered modern times  
By stealth. Standish O'Grady, then Lady Gregory,  
And finally the poet Yeats himself presented you,  
Translated and transmuted, to the new Irish:  
Plucking the chord of ancient memory, buried hope.

Pearse resurrected you at St. Enda's: "the most  
Perfect hero of the Gael." He turned your death into  
A blood sacrifice, and then emulated it.  
Yeats was right to put you in the Post Office  
With him, though it was Connolly -- and not  
Pearse -- tied to a chair, propped up, to take his bullet.

V.S. Pritchett said patriotism was bad  
For sculpture -- to survive, a statue need be  
On the winning side. De Valera proved him right,  
Dragged Sheppard's *The Dying Cuchulainn* into  
The Post Office in thirty-six, making a shrine  
For a cult of dead heroes, with more to follow.

Pascal said a man shows his greatness not at one  
Extremity, but by touching both at once. Has your  
Shade stalked West Belfast to view your imagined visage  
On gable ends in both the Shankill and Falls?  
The tribal drums sound on, and you still made to  
Answer their call and shed blood to their beat.

What of glory now, O Hound? What price fame?  
Have the long years annealed your heart, retracted  
The ambit of your sorrow? Or do some wounds  
Survive the grave, outlast the possibility  
Of forgiveness, bleeding out through eternity?  
What would you tell us now, if you could, of glory  
And fame? Or would you -- Ferdia at your side --  
    speak instead of mercy?