

ON THE STONY HILL

*In memoriam M. O'S (1936—2011)
for Eileen, her sister*

I

This is the place where we scattered
our mother, on the stony hill above the town;
over field and shed and far Slea Head,

she blew to rest amid grass and stone.
It's not the simplest walk,
not some post-lunch waddle from an SUV—
but a good long climb from harborside

up the wandering hill to a thousand feet.
From Dingle pier to Milltown bridge,
then off the road and along the ridge on a
narrowing track of gravel and mud,

we stepped gingerly among puddle and dung.
Even high up, the hills are wet—this is
Ireland after all—into Gulf Stream mists
the island leans, its dark cliffs echo with seagulls'

screams—and its headlands drip with rain.
A good twenty of us, her blood and friends,
as far back as a lifetime bends, hiked the trail
in a staggered line, some probing
ahead and others lagging behind—

some in pairs but most alone, leaning
to the hill and inner mind.

* * *

To this end of course we all must come
after birth and struggle, our journeys done,
perhaps the wiser, perhaps still dumb—
we push away the forlorn truth;

But isn't it good to let go here,
into this wild and windy space—
above mud and boot and chewing sheep,
and shadowed clouds across the deep—
the wide Atlantic in our face?

My mother so loved this place.

II

She'd come up here as a child,
Or at least a teen, with lolly-tongued
Roger along beside, weaving figure-eights
and Celtic braids 'round skirted
Mary with her straighter stride.

* * *

She could see it all from this windy height,
this crow's nest on the mountainside—
see browed and long Burnham Hill, its

humpbacked fields a quilted whale; and to
the left, squat lighthouse eye
on bayside perch squinting down the gale;

and farther west, sad sorrow's gate,
its creaking mouth an open wail; and
winging back from crescent strand,

this sodden somber harbor town
in all its hushed and shuttered pain—
the huddled roofs, the slated rain—so much
she did not understand:

 this world, indeed,
 opaque.

The long war and droning planes,
the stinging nuns, the stinging cane—and fast
upon her father's death (she was eight)—
the roughly buried grief:

*"No more tears now—do you
hear me?"*

No. More. Tears."

And so—her wail entombed,
and her widow-mother stretched wire-
thin—by ailing babe and headstrong son
(and shop and farm and working
men)—so young Mary was, like half a
waif,
put out to relatives in the
country.

And there, outside of Ventry,
she was swallowed whole.

And in the belly
of that darkness, she tholed alone,
immured in the soundless deep.

* * *

A quiet couple, their children grown,
housed and fed her, but naught's
the same—her heart was cracked,
her home, a name—and a vast, ticking
silence became her life:

The quiet roads and empty lanes,
sods of turf in the iron grate;
and above the clock, on the parlor wall,

a drawing clipped from a magazine:
Though time's forgot that artist's name, that print
impressed her child's brain

with the blunt force of a thumb
in clay:

A grief-sick dog
on the master's grave.

* * *

Waning evenings by the roadside gate.

III

She'd come up here to breathe and muse
to clear the mind of silt and sand;
she could feel the angels, too—
through these heights the *spioraid* flew—
slanting skywards from the land,
streaming gray and blue.

* * *

And later, after eighteen, when
she'd moved across the sea, and married,
and begun her own family—three boys in
three years (try that some time)—

never quite leaving it all behind;

When in those summers she'd returned,
touching down on Shannon's
ground, and onwards south through Munster
towns—Adare, Tralee, and Anascaul—
hairpin turns and lorry crawl,
ahead lay the same *unheimlich* place,

as fluid and fixed as a mutinous wave.

* * *

She'd come back home to her fading
mother, and aunts and uncles declining;
to pastures paved by holiday homes,
boreens straight and widening;
old names effaced from over the doors,
repainted with quaint enticing; and
on the wind of this new calendar town,
the jingle of advertising.

She embraced some changes
but not them all—
but of course it didn't matter:
change would come

whether she approved or not—like the

car park in the harbor.

Babies born and quare ones gone,
funerals stacked like decks of cards;
banks gone bust and the tiger
broke, youth once more burned
off like turf—

 yet some old ghosts
now laid to rest (the rain erodes both worst
and best):

the cold, cross nuns from long ago

 all just stones
 in the churchyard now.

* * *

In those years, up she'd climb
to make sense of her passing life:
how'd she arrive so fast at thirty-nine?

And then fifty-two?

 And sixty-five?

It's a wonder there's anyone at all alive.

IV

She sometimes wished
she could have been a painter
 or a singer,
one who could melt stones
 and make art—
wing an arrow through a sunless heart
 and scale high the clouds
 of winter.

And she did sing, too,
 in the choir,
had a good voice and ear—
could hear music in things
some others couldn't hear:
 a dog barking in the night

from two streets over;
the wintry hiss and
bang of the radiator;
 snowflakes tapping tiny
 toenails
on the glass,

the quiet bristled strokes
of her painting class;

and on Sundays, too,
on Saint Margaret's floor—with
wooly heads by the altar and
restless kids by the door—

the padded kneelers whumping
thunder
 on the shore.

For some years as well
she had a Wednesday night reprieve—
 an art class
in the evening
by the Broadway el;

while the subways shuddered by
with their Edward Hopper lives,

Ms Keller taught perspective
 to young housewives.

V

We've reached the spot—
the spot, in fact, has summoned us
 to stop.

The track, through grass and rocks,
 has dissolved a while back
and here—on the saddle above Scrag—
 lies the path of no path—

and infinite

wind—

“If ye don’t go up high enough,” had been
her gentle threat, “I’ll blow back on ye
and haunt ye forever.”

But she’d meant that.

Recessed into the mountain’s spine,
an amphitheatre of flora
and lime—a hallowed spot, a ring

of ancient stone—where wildflowers
shake, and spirits fly,
in earnest to take her home.

VI

You bring it to the mountain.
In the end,
you bring it to the mountain.

You may not know why anything was,
why this led to that,
and that to some other thing,

it just did.

Your life is what it was,
Full stop.

The workings of memory may revise—
erase, bridge, and justify—

construct a crystal inevitable in the sky—

but the plain and natural fact
is that life is a more humble thing:

A jumble of accidents and intentions,
stumblings and circumventions,
its own wandering path

through the sheep and the rock,

hoof prints of horses tracking left and right,

and the sun slanting westward
towards the night;

and it's only when it's over,
when you look back at the thread
winding up through the hills and the wire
and thorns—

through the wallows and screes,
over stiles and past stunted trees,

that you see what it was—that

you recognize the ghost
dogging you patiently through
the grass;

and with a prayer and a shout,
and a joyous surrender

to the sky and beyond,

your ashes fly
into the next time around.