

Two Geese

On the drive home, just a brief glimpse  
off to my left at the side of the road,  
the one, standing erect and alert, firmly balanced  
on webbed feet, the other, sprawled carelessly against  
the curb, one wing fanned, the bill half open,  
both of them motionless.

I had read somewhere that geese mate for life,  
like wolves and swans and otters, so it's likely  
that these two were paired, before some predatory  
or mechanical piece of violence had occurred,  
the only sign now a roundish mound of feathers,  
and a particular, perfect stillness.

It was just a goose, one among millions,  
lacking our treasured human sensibilities,  
a brutish creature without emotion,  
in its abundant, anonymous wildness,  
and surely, I thought, they do not feel hope,  
or love or loss. Still, I felt like crying.

*Two Geese and other poems*

Kudzu

In the deep South, it's now almost a joke,  
the massive, relentless ubiquity,  
monstrous green curtains that suffocate oak  
and dogwood, smothered blossoms of cherry

and rose, growing fiercely, one foot per day,  
overachieving, unwilling to spare  
a house or barn that might be in the way,  
a dogged instinct to spread, everywhere.

I'm on the lookout, as it crawls and creeps,  
an irresistible march to the North  
where helpless, I wait, unable to sleep,  
a nightmare that it will soon reach New York.

Central Park, the High Line, Fifth Avenue,  
the Brooklyn Bridge. All covered in kudzu.

In County Wicklow

We were married in Glendalough,  
under a wide blue sky, in a clean mountain breeze  
that I imagined might lift away suspicion  
and soothe our stubborn family controversies,  
but it only ruffled the lavender blossoms  
in Aislinn's hair, as red as the deepest, fiery sunset.

We named the baby Claire after my mother.  
She came too early, weak and yellow,  
and though we admired her proud resolve to survive,  
she lasted just six weeks. We buried her in the far hill,  
and marked the spot with a granite cross  
that we hauled down from Dublin in the hay wagon.

For a time, we contemplated the mysteries  
of human misfortune, placing ourselves,  
in thought and memory, against our more profitable neighbors,  
whose good luck or superior character, allowed them  
to gather and assemble their daily contentments,  
and to avoid calamity.

This was in 1918, when the influenza had spread  
to Ireland, creeping north from Spain, some said.  
Aislinn's skin turned suddenly gray, and she was besieged,  
spectacularly, by fever and nosebleeds and monumental fatigue.  
One October afternoon, she climbed the heavy stairs,  
and for the first time in full daylight, lay down in bed.

A more adventurous spirit would have looked ahead,  
in spite of these dreary setbacks, to rediscover hope  
and confidence, but I have found the strength only to remember,  
one starry midnight when I carried our tiny daughter  
through a field of primrose, and a cool autumn morning  
when Aislinn turned to me and whispered that she loved me.

*Two Geese and other poems*

Shanksville

With broken hearts we stared, our mouths agape,  
as three planes crashed, a horror on TV.  
A never-ending replay traced the shape  
of grief and fear, a grotesque tragedy.

The news would come that there were four not three,  
another plane in Pennsylvania down,  
and witnesses would swear that they had seen  
it was inverted, when it hit the ground.

And now a vast memorial marks the site,  
where mysteries are known and stories told,  
the forty screens of marble, gleaming white,  
and forty names in letters scratched in gold.

We sense an invitation here, for prayer,  
a kind of peace, and infinite despair.

Two Boxes of Sheet Music

From deep in a dark, dusty corner of the attic  
I carried them down, down to the light and air  
of the present day, and cautiously reached inside  
toward a strangeness passed, to touch  
once familiar pages, the austere mythologies of my youth.

Andersen etudes, Bach sonatas,  
Quantz, Rameau, Danzi, Hindemith,  
Mozart concertos, Kuhlau duets, and layered  
appropriately at the bottom of a pile, mercifully hidden,  
the much dreaded Prokofiev and Chaminade.

Elaborately cascading displays of ink, a vast profusion  
of notes, and my own markings in pencil,  
indications of tempo, dynamics, articulation,  
and for wind players the most profound  
and impossible of challenges, where to breathe.

In my twenties, so much a part of me  
or who I thought I might be, an ecstatic urgency  
to know music, to understand it, to master an instrument,  
with yes, some measure of ability and interest, but alas,  
as I had always suspected, an undeniable absence of real talent.

I sifted slowly through the pages, with a hard sense  
of nostalgia, and true astonishment that I was once  
able to play this stuff, with what I presume  
was an elevated refinement of mind and personality,  
an immersion in the beauty and elegance of bygone centuries.

I can still recall the joy of being a musician, the wonder of it,  
the long, long hours of lonely practice, occasional pride  
and constant doubt, and the miraculous thrill of a high G,  
lifted tremulously above a final shudder of strings,  
a proper moment of silence, then the rush of applause from strangers.