License

They wander down in search of food each year
When summer turns the higher meadows brown,
Those ragged herds of starving spotted deer.
One August day, arriving home from town,
I saw her move behind my place, a doe.
I grabbed my rifle, worked the bolt, and thought,
I bet she's eaten everything I grow.
I trained my weapon, nearly fired a shot,
Then watched her darting gracefully away,
A creature far too glorious to harm.
The doe would live to steal another day.
I slung the loaded rifle round my arm.
My neighbor saw, expressing disbelief
That beauty should give license to a thief.
Happily Ever After

The old inconsequence of age: denied
My proper place and voice these latter days.
Who once received the unremitting praise
Of greater men, by lesser men deprived.
My fortune nearly gone, and all my joy.
I thought my deeds, performed in darker days,
Would like a beacon, keep my fame ablaze.
I've seen the reputations men destroy.
Some cunning politicians now contend
I plundered Heaven, brought the wrath of God,
And some deny there ever was a stalk.
My pockets bare, without a bean to spend,
I drag another cow to fairs. How odd
To be so poor, so full of rambling talk.
Lines Written in the Small Hours of the Morning

It's not the silver opulence of light,
The showy circuitry of moon and stars
Awakens us at three o'clock each night,
Nor drunkards stumbling home from bars.
Nor eerie timbers creaking up above.
The years of friendship's unacknowledged pleas,
The nonchalant neglect of those we love,
Our catalogue of small atrocities,
Consign us to this sleepless world of grey,
To play earth's last survivors, left alone.
We wait for dawn. But why? To chase away
The memories we've labored to disown?
Or grasp for light before the dark descends
Into that final sleep that never ends?
A Matriarch’s Birthday

Tonight you speak the Christian names of men,
Your father, brothers, lovers, husbands, son.
You’ve known in more than three score years and ten.
Though guests arrive and lighter talk’s begun,
You think about those specters just the same
While musing where to put your fragile hands.
Now blow away each waxy candle flame.
The birthday gifts appear, are opened, put away.
The children, bored now, scuffle on the floor.
Pale matriarch, emaciated, grey,
Recite that list of names for us once more,
Your father, brothers, lovers, husbands, son.
You bore the strength to bury every one.
The Fall of a Lark

In memory of Nadia Anjuman,
Afghani poet, reportedly beaten
to death after publishing her
first book of verse.

“My wings are closed. I cannot fly,”
She said before she plummeted,
A creature less of earth than sky.

A lark the bullies kill with stones,
She fell to earth, her music stilled,
A lifeless heap of shattered bones.

What gift like her’s endures for long
Where ignorance flings stones at art
And bullies put an end to song?

No harbinger of harm or death
Can make a lark withhold its voice,
The bursts of that ecstatic breath.

And yet to sing’s an act of will.
She had to know instinctively
A singing bird’s the first they kill.
**My Dark People**

Invoking a wrathful God  
With candles, icons, beads,  
The liturgy of the middle ages,

My dark people clutched  
Faith like a crucifix,  
The grim descendants of a tribe

Hardened by famine and plague,  
That bullied, burned and killed  
In the old blackguard days,

Knew the grief and shame  
Of the heartbreak fields,  
The world, the flesh, and the devil.

Schooled in the pubs, they couched  
An insult in the guise of praise,  
Praise in the guise of an insult.

I am Tomás Ó Ciarágain,  
Reared in the impenitent rage  
Of my forefather’s blood.

Be wary lover, stranger,  
We emerged in a black hour,  
Our legacy: a blessing and a curse.
Rock On, Rock On

Rock on, rock on, eternal band;
Rock on, rock on you'll never age.
Your gigs are packed, your songs endure;
You're still the greatest act on stage.

The incidents at Altamont,
The stabbing, screams, the hired thugs,
Are all a fading memory,
Dispatched with kinky sex and drugs.

With Sergeant Pepper off on leave,
And speechless Tommy just a mime,
You stand before the crowds alone,
The rockers who outlasted time.

Rock on, rock on, eternal band,
Dispense with words like dinosaur,
Enjoy the tours, the groupie nights;
Rock on, rock on forevermore.
Lilith

Her eyes, so lovely then,
Could cast a winding skein
To trap unwary men.

Abstracted by those eyes,
I lingered night and day,
Believing all her lies.

And when, in her ennui,
She let me slip away,
I still was never free.

Obsessed with her each fall,
When autumn's leaves begin
Their dark recessional,

I think of her and groan
In throes of restless sleep,
A hunger in the bone.

No matter where I stray,
In Eden or beyond,
She's never far away.
A Madman in Winter

The roof is gone above my head,
I go in rags, starved and naked.

—Buile Suibhne

Sweeney lost his way in dreams,
Wandering the icy roads,
Wading through the rushing streams.

Winter scrawled in stem and leaf
All its scroll of prophecies,
Days of heartbreak, nights of grief.

Sweeney sinned against the breath.
Every muddled prayer he spoke
Only brought him nearer death.

Making beds of straw and seed,
Misinterpreting the signs,
Parables he couldn’t read,

Sweeney lost his way in dreams,
Never knowing where to turn,
What condemns and what redeems.