

Punishment

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Limbo

Fishermen at Ballyshannon
Netted an infant last night
Along with the salmon.
An illegitimate spawning.

A small one thrown back
To the waters. But I'm sure
As she stood in the shallows
Ducking him tenderly

Till the frozen knobs of her
wrists
Were dead as the gravel,
He was a minnow with hooks
Tearing her open.

She waded in under
The sign of her cross.
He was hauled in with the fish.
Now limbo will be

A cold glitter of souls
Through some far briny zone.
Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
Smart and cannot fish there.

Act of Union

To-night, a first movement, a
pulse,
As if the rain in bogland
gathered head
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny
bed.

Your back is a firm line of
eastern coast
And arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills. I
caress

The heaving province where
our past has grown.
I am the tall kingdom over
your shoulder
That you would neither cajole
nor ignore.
Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-
independent shore
Within whose borders now my
legacy
Culminates inexorably.

II

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with pain,
The rending process in the
colony,
The battering ram, the boom
burst from within.
The act sprouted an obstinate
fifth column
Whose stance is growing
unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart
is a wardrum
Mustering force. His
parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I
know they're cocked
At me across the water. No
treaty
I foresee will salve completely
your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the
big pain
That leaves you raw, like
opened ground, again