

Bernard O'Donoghue – two poems

'Roped For the Fair' - Ivor Gurney

Originally there was nothing strange
 About him, except that he was quiet
 And often listened to the BBC.
 A good farmer, his hay was always in
 By mid-August, nor did he ever need
 To work on Sunday. Even in the fifties
 He was able to buy modern machines
 By some miracle of husbandry.

The odd thing about it was, of course,
 That it was the new sixties affluence
 Which turned him revolutionary,
 Until one April day he studiously
 Placed his Taiwanese transistor underneath
 His tractor wheels and drove over it,
 Back and forth, twenty times, until he could
 No longer see its cunning inner workings.

He had, to put it plainly, lost his reason.
 He read books about Russia, and talked
 (When he talked at all) about Mao Tse Tung.
 The family turned a blind eye to it
 And made excuses for him at Mass where he
 No longer went. On Sunday morning
 He'd walk out and look south-west to Mangerton,
 Smiling, leaning over his five-barred gate.

He'd even, in a further stage of mania,
 Started to feel sorry for his body,
 Its hardworking limbs and members: and how
 It couldn't even sleep without invasion
 From Consciousness who crept around the door
 In the half-light and was waiting silent,
 Menacing, at the bed-end when he woke up,
 Ready to resume its joyless, daily vigil.

It seemed as though he'd—to late—fallen in love
 With something he'd once been, and then been

Deprived of. He cast about for images
To fix what was slipping: the big Pyrex plate
Of thawing ice that no longer quite touched
The side of the barrel so a sole finger
Could push it under the surface of the water;
His life seemed, like that, unwieldy.

Or like bread that has been kneaded out
Until it's too floppy for any baker's hands.
Or maybe like a plane caught suddenly
In pockets of turbulence which cause
Its wings to rock and quiver in a wild
And flimsy reaching out for stableness.
It couldn't last, and in the course of things
Inevitably, they carted him away,

Kindly enough. After nine months of treatment
He came back: "a new man", they said.
He spoke, if that was possible, even less
Than before. He rode a bike to Mass (something
No-one did in those days) so he needn't
Make conversation by falling in step
With neighbours or by sitting in with them.
He still leant across his gate, except

Now he wasn't smiling at the prospect
Of the mountains. Neither was he probing
For an image to enclose it, once for all.
He looked in vain for happy living things
That might bring him back to some affection:
But the straightbacked greenfinch on the berries
Scorned him in the grudging drawing out
Of the misted early days of February;

The blinding crimson of its brother goldfinch
Inclined him towards panic. Could he hold out
Until the warblers came again in April?
Were the birds now saying "*Change for a pound.*
Change for a pound"? Not that he was without
All hope or ambition: biding his time,
He was waiting for the chance to go along
With the first decent flood of the coming spring.

Remnants

For years we never took there anything
 That would do in a real house: just a fridge
 That leaked its gas, a toaster you had to
 Hold down by hand, a rocking-chair thrown out
 From an old people's home in North Yorkshire.
 The carpet was an offcut with a hole in it
 Covered by the table. The record player
 Worked fitfully, slowing year by year.

Since then, things are both worse and better:
 A new fridge, bought cut-price in Barrack Street;
 On the other hand, a typewriter
 That looks perfect, but doesn't work at all.

And suddenly, I see what it was all about:
 That begging for bed-irons, spotted near gateposts
 In Dingle and given with grave perplexity:
 'Tá meirg orthu'; why I'd rather pay
 For these dying objects than replacements.
 I hoped thereby to bring back to life the people:
 Jack Sweeney, Phil Micheál and Mary-Ann John Riordan
 Who prayed and prayed well into her nineties.

(Tá meirg orthu: they are rusty)