

# MEMORY AND DUST

*Vincent Woods*

IN THE GREAT broken mosaic of life fragments re-emerge, small details of colour and image come together. On a visit to his house in Towneycorry, Tarmon, ten years ago my neighbour Tom Smith tells me: 'Now you didn't know this Vincent, but it was me put your mother and father together.' And he tells me how. My father and Tom are working together on the road up at Noel Flynn's father's house on the hill, strong young men shaping the land around them. It's 1941 or 1942. My father says 'Tom, you're a close neighbour of the Curlys'. Would you ever put in a word for me with Mary, and ask if it would be alright for me to call over to the house to visit her.'

'The following Sunday,' says Tom, 'your mother catches up with me on her bike on the way to mass, and we cycle together for a bit. I pass on the message, and she says 'Tell him to call tonight, and he'll be welcome.'

'And they were together from then out, till the day she died.'

That small and vital detail of life held within a repository of memory we may term folklore inspires a poem, part of a sequence called 'Thirteen Acres'.

## *Proposal*

Mary passes Tom Smith cycling to mass Sunday morning, summer 1941.

He remembers a pledge, cycles hard to catch up.

'Mary,' he says, catching his breath, 'I'm working there at Flynns — up on the top road

Working with John, Hughie Johnny's nephew

You know him to see

And he asked me to put in a word for him, seeing as we're close neighbours and were in the one class in school.

He wants to know

Can he call up

To the house

To see you?'

'Tell him he can,' she says

'Tell him to come tonight if he likes,

Tell him he'll be welcome.'

'Right so'

Tom tinkles the bell on his bike

And away

Mary draws up for a minute,

Then free-wheels half-way

Down the hill at Curragh's

2

I count the houses in Tarmon, as I used to count them before sleep when I was a child. We used to imagine the lives of the families around, and wonder what house we'd like to live in if we had a choice. I always came back to my own; I couldn't imagine anywhere else would be as right for me, would fit me so well. Nowhere else would have the cracks and stains I had come to love. Nowhere else would have the awkward comfort, the warmth huddled in from damp and cold.

From the county bridge to Drummons I count and calculate the number of people left in this part of Leitrim. Calculate the future.

And it's bleak.

When my mother died in 1992, a neighbour from Fermanagh said 'That's the end of Tarmon.'

I knew what she meant, but I resisted the implication. That a place dies with the death of a person who grew from it, who knew its contours and sounds and smells, who gave birth among its mud walls, who fled from it to the asylum in Sligo, who returned broken and made whole, who died on the breath of rose and buttermilk, and is

buried among her people on the lough shore.

The year before she died, my mother wrote to me in Sydney. She described seeing a lorry pass our house carrying a load of stones from the bridge at Cartronbeg, the bridge that marked the border between Leitrim and Roscommon, and where the Guihens and Flynns and Murrays celebrated each St John's Eve with a huge bonfire.

'That's the end of Tarmon,' she wrote.

I resisted the implication. That a place can be contained in symbol and stone. That its essence can be lugged away on the back of a lorry.

That we are not stronger than we are.

That place may not live forever.

The place of Sanctuary Tarmon  
A world of thirteen acres

3

I got my name, Vincent, from my mother's sister's husband, Vincent Clements, second-generation Italian-English. He and Rose met and married in Manchester, and on the seventh of August 1968 he caught up with me on a bend and dip in the road from Cartronbeg home to Aughamore.

'Vincent,' he called, 'Vincent, wait, I have something for you.'

And he put a half-crown in my hand, saved the disconsolate day when I thought nobody had remembered my insignificant eighth birthday.

I hear his voice still, a voice of generosity and quiet understanding. Granite and marble in the red-brick vowels. His black hair shining and crisping in the hayfields, in the haggard, in Tom Andy's pub. His splendid smile.

His son, also Vincent, was more like a brother than a cousin. Two Vincents, we stride the streets of Manchester in the spring of 1979, drink beer, see Robert Altman's film *The Wedding*, talk about Tarmon and his memories of childhood visits. As I wrote these words in March 2013 Vincent was dying: pancreatic cancer, the diagnosis delivered to him on his 62nd birthday.

Granny hears the banshee, blesses the Good People, sees a mermaid on the lough shore, sees a ghost train of nuns from the old convent at Gob travelling up Spink to the sister convent in Kilonan. Describes a stain of blood on the mossed stones of the convent ruin, an indelible remnant of Hamilton's Christmas massacre of 1641. She sees her dead son Johnny as she herself is leaving life: his splendid smile, his crinkled black hair, blue shirt.

What is folklore?

An echo from a broken gable

A spinning wheel mouldering in a loft

The standing stone on Kelleher's Hill

A jealous sister sharpening thorns.

A carved stone face-down in a drumlin Killeen

The féar gorta

A story twisting back on itself, dog or dobhar chú devouring its own flesh

The cure in a rope used to hang an innocent man

The power of a whispered curse

Vincent dies six weeks after his diagnosis. We kiss a swift goodbye in Didsbury, and in a short blur of time I'm speaking at his funeral. He had been told that he could give his cancer a name; this, they said, might help him come to terms with it. He decides to call it Maggie Thatcher 'because I hated her and I hate this.' A week or two before he goes he says to a friend: 'I can't believe that old biddy will outlive me.' They die within a few hours of each other, Vincent first to go, Thatcher a few hours later and their funerals are on the same day in April.

The folklore I grew up with was filled with the power of unknowable energy, good and bad, positive and malign. I heard stories of a widow woman evicted from her house up at Tullycorka cursing the house and all future tenants as she walked the road to Carrick and the poorhouse. The house was a two-storey shell, ghosted by a black dog and a spirit that attacked all who slept within its walls, a spirit that smothered a child in its cradle, threw a man down the stairs, drove all intruders out.



■ James and Bridget Guihen (nee Flynn), their seven children: Mary, Sarah, Johnny, Rose, Elizabeth, Teresa and Michael, and Bridget's mother Sally on Flynn's Street, Cartronbeg, Tarmon 1932.

Another empty house had belonged to a man who spent his nights out carousing and consorting with the Good People, his days sleeping in his bed. His daughter went astray on the road and had to be brought back to him. After he died the family moved away and the house was sold, but nobody could sleep an easeful night in any room within its perimeter.

At Vincent's funeral I dip into the well of glistening laughter that mirrors our grief, pain, almost unendurable loss. I imagine him in a sunlit pub, a glass to hand, the Guardian crossword on the table, and a few pertinent clues:

One across: *British Prime Minister who destroyed the fabric of society and the NHS, (also Latin: Vespertilio Antiquus Ancient Winged night creature).* 6 letters and 8

Easy, that one: Maggie Thatcher.

Ten down: *Place where God (if she has a sense of humour) will send one across for at least some of eternity.* 4 letters and 3...

What fits? God, being from the north of England, the solution, and destination:

Down pit

4  
July 1992. My mother is dying.

'Is there anything you'd like?' I ask.

She stares for a few moments, then raises her head faintly from the pillow.

'A drink of fresh buttermilk.'

My folk were poor. Their lore, their tradi-

tion was rich. They were peasant farmers and coal miners and thatchers and basket makers; they left school at thirteen and fourteen and went into service, worked for people with money, were hired at hiring fairs, worked the bothies in Scotland, went to America, went to London and Manchester; some of them never came back.

My mother came back from service in London just before the start of World War 2. When I was seven or eight and had to learn a new song to sing at school she stood in the heart of our kitchen and sang Percy French:

*O Mary this London's a wonderful sight...*

I didn't understand, though something in me began to ravel towards understanding.

*But for all his great powers he's wishful like me/To be back where the dark Mourne sweeps down to the sea*

Lough Allen was the sea, Sliabh an Iarann was the Mourne.

The land was magnet to the soul.

The soil, the daub was word, story, music, spirit. All life comes from it and returns to it.

Laughter and Dust

*This is an amended extract from 'A World of Thirteen Acres' by Vincent Woods, first published in 'Folklore and Modern Irish Writing' edited by Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor and published by The Irish Academic Press (2014)*