

POETRY

Angela McCabe

JOHNNY GAFFNEY WOULDN'T DRIVE THE TRAIN: 1920

How stubborn he must have been
knowing the RIC
would be as mad as meat axes.

He sat in his own cab,
this loco pilot, while police banged on the door,
weapons pointed at his skull.

How courageous to live his ideals,
to be strong in his convictions
in the face of lethal danger.

Four IRA prisoners to be driven to Sligo Jail.
fallen victims of an ambush
marched to the railway station.

But Johnny Gaffney wouldn't
drive the train to Sligo. Refused
to move out of Ballinamore.

People thronged from the countryside,
hundreds of them on the platform.
News spread of the stationary train.

Songs were sung. Hands clapped.
Cheers went up and increased tenfold
when prisoners left the carriage.

Johnny Gaffney arrested,
spent five years in jail with the prisoners,
all interned till after the Treaty,

I stumbled on old annals, tapestries of words,
scrolls in texts saying: Erin go Bragh.
Go raith maith agat Eoin beannaithe.

Johnny Gaffney's empty house in Lahard
trees wave at their height,
dogs bark at the moon.

Dead walk in and out of walls.
A ghost train
by the old railway house.

LENTEN MOON ON SHEE BEAG

They all come out on such nights,
the lame, the cripples,
the crazies, the half bred wolves.

Sheep cower over lambs
sense evil in the air.
Dogs have killed, blood smeared

over iced drumlins, poured plasma into holes.
The pregant yows freeze in silence,
lie stiff with fear, act dead.

We wait on Shee Beag
in the Blue Moon barely breathing,
see dogs move stealthily,

ready for the kill, lure them with meat
into the horse box, bolt and chain.
Morning: their stools evidence of that deadly attack.

The odd couple from Ahgascur
have rows on the full moon.
We drive their crooked lane,

find they have abandoned the house.
take the hatchet from Fionn,
help Graine out of the tree,

keep dog wardens at bay,
patrol the neighborhood through lunar
madness and cruel death,

as we have done, all our lives.

TRATHNONA TREE BALLINAMORE

Limbs low, stand against
her tender trunk
and how we ground ourselves.

November leaves
lemon yellow,
wind blows her naked.

Christmas committee hang lights
from her boughs to cheer
elderly residents who live alone

in one room.
Their last threshold
to pass through.

Trathnona tree will again watch
the ambulance or hearse
arrive, flap her branches,

farewell to the men and women
who walked up and down the town
with a cheer and a smile,

sat outside their doors on sunny days,
watered their little gardens
on summer evenings.

Pink clouds roll across a December sky,
blue translucent light on the horizon.
Sliabh an Iarainn in a crust of snow.

Sun sinks behind the grey ridge
decorations as crystallized spangles,
imitation Christmas trees in windows

neighbours watching for the lights to go out.

THE SWAP Brian Dolan

The car finally dragged its oily underside down the lane towards the dim gable light, dew blasted windscreen hurriedly smeared by its late driver.

One over-weight Ryan-lite case, forced into submission by a farm dented boot lid, shared Biro name-tags with the down under backpack.

Mam's porridge breakfast was the first last supper of the nearly departed, with the accidentally imported kelpie, left behind for company, watching from the corner.

Black Diesel smoke propelled the Vectra to the left, taking the right way for the airport, the wrong way for the two silent spectators, together watching, as the slender silvered road emptied itself into the fallen sky.

Slowly turning back into the warm kitchen, Mam pulled a cardigan on with a shiver and leaned her head against the thick stone wall, watching the pale darkness fade through the small window framed with buttercup yellow curtains.

The kelpie followed the father closely, up the hill, through the pass, and on out to the narrow field, watching for the first movement of a careful hand to start the gathering, waiting to take the place of the exported offspring.

It was May Day, and the sun was still a promise, flowing warmly from just over the horizon, always arriving; never staying.