

Classic Poetry Series

Eamon Grennan

- poems -

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Eamon Grennan (1941-)

Eamon Grennan is an Irish poet born in Dublin. He has lived in the United States, except for brief periods, since 1964. He was the Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Professor of English at Vassar College until his retirement in 2004.

Though his Irish roots are clear in his poetry, Grennan has an international sense of literary tradition. He has cited as influences American poets including Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop (herself an international poet with ties to the U.S., Canada, and Brazil). In addition to writing poetry, he has translated Giacomo Leopardi and—with his wife, Vassar classicist Rachel Kitzinger—Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Grennan studied at University College, Dublin, where he met poets Derek Mahon and Eavan Boland, and at Harvard University, and began teaching at Vassar in 1974. He returned to Ireland fairly briefly, first in 1977 and later in 1981, and began writing poetry there. His first book, *Wildly for Days*, was published in 1983. Gaelic poetry became an important influence, particularly, he has said, on the sound of his poems. At the same time, he is interested in the sentence as a poetic unit as well as a prose unit. In an interview with Timothy Cahill, Grennan said:

I have, it's a toothache quality, a kind of pain -- the ambition to make a sentence that is full, that has not gone limp, hasn't stopped while it still has some elasticity in it.

Grennan's career has been long, productive and distinguished, and he has earned from fellow poets a reputation for lyrical skill and psychological intensity. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins said of Grennan:

Few poets are as generous as Eamon Grennan in the sheer volume of delight his poems convey, and fewer still are as attentive to the marvels of the earth. To read him is to be led on a walk through the natural world of clover and cricket and, most of all, light, and to face with an open heart the complexity of being human.

Grennan was shortlisted for the 2008 Poetry Now Award for his collection, *Out of Breath*.

Eserleri:

Works

Matter of Fact. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2008.

Out of Breath. Gallery Books, 2007.

The Quick of It. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2005.

Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus. Trans. with Rachel Kitzinger. Oxford, 2004.

Renvyle, Winter. Philadelphia: Pointed Press, 2003.

Still Life with Waterfall. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2002.

Selected & New Poems. Dublin: Gallery Press, 2000.

Provincetown Sketches. Aralia Press, 2000.

Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century. Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1999.

Relations: New & Selected Poems. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1998.

Selected Poems of Giacomo Leopardi. Trans. Princeton: Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation, Princeton University Press, 1997.

So It Goes. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1995.

As If It Matters. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1992.

What Light There Is and Other Poems. New York: North Point Press, 1989.

Twelve Poems. San Francisco: Occasional Works, 1988.

Wildly for Days. Dublin: Gallery Press, 1983.

Cat Scat North Point Press, 1988.

Art

The whole chorus saying only one thing: look
at what goes, where we stand in the midst of it:
Golden eyes of the beginning, deep patience
of the end. Stone-deaf, the rocks in silence
are writing our lives: mossed, or lichen- daubed
to brightness, their gravity is here to stay. . .
but so is the butterfly winged with light
and in a dozen minds at once, letting its life
be wamble and whim as air determines, though still
a fixed purpose sticks to it, it knows the score
the chorus follows as one voice, singing
Light whelms, whelms, and will end us, while
a painter, old, is leaning slightly to the right or left.

Eamon Grennan

Cat Scat

I am watching Cleo listening, our cat
listening to Mozart's Magic Flute. What
can she be hearing? What
can the air carry into her ears like that,
her ears swivelling like radio dishes that
are tuned to all the noise of the world, flat
and sharp, high and low, a scramble of this and that
she can decode like nobody's business, acrobat
of random airs as she is? Although of course a bat
is better at it, sifting out of its acoustic habitat
the sound of the very shape of things automat-
ically-- and on the wing, at that. The Magic Flute! What
a joy it is, I feel, and wonder (to the end this little scat)
doe , or can, the cat.

Eamon Grennan

Cold Morning

Through an accidental crack in the curtain
I can see the eight o'clock light change from
charcoal to a faint gassy blue, inventing things

in the morning that has a thick skin of ice on it
as the water tank has, so nothing flows, all is bone,
telling its tale of how hard the night had to be

for any heart caught out in it, just flesh and blood
no match for the mindless chill that's settled in,
a great stone bird, its wings stretched stiff

from the tip of Letter Hill to the cobbled bay, its gaze
glacial, its hook-and-scrabble claws fast clamped
on every window, its petrifying breath a cage

in which all the warmth we were is shivering.

Eamon Grennan

Memento

Scattered through the ragtaggle underbrush starting to show green shoots
lie the dark remains of rail sleepers napping now beside the rusted-out wreck
of a Chevy that was once sky-blue and now is nothing but shattered panels and
anonymous bits of engine in the ditch by a path that was once a railway line
cut between small hills whose silence hasn't been broken by the rattle and
lonesome-blown whistle of a train for fifty years and whose air hasn't filled
for ages with my childhood's smell (set by Seapoint on the coastal line) of coal
smoke and hot steam puffed up in great cloud-breaths out of a black-sooted chimney.

Eamon Grennan

On A Cape May Warbler Who Flew Against My Window

She's stopped in her southern tracks
Brought haply to this hard knock
When she shoots from the tall spruce
And snaps her neck on the glass.

From the fall grass I gather her
And give her to my silent children
Who give her a decent burial
Under the dogwood in the garden.

They lay their gifs in the grave:
Matches, a clothes-peg, a coin;
Fire paper for her, sprinkle her
With water, fold earth over her.

She is out of her element forever
Who was air's high-spirited daughter;
What guardian wings can I conjure
Over my own young, their migrations?

The children retreat indoors.
Shadows flicker in the tall spruce.
Small birds flicker like shadows--
Ghosts come nest in my branches.

Eamon Grennan

One Morning

Looking for distinctive stones, I found the dead otter
rotting by the tideline, and carried all day the scent of this savage
valediction. That headlong high sound the oystercatcher makes
came echoing through the rocky cove
where a cormorant was feeding and submarining in the bay
and a heron rose off a boulder where he'd been invisible,
drifted a little, stood again -- a hieroglyph
or just longevity reflecting on itself
between the sky clouding over and the lightly ruffled water.

This was the morning after your dream of dying, of being held
and told it didn't matter. A butterfly went jinking over
the wave-silky stones, and where I turned
to go up the road again, a couple in a blue camper sat
smoking their cigarettes over their breakfast coffee (blue
scent of smoke, the thick dark smell of fresh coffee)
and talking in quiet voices, first one then the other answering,
their radio telling the daily news behind them. It was warm.
All seemed at peace. I could feel the sun coming off the water.

Eamon Grennan

Song

At her Junior High School graduation,
she sings alone
in front of the lot of us--

her voice soprano, surprising,
almost a woman's. It is
the Our Father in French,

the new language
making her strange, out there,
fully fledged and

ready for anything. Sitting
together -- her separated
mother and father -- we can

hear the racket of traffic
shaking the main streets
of Jersey City as she sings

Deliver us from evil,
and I wonder can she see me
in the dark here, years

from belief, on the edge
of tears. It doesn't matter. She
doesn't miss a beat, keeps

in time, in tune, while into
our common silence I whisper,
Sing, love, sing your heart out!

Eamon Grennan

The Cave Painters

Holding only a handful of rushlight
they pressed deeper into the dark, at a crouch
until the great rock chamber
flowered around them and they stood
in an enormous womb of
flickering light and darklight, a place
to make a start. Raised hands cast flapping shadows
over the sleeker shapes of radiance.

They've left the world of weather and panic
behind them and gone on in, drawing the dark
in their wake, pushing as one pulse
to the core of stone. The pigments mixed in big shells
are crushed ore, petals and pollens, berries
and the binding juices oozed
out of chosen barks. The beasts

begin to take shape from hands and feather-tufts
(soaked in ochre, manganese, madder, mallow white)
stroking the live rock, letting slopes and contours
mould those forms from chance, coaxing
rigid dips and folds and bulges
to lend themselves to necks, bellies, swelling haunches,
a forehead or a twist of horn, tails and manes
curling to a crazy gallop.

Intent and human, they attach
the mineral, vegetable, animal
realms to themselves, inscribing
the one unbroken line
everything depends on, from that
impenetrable centre
to the outer intangibles of light and air, even
the speed of the horse, the bison's fear, the arc
of gentleness that this big-bellied cow
arches over its spindling calf, or the lancing
dance of death that
bristles out of the buck's
struck flank. On this one line they leave
a beak-headed human figure of sticks
and one small, chalky, human hand.

We'll never know if they worked in silence
like people praying—the way our monks
illuminated their own dark ages
in cross-hatched rocky cloisters,
where they contrived a binding
labyrinth of lit affinities
to spell out in nature's lace and fable
their mindful, blinding sixth sense
of a god of shadows—or whether (like birds
tracing their great bloodlines over the globe)

they kept a constant gossip up
of praise, encouragement, complaint.

It doesn't matter: we know
they went with guttering rushlight
into the dark; came to terms
with the given world; must have had
—as their hands moved steadily
by spiderlight—one desire
we'd recognise: they would—before going on
beyond this border zone, this nowhere
that is now here—leave something
upright and bright behind them in the dark.

Eamon Grennan

Totem

All Souls' over, the roast seeds eaten, I set
on a backporch post our sculpted pumpkin
under the weather, warm still for November.
Night and day it gapes in at us
through the kitchen window, going soft
in the head. Sleepwalker-slow, a black rash of ants
harrows this hollow globe, munching
the pale peach flesh, sucking its seasoned
last juices dry. In a week, when the ants and
humming flies are done, only a hard remorseless light
drills and tenants it through and through. Within,
it turns mould-black in patches, stays
days like this while the weather takes it
in its shifty arms: wide eye-spaces shine,
the disapproving mouth holds firm. Another week,
a sad leap forward: sunk to one side
so an eye-socket's almost blocked, it becomes
a monster of its former self. Human, it would have
rotted beyond unhappiness and horror
to some unspeakable subject state—its nose
no more than a vertical hole, the thin
bridge of amber between nose and mouth
in ruins. The other socket opens
wider than ever: disbelief.

It's all downhill
from here: knuckles of sun, peremptory
steady fingers of frost, strain all day and night—
cracking the rind, kneading the knotted fibres
free. The crown, with its top-knot mockery
of stalk, caves in; the skull buckles; the whole
sad head drips tallowy tears: the end
is in sight. In a day or two it topples on itself
like ruined thatch, pus-white drool spidering
from the corner of the mouth, worming its way
down the body-post. All dignity to the winds,
it bows its bogeyman face of dread
to the inevitable.

And now, November almost out,
it is in the bright unseasonable sunshine
a simmer of pulp, a slow bake, amber shell speckled
chalk-grey with lichen. Light strikes and strikes
its burst surfaces: it sags, stays at the end of
its brief tether—a helmet of dark circles, death caul.
Here is the last umbilical gasp, everybody's
nightmare parent, the pitiless system
rubbing our noses in it. But pity poor lantern-head
with his lights out, glob by greasy glob
going back where he came from: as each seed-shaped
dropp falls free, it catches and clutches
for one split second the light. When the pumpkin
lapses to our common ground at last—where
a swaddle of snow will fold it in no time

from sight—I try to take in the empty space it's left
on top of the wooden post: it is that empty space.

Eamon Grennan

Untitled: Back they Sputter

Back they sputter like the fires of love, the bees to their broken home
Which they're putting together again for dear life, knowing nothing
Of the heart beating under their floorboards, besieged here, seeking
A life of its own. All day their brisk shadows zigzag and flicker

Along a whitewashed gable, trafficking in and out of a hair-crack
Under wooden eaves, where they make a life for themselves that knows
No let-up through hours of exploration and return, their thighs golden
With pollen, their multitudinous eyes stapled to a single purpose:

To make winter safe for their likes, stack-packing the queen's chambers
With sweetness. Later, listen: one warm humming note, their night music.

Eamon Grennan

Watch

1.
Watching it closely, respecting its mystery,
is the note you've pinned above this heavy Dutch table
that takes the light weight of what you work at,
coaxing the seen and any mystery it might secrete
into words that mightn't fall too far short, might let you
hear how the hum of bees in the pink fuchsia
and among the buttercups and fat blackberries
is echoed by that deep swissshhh sound that is
your own blood coursing its steady laps
and speaking in beats to the drum of your left ear.

2.
When you watch the way the sycamore leaf curls,
browns, dries, and drops from the branch it's lived on
since spring, to be blown by a soundless breeze
along the seed heads of the uncut grass, then
the mystery that is its movement—the movement,
that is, from seed to leaf-shard and so on
to fructive dust—holds still an instant, gives a glimpse
of something that quickens away from language
into the riddling bustle of just the actual as you
grab at it and it disappears again, again unsaid.

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