

Classic Poetry Series

Denis O'Driscoll
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Denis O'Driscoll(January 1, 1954-)

Dennis O' Driscoll is an Irish poet, essayist, critic, and editor born in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. Although not widely recognized in the United States, he is considered one of the best European poets of his time. In all, he has written eight books of poetry, two chapbooks, and a collection of essays and reviews. Additionally, much of O'Driscoll's work has been inspired by his friend and mentor, Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney. Majority of his works can be characterized by the use of economic language and the recurring motifs of mortality and the fragility of everyday life. As he ages, O'Driscoll's works become more fluid and thoughtful as well as more frequent, and, according to some sources, like Alan Brownjohn of The Sunday Times for instance, even though he is younger than some of the poetic greats, "at best he is already their equal."

Life and Career

Born on January 1, 1954 in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland, O'Driscoll was the child of James and Catherine F., a salesman/horticulturist and a homemaker. He was educated by The Congregation of Christian Brothers and then attended the University of Dublin from 1972-75. After completing his secondary education, at age sixteen (1970), O'Driscoll was offered a job at Ireland's Office of the Revenue Commissioners the internal revenue and customs service. Specializing in "death duties, stamp duties, and customs," he was employed for over thirty years full-time. Later, in the 1970s and 80's, O'Driscoll held many part-time jobs and positions in association with his writing. He took, for instance, a position as part-time editor of Tax Briefing, a technical journal produced in Ireland, as well as reviewing poetry for Hibernia, and The Crane Bag.

He also served on the council of the Irish United Nations Association from 1975-80. After this, he married Julie O'Callaghan, a writer, in September 1985. In 1987, he temporarily became a writer-in-residence at the National University of Ireland. He has also served as editor of Poetry Ireland Review as well as two textbook anthologies entitled The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry, and Quote Poet Unquote. After thirty-eight years in Revenue, in early 2008, O'Driscoll was asked to write a poem marking the opening of the Revenue Museum in Dublin Castle, marking the first time his job and his art would intermingle. This poem, At The Revenue Museum, which was originally brought to life to be printed in a program for the opening ceremony, now hangs as an exhibit in the museum itself.

O'Driscoll stayed in the revenue business for as long as he did due to the advice of a colleague, who told him, "If you ever leave your job, you will stop writing."

Thus, revenue became a sort of fall back option for him; a career that paid regularly and provided a pension. Whereas poetry was his art. Even so, in his memoir entitled, *Sing for the Taxman*, O'Driscoll states, "I have always regarded myself as a civil servant rather than a 'poet' or 'artist' - words I would find embarrassing and presumptuous to ascribe to myself."

Journal Publications

Prior to the publication of his own poems, O'Driscoll published widely in journals and other print publications as both an essayist and poetry reviewer, for which he was very widely known. In fact, *The Times Literary Supplement* has called him "one of Ireland's most respected critics of poetry." During this time he contributed upwards of two-hundred essays and reviews to various publications, a few in which he also held the position of editor. Some of the better known periodicals he has been published in are *Poetry*, *The London Magazine*, *Harvard Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Poetry Review*. Finally, he has also published one collection of literary criticisms entitled *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams* which contains a selection of essays and reviews.

Style

O'Driscoll's poems are often written to contain the major motifs of death and the banality of everyday life in a fluid and discursive style and an economic language base. In an interview, O'Driscoll claimed his sympathy towards writing in the language that is standard to the time period in which one lives. More often than not, O'Driscoll's poems are shrouded by darker thematic content, but every so often his poems can be satiric and even clownish. Despite this, O'Driscoll is know widely for his fundamental compassion for the human condition. The purpose of his poems is often not to stand by and be passively entertaining, but, rather, to challenge the emotional content of the reader's life.

Awards

Due to the notability of his works, O'Driscoll has received numerous awards and recognition from countries around the world. These include:

Lannan Literary Award

E.M. Forster Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters

O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry from the Center of Irish Studies in Minnesota

Poetry Book Special Commendation for New and Selected Poems

Shortlisted for The Irish Times Poetry Now Award for Reality Check

Argosy Irish Non-Fiction Book of the Year Award

Honorary doctorate in literature by University College, Dublin

He has also been asked to give readings of his work in such places as the Poetry Room in Harvard University, the Poetry International in London as well as the Hay-on-Wye and Cheltenham festivals of literature.

Life

Life gives
 us something
to live for:
 we will do
whatever it takes
 to make it last.
Kill in just wars
 for its survival.
Wolf fast-food
 during half-time breaks.
Wash down
 chemical cocktails,
as prescribed.
 Soak up
hospital radiation.
 Prey on kidneys
at roadside pile-ups.
 Take heart
from anything
 that might
conceivably grant it
 a new lease.
We would give
 a right hand
to prolong it.
 Cannot imagine
living without it.

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Missing God

His grace is no longer called for
before meals: farmed fish multiply
without His intercession.

Bread production rises through
disease-resistant grains devised
scientifically to mitigate His faults.

Yet, though we rebelled against Him
like adolescents, uplifted to see
an oppressive father banished -
a bearded hermit - to the desert,
we confess to missing Him at times.

Miss Him during the civil wedding
when, at the blossomy altar
of the registrar's desk, we wait in vain
to be fed a line containing words
like 'everlasting' and 'divine'.

Miss Him when the TV scientist
explains the cosmos through equations,
leaving our planet to revolve on its axis
aimlessly, a wheel skidding in snow.

Miss Him when the radio catches a snatch
of plainchant from some echoey priory;
when the gospel choir raises its collective voice
to ask Shall We Gather at the River?
or the forces of the oratorio converge
on I Know That My Redeemer Liveth
and our contracted hearts lose a beat.

Miss Him when a choked voice at
the crematorium recites the poem
about fearing no more the heat of the sun.

Miss Him when we stand in judgement
on a lank Crucifixion in an art museum,
its stripe-like ribs testifying to rank.

Miss Him when the gamma-rays
recorded on the satellite graph
seem arranged into a celestial score,
the music of the spheres,
the Ave Verum Corpus of the observatory lab.

Miss Him when we stumble on the breast lump
for the first time and an involuntary prayer
escapes our lips; when a shadow crosses
our bodies on an x-ray screen; when we receive
a transfusion of foaming blood
sacrificed anonymously to save life.

Miss Him when we exclaim His name
spontaneously in awe or anger
as a woman in a birth ward
calls to her long-dead mother.

Miss Him when the linen-covered
dining table holds warm bread rolls,
shiny glasses of red wine.

Miss Him when a dove swoops
from the orange grove in a tourist village
just as the monastery bell begins to take its toll.

Miss Him when our journey leads us
under leaves of Gothic tracery, an arch
of overlapping branches that meet
like hands in Michelangelo's Creation.

Miss Him when, trudging past a church,
we catch a residual blast of incense,
a perfume on par with the fresh-baked loaf
which Milosz compared to happiness.

Miss Him when our newly-fitted kitchen
comes in Shaker-style and we order
a matching set of Mother Ann Lee chairs.

Miss Him when we listen to the prophecy

of astronomers that the visible galaxies
will recede as the universe expands.

Miss Him when the sunset makes
its presence felt in the stained glass
window of the fake antique lounge bar.

Miss Him the way an uncoupled glider
riding the evening thermals misses its tug.

Miss Him, as the lovers shrugging
shoulders outside the cheap hotel
ponder what their next move should be.

Even feel nostalgic, odd days,
for His Second Coming,
like standing in the brick
dome of a dovecote
after the birds have flown.

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Nocturne

Time for sleep. Time for a nightcap of grave music,
a dark nocturne, a late quartet, a parting song,
bequeathed by the great dead in perpetuity.

I catch a glance sometimes of my own dead at the window,
those whose traits I share: thin as moths, as matchsticks,
they stare into the haven of the warm room, eyes ablaze.

It is Sunday a lifetime ago. A woman in a now-demolished house
sings Michael, Row the Boat Ashore as she sets down the bucket
with its smooth folds of drinking water...

The steadfast harvest moon out there, entangled in the willow's
stringy hair, directs me home like T'ao Ch'ien: A caged bird
pines for its first forest, a salmon thirsts for its stream.

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Someone

someone is dressing up for death today, a change of skirt or tie
eating a final feast of buttered sliced pan, tea
scarcely having noticed the erection that was his last
shaving his face to marble for the icy laying out
spraying with deodorant her coarse armpit grass
someone today is leaving home on business
saluting, terminally, the neighbours who will join in the cortege
someone is paring his nails for the last time, a precious moment
someone's waist will not be marked with elastic in the future
someone is putting out milkbottles for a day that will not come
someone's fresh breath is about to be taken clean away
someone is writing a cheque that will be rejected as 'drawer deceased'
someone is circling posthumous dates on a calendar
someone is listening to an irrelevant weather forecast
someone is making rash promises to friends
someone's coffin is being sanded, laminated, shined
who feels this morning quite as well as ever
someone if asked would find nothing remarkable in today's date
perfume and goodbyes her final will and testament
someone today is seeing the world for the last time
as innocently as he had seen it first

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Weather Permitting

I

The August day you wake to takes you by surprise.
Its bitterness. Black sullen clouds. Brackish downpour.
A drift-net of wetness enmeshes the rented cottage,
towels and children's swimwear sodden on the line.

Dry-gulleted drains gulp down neat rain.
Drops bounce from a leaking gutter with hard,
uncompromising slaps: and, like resignation
in the face of death, you contemplate winter

with something close to tenderness, the sprint
from fuel shed to back door, the leisurely
ascent of peat smoke, even the suburban haze
of boiler flues when thermostats are set.

You warm to those thoughts as you sit there,
brainstorming ways to keep the family amused,
plans abandoned for barefoot games on dry sand.
Handcraft shops? Slot-machine arcades? Hotel grills?

In truth - manipulating toast crumbs backwards,
forwards at the unsteady table's edge - you'd prefer
to return to your bed as if with some mild
ailment, pampered by duvet, whiskey, cloves.

II

Let it rain.
Let the clouds discharge their contents like reserve tanks.
Let the worms burrow their way to the topsoil
from whatever dank Sargasso they were spawned in.
Let dampness rot the coffin-boards of the summer house.
Let the shrubs lose their foothold in the wind,
the nettles lose their edge, the drenched rat
with slicked-back hair scuttle to its sewage pipe.
Let the tropical expanses of the rhubarb leaves
serve as an artificial pond, a reservoir.

Let the downpour's impact on the toolshed be akin
to the dull applause on an archive recording of a love duet.
Let the bricklayers at the building site wrap
pathetic sheets of polythene around doomed foundations.
Let the limb ripped from the tree's socket
hover fleetingly in the air, an olive branch.
Let a rainbow's fantail unfurl like a bird of paradise.
Let a covenant be sealed, its wording watertight.
Let the floods recede.
Let there be light.

III after Giacomo Leopardi

The storm runs out of wind; nature, which
abhors a silence, fills the vacancy with birdsong.
Deserting the airless, low-ceilinged coop,
the hen repeats herself ad infinitum. Replenished
like the rain-barrels, hearts grow sanguine.

Hammering resumes. Humming. Gossip. Croons.
Sun strides down lanes that grass has repossessed,
takes a shine to the brasses at the hotel where,
by the window she thrust open, the chambermaid
is marvelling at the cleansed freshness, calm.

Balm of mind and body. Will we ever feel
more reconciled to life than now, ever
know a moment more conducive to new hopes,
eager beginnings, auspicious starts?
How easily pleased we are. Rescind

the threat of torment for the briefest
second and we blot out dark nights of the soul
when lightning flashes fanned by wind
ignited fire and brimstone visions.
Sorrow is perennial; happiness, a rare

bloom, perfumes the air - so that we breathe
with the ease of a camphor-scented chest
from which congestion has just lifted.
Lack of woe equates with rapture then,
though not till death will pain take full leave

of our senses, grant us permanent relief.

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