

Next to Nothing

CHRIS AGEE was born in 1956 and grew up in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York. He attended Harvard University and since 1979 has lived in Ireland. He is the author of two collections of poems, *In the New Hampshire Woods* (The Dedalus Press, 1992) and *First Light* (The Dedalus Press, 2003), as well as the editor of *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Bloodaxe Books, 1998, Poetry Society Recommended Translation), *Unfinished Ireland: Essays on Hubert Butler* (Irish Pages, 2003) and *The New North: Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland* (Wake Forest University Press, 2008). He reviews regularly for *The Irish Times* and is the Editor of *Irish Pages*, a journal of contemporary writing based at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

Also by Chris Agee

POETRY

In the New Hampshire Woods (The Dedalus Press, 1992)

First Light (The Dedalus Press, 2003)

AS EDITOR

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CAMBRIDGE

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In memory of Miriam Aoife Agee

12 i 1997 – 4 iv 2001

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“In Prvo Selo”, “In the Adriatic” and “Attic Grace” appeared in the anthology *Wingspan: A Dedalus Sampler*, edited by Pat Boran (The Dedalus Press, 2006). “Sebald” and “Alpine Interlude” were included in the anthology *Magnetic North: The Emerging Poets*, edited by John Brown (Lagan Press, 2006). “Alpine Interlude” also appeared in *Something Beginning with P*, edited by Seamus Cashman (O’Brien Press, 2004).

Seven sections of “In the Adriatic” were used by the Irish composer Elaine Agnew in a composition of the same name commissioned by RTÉ. It was first performed by the contemporary music ensemble, Concorde, in July 2006.

“Stellata” is a variety of magnolia. “Qi” is a word of Chinese origin for the life-force. In California, an “estero” is a sea-inlet of wetlands; in Ireland, “machair” is the sandy pasturage found behind dunes. “Ragusa” is the Italian name for Dubrovnik. The dates given in “Heartscapes” refer to the moment of genesis and not necessarily of composition.

At Bethlehem Nursery

The frost this morning was thick, Byzantine,
Coating an infinite wicker of grass leaves, blades of daffodil,
Old November leaves curled like lips of conch,
Side view mirror fingered clear in the early morning

Eternally new. Quintessential Irish chill, unvanquished bluish-white
Under sleepers of shadow on sun-warmed verges,
The visitation, the annunciation of night—fog's delicate lacework
Breathed out by the Gulf Steam's circumpolar Ariel.

MID-MARCH 2001

A Bouquet from Miriam

I

Violet and primroses brought through the night from Donegal
To be laid near her coffin-plate splashed with a quicksilver sprinkle.

II

After a week's Shiva, we pick wood-anemone for our box of ashes
And let go her fluttering soul. *I see the Styx at Minnowburn Beeches.*

III

A month on, parachutes from the dead moons of dandelions
Glistening like thistledown on the lost air of her departed time.

MAY 2001

Heaney at Struga

When Heaney rose at Struga, two days after
Receiving the Golden Wreath in the great hall

Of the House of Poetry, and spoke
Before a front row full of politicians

In a Macedonia on the cusp of war, aisles aswarm
With moths fluttering in floodlight, sweet night breezes

Off the waters of Lake Ochrid, of how
Persuaded by the power of his art

Hades had stilled his kingdom of shades
For Orpheus descending to the underworld:

Axion's wheel halted, Sisyphus suspended,
The stopped spindles of the spinning Fates:

His unparalleled lyre held like a buckler
Leading her soul up the dark slope towards the light

Of new life, the human love and the human fear
Whose backward glance cost him his beloved

Eurydice forever: I thought, then, of the weight
Slipping, piggybacking my own daughter

Out of the ultimate pit, dark crypt of her bedroom,
To five more minutes, even, of life's warm brow . . .

AUGUST 2001

Depths

In Mayo,
on one of those

beaches where blanket
bog runs down

to the strand, beetling
the hard sand's stumps

of bog-pine garlanded
with bladderwrack,

a businessman unearthed,
on the tideline,

two Celtic torcs,
their gold

lambency emerging,
so I imagined,

from the black
Ireland

of time passed, which
made me think, too,

of the shining hoards
of imagery, or love's presence

lifted clear of the calendar
depths of untarnished memory.

The awful Saturday
was the last day

of March, the ides
of her little life.

Chaucer's April,
sweetest month,

I walked out of that last room
to hailstones

on the windshield,
a branch down

in the spangled
garden of the world

left four days before,
to the new place

I would never leave.
In May

I waited for a sign,
small nymph

out of the bog-pool
of death: the mayfly's

grannon or iron blue.
Ascendant

June and July, lush
Mediterranean twins,

when everything,
it seemed, led back

to her:
a doe in the Catskills

on a lawn's far shore;
the Žrnovo garden's

small, delicate
bejewelled insects

and butterflies
never failing

to remind me
of Miriam's brief

but exquisite life
(as if, indeed, this

was the real insight—
in its shadow—

into life after death).
Struga, mid-August,

I watched from a balcony
a phalanx of belligerent crows

smudge the morning dusk
over Ochrid's glistening

mother-of-pearl sheen.
When the Eleventh

struck out of the blue
yonder, a bright

bolt of dust, I learnt
the limits of empathy:

to be there, truly,
was to *be* there. Fall

was Old
New England

clement, an Irish
Indian summer,

October leaf
yellowing slowly,

too slowly, to
the bare branches

of despair,
November's last

winter primrose—
planted her sick-day—

ragged, now, as the heart.
An empty playground

in December,
wan London

illuminations
on the face of a wall,

the same sky
over Auschwitz;

in the mind's eye
seeing her small soul

before the Babylon
of the Tate Modern,

the Dynamo's
excathedral ziggurat,

rivets like dies,
birch and the brown

river rhombus lit
into swirling latte,

imagined mudlarks
still haunting trove

on its twilit slob.
Now upcoming January's

the Ground Zero
of no epiphany,

slouching towards un-
imaginable March,

death like a voice
in the Otis lift

sounding to no one,
or a belfry bisected

by the empty sky,
the bitterness

which will never wash
out of the shining blue.

DECEMBER 2001

Sebald

1944–2001

On and off, I had been musing about vistas
Of simultaneity: the continuum between, say,

In a natural sense, fresh graves in Afghanistan
And the abysmal plain on the Marianas Trench

Lit by the spectral trceries of bioluminescence; or,
In the social, sipping coffee as Srebrenica happened

In waves of twenty-plus. How—at any one time—everything
Is happening in a single world-image like tens of millions

Of words in a Babel of thousands of tongues coexisting
In its archive of consciousness. That interior Friday

In the Year of the Buddhas, it might have happened
As I paused for a moment at a window over Royal Avenue

Or collected my daughter's last photographs amid the sad
Crepuscle of the framing shop. Now, over coffee, reading

Of *seiceamóir* and *cuileann* in *Trees of Ireland*,
I think of his radiant endings: *a last glimpse of the land*

now being lost forever and reaching the town
as evening began to fall: and hope

His noble German span and hers in miniature
Are travelling forever into the dark land of eternal light.

DECEMBER 2001

Next to Nothing

According to the Sufis, *suffering is a special sign*
Of divine favour: so a new friend's letter

Tells me, verifying (almost) its theme of a new life
In the spirit of death. Once again, I hardly know

What to make of such an extraordinary gloss:
Which reminds me, like all the rest, of the human

Barnacled to the great right whale of Heidegger's Being,
Touching it has no idea what osmosis: or rounded,

Uncovered stones like Jesus's writing on the sand
At the vast strand at Magheraroarty. Everyone arrives

Into the cloud of my real unknowing, hoping
To make good the camp ruination

Of the small Taj Mahal of Miriam's life,
The Mogul invader of memory's love; even so, truth

To tell, there is strange comfort in the sage
Belief of others, like Rusmir's in Sarajevo,

A stone's throw from the market stalls ghosted
With the Second Law of Thermodynamics: suspected Sufi

Who has never written. Knowing myself nothing;
Nothing sure; or next-to-nothing. That is all.

JANUARY 2002

Attic Grace

The moon is more beautiful than any nation state . . .

Is this, then,

The litmus of civilization? Islam's beloved crescent more beautiful even

Than Mohammed? As being must be to belief, to revelation?

The new moon to the reckonings of Mecca? Alabaster discus

As pitted as an Attic face . . .

O pristine planet of dust and vellum

O inhuman gem

The Tulip Tree

Is what the woman said she called it, the countrywoman
With sad perse eyes and a mane of greying ringlets

Who sold us a small magnolia and told us of her daughter's
Slow death of MS. I thought of the gathering dark

In the dusk of a sugar-plum evening with Miriam
When the treetops, we said, were dusted in icing

She longed to touch: huge snowflakes drifting
Through black panels of our café bay, a celeste's hour

Magicking childhood's storm-bound sofa. What would she make
(Have made) of the waxen blush of the tulip tree? Today

The memorial stellata of another, like a great bloom of time—
Petals fallen into moments, sudden freshet of sunlight,

The mahogany spreads of Shamrock Compost—was planted
A year to the noon of her death's end to all moods and tenses.

MAY 2002

Life

In broad midmorning, a wild streak of handsome ginger,
Reynard of the suburban bins, in a lull in the traffic,

Ventured the gap ahead and leapt a high stone wall
To the den-paradise of Riddel Woods. Why's the natural

So consoling? It should surely be otherwise: what can
One life mean in Hubble's cosmological hall-of-mirrors,

Dark matter and curved space, light bent into
Replications of galaxies, the entropy of the Big Bang?

And *When time and space began*, what can *that* mean?
Yet this hour on Ireland there's still the azure-green

Pearl of the world: life's microcosm, the conscious imago
Like a jellyfish drifting (and maybe parallax millions of them)

Through the blackened depths, hot-air balloon of the lit gift
A helium teardrop in the universal darkness of "God"?

The Apocalypse of Fishes

Beautiful fish, sunlight streaming
Into vivid iridescence. First gate,
First stall: turbot and halibut, a huge conger,

Blueblack mackerel and silvery herring,
The abstract oysters. Glassy sea-bass eyes
And red mullet mounted on beds of ice;

Slow-motion dumbshow of lobsters
Entangled in seaweed; crabs packed
In bladderwrack, their Portavogie crates

Like cattletrucks. Zero metaphysics,
I feel its brute truth—the one life, ended
Or ebbing: a death scene, blood-spattered

And ice-bound, like the moment itself.