

# Derek Mahon

## Antarctica

'I am just going outside and may be some time.'  
The others nod, pretending not to know.  
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

He leaves them reading and begins to climb,  
Goading his ghost into the howling snow;  
He is just going outside and may be some time.

The tent recedes beneath its crust of rime  
And frostbite is replaced by vertigo:  
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Need we consider it some sort of crime,  
This numb self-sacrifice of the weakest? No,  
He is just going outside and may be some time

In fact, for ever. Solitary enzyme,  
Though the night yield no glimmer there will glow,  
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

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## Ecclesiastes

God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-  
chosen purist little puritan that,  
for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the  
dank churches, the empty streets,  
the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and  
shelter your cold heart from the heat  
of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the  
bright eyes of children. Yes you could  
wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal  
with locusts and wild honey, and not  
feel called upon to understand and forgive  
but only to speak with a bleak  
afflatus, and love the January rains when they  
darken the dark doors and sink hard  
into the Antrim hills, the bog-meadows, the heaped  
graves of your fathers. Bury that red  
bandana and stick, that banjo, this is your  
country, close one eye and be king.  
Your people await you, their heavy washing  
flaps for you in the housing estates  
a credulous people. God, you could do it, God  
help you, stand on a corner stiff  
with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun.

As it should be

We hunted the mad bastard  
Through bog, moorland, rock, to the star-lit west  
And gunned him down in a blind yard  
Between ten sleeping lorries  
And an electricity generator.

Let us hear no idle talk  
Of the moon in the Yellow River.  
The air blows softer since his departure.

Since his tide burial during school hours  
Our kiddies have known no bad dreams.  
Their cries echo lightly along the coast.

This is as it should be.  
They will thank us for it when they grow up  
To a world with method in it.

Rathlin Island

A long time since the last scream cut short –  
Then an unnatural silence; and then  
A natural silence, slowly broken  
By the shearwater, by the sporadic  
Conversation of crickets, the bleak  
Reminder of a metaphysical wind.  
Ages of this, till the report  
Of an outboard motor at the pier  
Fractures the dream-time, and we land  
As if we were the first visitors here.

The whole island a sanctuary where amazed  
Oneiric species whistle and chatter,  
Evacuating rock-face and cliff-top.  
Cerulean distance, an oceanic haze –  
Nothing but sea-smoke to the ice-cap  
And the odd somnolent freighter.  
Bombs doze in the housing estates  
But here they are through with history –  
Custodians of a lone light that repeats  
One simple statement to the turbulent sea.

A long time since the unspeakable violence -  
Since Somhairle Buidh, powerless on the mainland,  
Heard the screams of the Rathlin women  
Borne to him, seconds after, upon the wind.  
Only the cry of the shearwater  
And the roar of the outboard motor  
Disturb the singular peace. Spray-blind,  
We leave here the infancy of the race,  
Unsure among the pitching surfaces  
Whether the future lies before us or behind.