

MELTING GLASS ∞ *Michael Longley*

IN 1986 I WAS STAYING ON MY OWN in the Carrigskeewaun cottage in the wilds of Mayo. Somewhat lonesome, I was delighted to welcome to my soul-landscape Douglas and his then-second wife Lesley. They were touring Ireland, and lingered long enough to take in what I cherished, the wind-dwarfed flowers, shore birds' calls, Atlantic islands. On the way back to their car Douglas seemed reluctant to take off his shoes and socks to paddle across the little local river, the Owenadornaun (long since diverted by a sheep-farming neighbour). So I gave him a piggy-back across the shallow water. Lesley photographed the comic scene.

I have long considered Douglas's early poem 'The Friendship of Young Poets' one of the loveliest of the last century. The first ten lines wittily lament the speaker's sense of isolation and loss, because he and other young poets of his time had never actually met. A kind of brief refrain—'We never met'—is sounded twice. The closing quatrain opens out magically, a sunburst of emotion, a heartbreaking imagining of what never happened, a big-hearted epiphany:

There is a boat on the river now, and
Two young men, one rowing, one reading aloud.
Their shirt sleeves fill with wind, and from the oars
Drop scales of perfect river like melting glass.

I envisaged an answering poem, but I wanted it too desperately. The poem escaped me until this summer, in the middle of an unexpected Mayo heatwave, an echo of Douglas's beautiful words came into my head as I woke. Both of our poems are fourteen-liners, sonnets of a kind. In my last line the ghosts of Edward Thomas and W. B. Yeats join in our conversation. With admiration, gratitude and long love I offer my sonnet to my dear friend in poetry:

THE FRIENDSHIP OF OLD POETS

for Douglas Dunn

'A page from the Irish *Kama Sutra*'
You wrote on the back of that photograph
Of me giving you, Douglas, a piggy-back
Across the Owenadornaun to keep dry
Your shiny brogues and sensible woollen socks.
Are there sand martins nesting to our right?
Is that a meadow pipit or a skylark
Old friend, my Carrigskeewaun visitor?

Come back to my landscape after many years
And walk with me across the machair,
Over thyme and hawkbit and silverweed.
I stagger on boulders under your weight.
Look, there are stonechats upon the barbed wire,
Tall nettles among the whispering reeds.