We don’t compare, we don’t compete. we create.

William Blake
Off By Heart

Thanks to you
my fat-knuckled
trigger-fisted
master

At the fine
young age
of eight
I did discover

How the strong
aim the weak
against the weaker.

My crime?
To miss my nine times tables.

My punishment:
to sit beside ‘the tinker.’
The Boy in the Ring

Where is the boy?
The boy is in the ring.
& where is the ring?
The ring is in the school-yard.
& what makes up the ring?
The ring is made of other boys.

What kind is this ring?
It is a spinning ring,
& a jeering ring
a hissing ring
a rhyming ring
a kicking ring a spitting ring
a teeth, tongue & eyelid ring,
a hair & eyes ring
a snot & nostrils ring,
a knee & knuckles ring
a fist & boot & mouth
& ear & elbow ring.

Who is the god of this ring?

The god of the ring is unknown.
Jack O the Lantern maybe
or the scarecrow with the two axes
or a wailing midnight wind
or a sack of smashed glass.

What is the boy doing in the ring?
The boy is looking
at himself in the ring.
He is sitting down
& crying
& looking at himself
in the ring.

Why did the boy go into the ring?
The boy never went into the ring.
When will the boy get out of the ring?
Explanations of War

See all those bright lights whizzing around in the sky-
They are only the stars throwing a party.
& the shaking you feel beneath you,
The shaking that jars your teeth & your bones-
That is only the way the earth dances.
& the bangs & roars, the cracks & blasts & booms-
These are only the sounds of little spirits tuning their instruments.
& the horrible wailing that rises & falls, rises & falls above the buildings-
That is only the rooftops shrieking their envy that they cannot fly off.
& the high fires that climb above the rooftops-
These are the rejoicing souls of our city flying to heaven.
& the black clouds of smoke blotting the beautiful woman of the moon-
These are our dark acts evaporating.
& you my child, lying still in my arms,
Lying stiff as a mould of ancient clay,
You my child, you are only sleeping.
For The Tuam Babies

Nameless in life
we died without names
because without a name
we couldn’t live
& without a life
we couldn’t die
& if we didn’t die
we weren’t killed
& if we weren’t killed
no-one killed us
& if no-one killed us
there are no killers
& if there are no killers
then no-one can lie
about the lives
we didn’t live
& the deaths we didn’t die
What I am seeing

What am I seeing now
when I look at a tree
standing alone
in the middle of a country field?

Not the strength to bend straight in the terrible weather.
Not an indomitable will to live.

Now I am seeing the absent forest,
the undecided emptiness,
the cut down things.
An Only Child.
i.m. Zhao Liu Tao murdered in Dublin in January 2002.

I had my grandfather’s mouth.
In famine he was told to thrive on hunger.
He wouldn’t swallow it.
They cut his tongue out.

I had my father’s eyebrows.
They arced like blackbird’s wings
and nearly touched across his brow.
He kept his head down.

I had my mother’s lips.
She sang true songs of long ago.
Now my lips are blue,
she sews her’s up in grief.

I was last in a line,
shouldering well the hope of many.
I was an only child,
bearer of a name’s eternity.

When they burst my skull with an iron bar
they murdered so well, so often.
They killed my father, my mother
and all before & after for ever & ever.

Like a stream vanished in a drought
we are gone to a place without laughter,
a place without children,
a place of endless silence.
When I came here only wanting to open my mouth, when I came here only wanting to learn how to speak.
To a ghost

Why should you,
who had no shield,
stand guard for me?

How would you cleanse,
when you never got
a leg up from the muck?

What kind of guide would you make,
who stumbled one-eyed
in the half-light all her life?

And why should you forgive,
who never had
a decent shot at sin?

It’s too stupid even to talk to you.
You do not listen.
You are not there.

Not a look out perching on my shoulder.
No becalming whispers
in my sleepless midnight ear.

Your only haunting is
a question
that permeates the air

though I can find no answer
and you
will never tell.
For what, ghost,
do you come here?
For what, my angel, did you live?
Post Natal Ward, Holles Street
(upon the birth of my daughter, Rosa)

Here at the end of a billion year voyage of drudge and trumping ridiculous odds
touch remains the cleanest kind of knowledge.
The only law is shamelessness.
Here mouths remake their promise
as the standards of the heart,
every utterance amazes,
each tiny cry is the aboriginal of language.
Tears are a global alphabet of blood.
Milk a miracle of opulence,
and the currency of love.

Only the walls I'd nail as stately hypocrites
that scold CLEAN HANDS SAVE LIVES;
when what can be told
is only a mist of moving bulks,
nothing definite.
Dominic Street, A Recipe.

for Melisa Halpin

To make a beach
where there is only worn out grass
you need a lot of cider going around.

You need a cast of galloping three to nine year olds.
You need the male chest & the Chinese alphabet.
You need the sun.
You need the drone of various miniature engines.

You need two lads leaning on the railings
who can no longer speak
and have lost the fear of drowning.

Passing by in the haze
You need yourself
Still wet with the belief
that beyond the light splintering on broken glass
and beneath the busted footpaths
there are seabirds,
ocean,
dolphins,
sand.
Dundrum Shopping Centre

Shipwrecked in Dundrum.
I have been swallowed by a Kraken
though I am no Jonah
just an obscurely drifting piece of plankton
among the shoals of my kind
who are also being eaten.
Stuffed Toddler

In the catacombs in Palermo
there is a stuffed toddler,
standing up.

You see her as you round a corner,
at the far end of new corridor,
facing you from the next turn.

Momentarily she seems to glow with life.
To be about to leap out from the wall & run
towards you.

Playfully.
Like a real live infant.
But who would bring a real live infant down here?
Down here to run the gauntlet
of the upright, flaking dead.

Closer in, you see that she really is
very well preserved.
In a dress. Ribbons.
As if a bridesmaid. Or on a visit
to a distant relative
who must be impressed.

She looks, you think,
like an ideal child.
A made to order child.
A child designed by advertisers.
Almost a mannequin.
Blemish free, perfectly symmetrical.
You guess, & the guide affirms,
that it is the mother, the father,
the grown up sisters & brothers, & so on,
who line the gallery fanning out on either side of her.

Obviously, they were a rich family,
powerful, rapacious, cruel. Tender beyond reason
to their little girl. Showering her with gifts.
Protecting her from all harm.
Daring anyone to so much as look at her
with bad intent.

They must have visited her very often.
Perhaps even every day.
One of them,
at least.
Lost Tribe of the Wicklow Mountains

I believe in them,
so they do exist.

In the Wicklow Mountains
It is easier to hide than you think.

Behind waterfalls.
In sunless crevices.
In densest rhododendroned foliage.

On slopes of fluttering shadow & scree.

Nothing I know of, apart from these lines,
Speaks of this tribe.

They might be waifs that escaped from the lead-mines.

They might be vagrants who dropped out of ballads & poems.

They might be rebels
Who outran the redcoats
Until the redcoats dissolved.

They might be ravers & Wiccans
Who squat in high ruins
Holding thousand day hooleys,
Cavorting in roofless great halls.

They might change into foxes in moonlight
And paw through the motorway snow
To scavenge the exurban dustbins.
But, sincerely, this tribe has no patterns.
It fits no descriptions.
Nothing about it – beyond its certain existence – translates:

No reason, no theses, no customs, no goal.

The tribe is my credo.
That’s all.

Strong is my faith.
Strong is my beat.
Strong is my magic.
Strong is my want

& wanting, I rise till
I’m vanishing with them,
Spinning in to a mist
Where I’ll never be spotted

Above Mullaghcleevaun.
It’s so righteous to stray.
It’s so good to abandon.
It’s so just to ascend

With the lost & forgotten

To summits the rooted
Cannot even imagine.
Someone Else’s Turn

Three years after her classmate Johnny, who also loved dancing, dies in junior infants of cancer, my daughter’s in the back of our car after school, and we’re stalled at the lights, & we’re all looking out at the afternoon sky over the Wicklow Mountains.

*Wow*, says my wife, the driver, *see how those clouds hang so low on The Sugarloaf, & the gold of the sun right through them, like a crown for the mountain? Isn’t it striking, so rich & so colourful, like you’d see in a gallery?*

*Every year*, says my eight-year-old daughter, *when it’s Johnny’s Anniversary, the clouds float down from heaven with Danny floating down on them so he can see his friends and family & say hi.*

*Really?*, say I out of curiosity, but also mild concern *...What else happens on Johnny’s Anniversary?*

Oh, says she, *in the nighttime Johnny jumps out of his grave and dances in the moonlight to his favourite music like Michael Jackson for a while* and when he finishes dancing the moon applauds and so do the yews & so do the crows & the cows and the toads & the ferns and so do all the other dead people in the graveyard who’ve been
watching him dancing away....

And I say Really? Why’s that?

- Cos it’s someone else’s turn the next night and everyone has to get a clap & a hip-hip-hurrah when it’s their turn you eejit.
The Four Honesties

The honesty of wind: everything must whistle by, everything must blow.
The honesty of sea: everything must churn, everything must flow.
The honesty of sun: everything must feed the fire, everything must glow.
The honesty of earth: everything must go to seed, everything must sow.
I am Salmon

I am Salmon.

I am Salmon in a poisoned stream,

trying to heal myself upriver like you.

Part healed and part poisoned then,

and part-poisoning too.
SNOWFLAKE

Yes. I admit it.
I’m one of those thunderin snowflakes
You’re always gabbin on about.

Sure. I’m only half a man
Compared to you.

I’m lightweight &
I’m blown about
all over the gaff.

Fair enough.
It’s as you say.
No kind of warrior am I atall.

I’ll melt away in one degree of heat
Or be shattered
by a drop of rain.

I am like the plankton
in the ocean.
I am the very smallest fraction
Of the storm.

So very nearly nothing is my all.

Yet I am mysterious
and you cannot grasp me.
A wonderful once-off
Who wont be repeated.
I have no fear of windy gods.
Nor do I mourn
the splitting oaks
As they go down.

I am a storm-shorn artwork,
And I don't mind this spinning fall.
It's always been my element.

Soon, I'll strike your earth
& brighten everything.

My kingdom come:
the woken ground.
The Options

All the papers are saying
the Invisible Hand is on the way back.

Do you remember the last time it came,
not so long ago at all?

It stole your job.
It tried to throw you
out of your home.
It beat up your wife
and your children.
It kept pouring drink
down your brother’s
throat until he choked.
It tied the knot in
your niece’s boyfriend’s
suicide rope.
It smacked you so hard
on the top of the head
that before you got up
you were old.

Now all the politicians
are saying the Invisible Hand
is closing in,
and there’s nothing we
can do about it
cos we can’t see it.
But I reckon,
with a bit of luck,
if we all stretched
out our hands together
we might just
be able to grab it.

Because those are the options.
Neighbour

Dear in-hock-for-a-lifetime
Suburban, anonymous, pebble-dashed,
Pre-packaged-dream-house neighbour of mine

I have not got a clue about you
What your name is
Where you hail from
To whom you belong
Whatever it is that you do

Though I am more than familiar
With the cursed electrical dirge of your shower
That moans through brick & cement in between us
Every workaday morning of winter
In the draught-ridden dark before dawn

And I have come to forgive you your musical taste
In the best left unsung
For mine is as poor
While Sepultura rock out of your Pod
Tiffany herself goes on soiling my Zen

And Neighbour, I must confess
That when I’m out in the yard for a smoke
I sometimes peer over your fence
And spy through your blinds
How the grey outlines glide from table to couch!

Such mystery! Such grace!
Like a swan in the mists of a moor!
Like a deer in a twilit oak wood!

So Neighbour of mine
Fellow drudge, fellow drone
Fellow white-collar bee in a dormitory town
You who snore & make love,
Gobble & belch, stain & wash up, as I do,
In the same white-washed,
breeze blocked,
ten by eight rooms,
Moving through time to destination unknown

Do you ever wonder
When your back’s against the wall

That mine might be too?

Yes, that mine will be too....
Recovery

Storms I weather
Gripping the manes of waves

But in the calm that settles after
I lose my way

Alone I drift on bits of wood
Under a white flag
Over the grey, the blue

Seeking tiny islands of repair.
You ask me why I am fighting

I am fighting for my father & my mother
For my nana’s, my granda’s, my uncles & my aunts,
None of whom were ever children.
None of whom ever got a chance.
I am fighting because I shelter the flame of their lost lives
In the cup of my bare hands. I will not let it out.
Tribute To Joe Strummer

Your words were boots Joe, boots in Lewisham
When black & white & yellow riot put down the Nazi scum,
And in Trafalgar Square in ninety-one
When the fury of our rainbow class put Thatcher on the run
Your words were firing like a gun Joe, firing like a gun.

I heard your booming words echo
Through the streets of Prague-
when we shut the World Bank down
And you were roaring vengeance in Genoa
when we had to fight through gas
and bullets just to hold our ground
And when the many-headed future met in Florence
Everyone knew your name Joe
Your songs were all around.-

And when the threw me in a cell Joe
I sang straight to hell Joe
And when they stood me up in court Joe
I hummed the Brixton guns Joe

Oh Joe! when you got up to sing
It was a fist in a copper’s face
It was a pitchfork in a landlord’s neck
It was a bullet in a contra’s gut
It was an arrow in the eye of a general
It was a kick in the balls for the rich.
It was everything good Joe
It was everything good

And when us Zombies & us Rastas
and us Punks & Workers win
You will be singing in our blood Joe,
You will be dancing like speed in our veins.

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