

Beyond Aughlish

'In the name of God, Amen. I John Arthur of Aughlish in the County of Londonderry, being weak in body but of sound mind, memory and judgment, do make this my last will and testament in manner following. First I leave and bequeath my soul to God who gave it.....'

*The opening lines of my Great Grandfather's will,
dated January 24th 1884.*

I.
Among our campfire catch of maxims, mottos, superstitions, spells -
Shoals of folk-wisdom netted in a trice of words,
And brought up now and then to punctuate some current incident with
 'this is how it is,' 'the world is thus,'
The bittersweet of raw experience trawled by a hundred generations
 and honed to shapes familiar to the touch,
A fixed belief, confirmed by those who, unexpectedly, have lived,
That somehow, just before you die, your life jumps clear of all
 forgetfulness,
And, like a leaping salmon, flashes past, shocking in its sudden
 wholeness and unexpected nakedness.

II.
Perhaps there is some truth in this, or maybe wishful thinking is
 at work,
Or habit merely reaching for the nearest tools to hand, their handles
 shiny with accustomed use.
I do not know the ins and outs of it, Great Grandfather,
Only, as I read your will, imagined dying, attended at my Father's
 death
Something flashed out from the depths which seemed to fill this old,
 familiar, comfortable net,
Until I tried to pull it in, 'Before you die your whole life flashes past'-
The net broke open, the gaff flew wildly from my grip.

III.

Beyond Aughlish the spotlight fades, the faces of the troupe grow dim,
Blend mutely, indistinct as stone, into the backdrop of small, County
Londonderry fields and farms.

Your will, handwritten, browned with age, digs down into the words
till water comes,

A small ditch in the waterlogged expanse of time which irrigates,
allows the sodden anonymity of history to drain and flow.

I wade into our past, feel names and dates and places cohere into flesh
and blood again.

My line of tumblers, lion tamers, fools trace out a vein of vanished
venues and performances,

Umbilical, to where the big top first was raised.

IV.

Aughlish, our names, all that we say, a chain of words passed on from
hand to hand,

Hearthstones of semi-sense to shield us from the sun in whose heat we
perform our lives away,

A dry-stone wall across the undivided, untamed countryside,
Behind which we have juggled, farmed and fed and warred and
multiplied,

A big top, canvas taut against the wind, inside a sea of sawdust littered
with the flotsam of each act like afterbirth,

Reach down, find axe-heads, mirrors, rusted bicycles, cave paintings,
faded photographs.

V.

I suckle through a single thread the flavour of a costume rich beyond
the mesh of taste,

Guddle with a cobweb touch a catch which outweighs every breaking
strength,

Bait my own line with seed sown far beyond my tidal depths,
From your trapeze to mine, a swing, a drop, flesh clasped to flesh, a
salmon leap,

Neat images which seemed to order, irrigate, collide and blur,
This is how it is, the world is thus, each hook slips off the perfect
smoothness of the way things are,
We are reduced to desperate epitaphs, tight sayings, ringside formula:

VI.

In the name of God, Amen, Sometimes your whole life flashes past, Do
you take this woman, Dust to dust...
We grasp at straws, our tackle shines with use and ignorance,
I wield it clumsy in my hands, hack a rough clearing for my act,
Knowing that beyond Aughlish and all our other wordy craft,
The dark world dwarfs and crowds our little circus tent, partners every
act with mute impenetrableness
Blows our sawdust platforms to the wind and throws us into orbits
which outleap every will and testament.

Chris Arthur