

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. The foreground shows a steep, dark rock cliff face that drops down to a dark blue ocean. The top of the cliff is covered in vibrant green grass, with a narrow, winding path leading along the edge. In the distance, the sea meets a pale, overcast sky. The overall scene is dramatic and scenic.

TOWARD

poems

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S L A N T



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Once again, in memory of Daniel Ounjian

and for Renata and David
and Daniel, Matthew, and Evan



CONTENTS

ONE

- WHERE THERE'S A HISTORY OF FAMINE | 3
SPIRIT SEEKING | 5
ENTERING THE CILL RIALAIG LANDSCAPE | 6
FRAYING BLUE ROPE | 11
FROM THIS DISTANCE | 12
GENEALOGY | 14
NO ROAD | 16
WITNESS | 17
TOWARD | 18

TWO

- ECHOGRAM | 21
TOO MUCH TO TAKE IN | 22
WIDOW'S WALKS | 23
SENTENCE | 25
THE SCULPTOR AND HIS MUSE | 26
THE MATH OF IT | 27
IN THIS HABITABLE DESERT | 29
THE MUSIC MAN | 31
WHERE | 34
THE DESIGN | 35

THREE

- IT WILL NEVER GET ANY BETTER | 39
A SUNDAY SKY IN RAIN | 40
THE INSISTENCE OF YELLOW | 42
ADVENT | 43
THIS LOT | 44

THE HABITS OF RAILS | 47

WHY TODAY? | 49

PSALM 8 | 50

LET ME COME BACK IN SEPTEMBER | 51

PRAISE SONG | 52

BENEATH AN IRISH SKY | 53

Notes | 55

Acknowledgments | 56

WHERE THERE'S A HISTORY OF FAMINE

They're always eating the grass.
One or two look up, startled, when I walk near.
They go on chewing.
Four o'clock one afternoon I hear a herder whistle.
His sheep come panting.
What does he have that they want?

Locals said it was coming,
the hurricane off Bermuda, turned this way.
All week winds had moaned.
Now screeching, they huddle round the cauldron of this cottage.
Through the night they howl.
The surf's pounding's drowned out.

Next day, the winds come off the cliffs.
They swell the waves, march them toward the West Cork hills.
The waves spume white froth.
Heavy, black-brimmed clouds follow after in endless parade.
I climb toward land's end.
Winds won't let me walk straight.

The sky's clearing. I chance it.
I've not yet walked down to the abbey's ruins.
Crows raise a ruckus,
flush a feather-thin pheasant with its hurrying trail of tail.
Only the well-fed
could find meat on those bones.

A famine's reach—like this land.
Where the heavens lower their weight on dark clouds.
The bay and rain blur.
The horizon, a vast front for thousands of miles of sea.
Where those left built cairns
at the backs of their mouths.

TOWARD

Tyrone Guthrie Centre, County Monaghan

I walk a mile down the road to Newbliss,
walk a mile away, walk the wooded path
along the lake and out onto the lane
winding between muddy green hills. I'm nowhere
but among mournful cows, their eyes bottomless
wells that know a soul's dark nights. All their lives
cows stay put. One foot to the next I keep
moving, an end point always in mind: village,
next hillock, rounding the lake's loop. On I walk
without being able to say why I must.
The language here has been lost, words like woods
cut down, hauled off, or abandoned. Yet
something remains of those who spoke it. What
has always been beyond words, even when
they had their own. That's where I'm headed.

PRAISE SONG

The child is eleven, the third of three brothers
so: fearless and tough. You know, Whatever
they can do....Also, the colorful one,
the dreamer. Last week, wanting blue jays and robins
to breed (he called it *mix together*). *I'd like that*,
he said, looking out toward the woods. This week
he's asking if I've seen the grave, he's nodding
toward their back yard. *I dug a hole out there*,
he says, *to bury the bird I found. A robin*,
he answers me. *I put a stone on top*.
Then it needed a name so I named it Wings.

Wings, what he wrote on the stone. This child,
who is only eleven, naming Death *Wings*.
Already knowing the universe of flight
and loss, this child accepting the offices
given unto us to perform, the ones we find
on the paths we walk. Because he walked
behind their house, because he found a dead bird,
the instinct to minister took over, told him what to do.
Now on my path—so due to chance, so foreordained—
this child who's eleven. This child named Evan.