

Classic Poetry Series

**Eamon Grennan**  
**- poems -**

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## Eamon Grennan(1941 -)

Eamon Grennan is an Irish poet born in Dublin. He has lived in the United States, except for brief periods, since 1964. He was the Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Professor of English at Vassar College until his retirement in 2004.

Though his Irish roots are clear in his poetry, Grennan has an international sense of literary tradition. He has cited as influences American poets including Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop (herself an international poet with ties to the U.S., Canada, and Brazil). In addition to writing poetry, he has translated Giacomo Leopardi and—with his wife, Vassar classicist Rachel Kitzinger—Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Grennan studied at University College, Dublin, where he met poets Derek Mahon and Eavan Boland, and at Harvard University, and began teaching at Vassar in 1974. He returned to Ireland fairly briefly, first in 1977 and later in 1981, and began writing poetry there. His first book, *Wildly for Days*, was published in 1983. Gaelic poetry became an important influence, particularly, he has said, on the sound of his poems. At the same time, he is interested in the sentence as a poetic unit as well as a prose unit. In an interview with Timothy Cahill, Grennan said:

I have, it's a toothache quality, a kind of pain -- the ambition to make a sentence that is full, that has not gone limp, hasn't stopped while it still has some elasticity in it.

Grennan's career has been long, productive and distinguished, and he has earned from fellow poets a reputation for lyrical skill and psychological intensity. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins said of Grennan:

Few poets are as generous as Eamon Grennan in the sheer volume of delight his poems convey, and fewer still are as attentive to the marvels of the earth. To read him is to be led on a walk through the natural world of clover and cricket and, most of all, light, and to face with an open heart the complexity of being human.

Grennan was shortlisted for the 2008 Poetry Now Award for his collection, *Out of Breath*.

# After Violence

Stained-glass blue day. But smoke, after a noise  
from heaven, still drifts half a world away  
over fallen houses. Soot-faced, the winged boys  
turn for home, the word 'mission' still warm,  
still pungent in the mouth. little wonder the sky,  
when you lift your splitting head to its glare,  
is heavy with questions, though ground here  
is harrowed and seeded: sleek leaves, grass-blades  
barely showing- just enough to say 'green'  
in the blazing face of heaven. But- with  
the spongy simmer of autumn still bubbling-  
how can these migrant juncos have come  
to our berried hedges and overhanging canopies  
of leaf, their voices silver-tinkling mini-bells  
of glass? And how, for reasons all  
unspoken, can a few human voices hope  
to hold the blood to some old promises?  
Simple wishes for a post-war world of touch  
in earnest, when- smoke cleared, cries died down-  
snow covers the only ground left to stand on.

Eamon Grennan

# Art

The whole chorus saying only one thing: look  
at what goes, where we stand in the midst of it:  
Golden eyes of the beginning, deep patience  
of the end. Stone-deaf, the rocks in silence  
are writing our lives: mossed, or lichen- daubed  
to brightness, their gravity is here to stay. . .  
but so is the butterfly winged with light  
and in a dozen minds at once, letting its life  
be wamble and whim as air determines, though still  
a fixed purpose sticks to it, it knows the score  
the chorus follows as one voice, singing  
Light whelms, whelms, and will end us, while  
a painter, old, is leaning slightly to the right or left.

Eamon Grennan

# Cat Scat

I am watching Cleo listening, our cat  
listening to Mozart's Magic Flute. What  
can she be hearing? What  
can the air carry into her ears like that,  
her ears swivelling like radio dishes that  
are tuned to all the noise of the world, flat  
and sharp, high and low, a scramble of this and that  
she can decode like nobody's business, acrobat  
of random airs as she is? Although of course a bat  
is better at it, sifting out of its acoustic habitat  
the sound of the very shape of things automat-  
ically-- and on the wing, at that. The Magic Flute! What  
a joy it is, I feel, and wonder (to the end this little scat)  
doe , or can, the cat.

Eamon Grennan

# Cold Morning

Through an accidental crack in the curtain  
I can see the eight o'clock light change from  
charcoal to a faint gassy blue, inventing things

in the morning that has a thick skin of ice on it  
as the water tank has, so nothing flows, all is bone,  
telling its tale of how hard the night had to be

for any heart caught out in it, just flesh and blood  
no match for the mindless chill that's settled in,  
a great stone bird, its wings stretched stiff

from the tip of Letter Hill to the cobbled bay, its gaze  
glacial, its hook-and-scrabble claws fast clamped  
on every window, its petrifying breath a cage

in which all the warmth we were is shivering.

Eamon Grennan

# Memento

Scattered through the ragtaggle underbrush starting to show green shoots  
lie the dark remains of rail sleepers napping now beside the rusted-out wreck

of a Chevy that was once sky-blue and now is nothing but shattered panels and  
anonymous bits of engine in the ditch by a path that was once a railway line

cut between small hills whose silence hasn't been broken by the rattle and  
lonesome-blown whistle of a train for fifty years and whose air hasn't filled

for ages with my childhood's smell (set by Seapoint on the coastal line) of coal  
smoke and hot steam puffed up in great cloud-breaths out of a black-sooted  
chimney.

Eamon Grennan

# On A Cape May Warbler Who Flew Against My Window

She's stopped in her southern tracks  
Brought haply to this hard knock  
When she shoots from the tall spruce  
And snaps her neck on the glass.

From the fall grass I gather her  
And give her to my silent children  
Who give her a decent burial  
Under the dogwood in the garden.

They lay their gifts in the grave:  
Matches, a clothes-peg, a coin;  
Fire paper for her, sprinkle her  
With water, fold earth over her.

She is out of her element forever  
Who was air's high-spirited daughter;  
What guardian wings can I conjure  
Over my own young, their migrations?

The children retreat indoors.  
Shadows flicker in the tall spruce.  
Small birds flicker like shadows--  
Ghosts come nest in my branches.

Eamon Grennan

# One Morning

Looking for distinctive stones, I found the dead otter  
rotting by the tideline, and carried all day the scent of this savage  
valediction. That headlong high sound the oystercatcher makes  
came echoing through the rocky cove  
where a cormorant was feeding and submarining in the bay  
and a heron rose off a boulder where he'd been invisible,  
drifted a little, stood again -- a hieroglyph  
or just longevity reflecting on itself  
between the sky clouding over and the lightly ruffled water.

This was the morning after your dream of dying, of being held  
and told it didn't matter. A butterfly went jinking over  
the wave-silky stones, and where I turned  
to go up the road again, a couple in a blue camper sat  
smoking their cigarettes over their breakfast coffee (blue  
scent of smoke, the thick dark smell of fresh coffee)  
and talking in quiet voices, first one then the other answering,  
their radio telling the daily news behind them. It was warm.  
All seemed at peace. I could feel the sun coming off the water.

Eamon Grennan

# Song

At her Junior High School graduation,  
she sings alone  
in front of the lot of us--

her voice soprano, surprising,  
almost a woman's. It is  
the Our Father in French,

the new language  
making her strange, out there,  
fully fledged and

ready for anything. Sitting  
together -- her separated  
mother and father -- we can

hear the racket of traffic  
shaking the main streets  
of Jersey City as she sings

Deliver us from evil,  
and I wonder can she see me  
in the dark here, years

from belief, on the edge  
of tears. It doesn't matter. She  
doesn't miss a beat, keeps

in time, in tune, while into  
our common silence I whisper,  
Sing, love, sing your heart out!

Eamon Grennan

# The Cave Painters

Holding only a handful of rushlight  
they pressed deeper into the dark, at a crouch  
until the great rock chamber  
flowered around them and they stood  
in an enormous womb of  
flickering light and darklight, a place  
to make a start. Raised hands cast flapping shadows  
over the sleeker shapes of radiance.

They've left the world of weather and panic  
behind them and gone on in, drawing the dark  
in their wake, pushing as one pulse  
to the core of stone. The pigments mixed in big shells  
are crushed ore, petals and pollens, berries  
and the binding juices oozed  
out of chosen barks. The beasts

begin to take shape from hands and feather-tufts  
(soaked in ochre, manganese, madder, mallow white)  
stroking the live rock, letting slopes and contours  
mould those forms from chance, coaxing  
rigid dips and folds and bulges  
to lend themselves to necks, bellies, swelling haunches,  
a forehead or a twist of horn, tails and manes  
curling to a crazy gallop.

Intent and human, they attach  
the mineral, vegetable, animal  
realms to themselves, inscribing  
the one unbroken line  
everything depends on, from that  
impenetrable centre  
to the outer intangibles of light and air, even  
the speed of the horse, the bison's fear, the arc  
of gentleness that this big-bellied cow  
arches over its spindling calf, or the lancing  
dance of death that  
bristles out of the buck's  
struck flank. On this one line they leave

a beak-headed human figure of sticks  
and one small, chalky, human hand.

We'll never know if they worked in silence  
like people praying—the way our monks  
illuminated their own dark ages  
in cross-hatched rocky cloisters,  
where they contrived a binding  
labyrinth of lit affinities  
to spell out in nature's lace and fable  
their mindful, blinding sixth sense  
of a god of shadows—or whether (like birds  
tracing their great bloodlines over the globe)  
they kept a constant gossip up  
of praise, encouragement, complaint.

It doesn't matter: we know  
they went with guttering rushlight  
into the dark; came to terms  
with the given world; must have had  
—as their hands moved steadily  
by spiderlight—one desire  
we'd recognise: they would—before going on  
beyond this border zone, this nowhere  
that is now here—leave something  
upright and bright behind them in the dark.

Eamon Grennan

# Totem

All Souls' over, the roast seeds eaten, I set  
on a backporch post our sculpted pumpkin  
under the weather, warm still for November.  
Night and day it gapes in at us  
through the kitchen window, going soft  
in the head. Sleepwalker-slow, a black rash of ants  
harrows this hollow globe, munching  
the pale peach flesh, sucking its seasoned  
last juices dry. In a week, when the ants and  
humming flies are done, only a hard remorseless light  
drills and tenants it through and through. Within,  
it turns mould-black in patches, stays  
days like this while the weather takes it  
in its shifty arms: wide eye-spaces shine,  
the disapproving mouth holds firm. Another week,  
a sad leap forward: sunk to one side  
so an eye-socket's almost blocked, it becomes  
a monster of its former self. Human, it would have  
rotted beyond unhappiness and horror  
to some unspeakable subject state—its nose  
no more than a vertical hole, the thin  
bridge of amber between nose and mouth  
in ruins. The other socket opens  
wider than ever: disbelief.

It's all downhill

from here: knuckles of sun, peremptory  
steady fingers of frost, strain all day and night—  
cracking the rind, kneading the knotted fibres  
free. The crown, with its top-knot mockery  
of stalk, caves in; the skull buckles; the whole  
sad head drips tallowy tears: the end  
is in sight. In a day or two it topples on itself  
like ruined thatch, pus-white drool spidering  
from the corner of the mouth, worming its way  
down the body-post. All dignity to the winds,  
it bows its bogeyman face of dread  
to the inevitable.

And now, November almost out,  
it is in the bright unseasonable sunshine

a simmer of pulp, a slow bake, amber shell speckled  
chalk-grey with lichen. Light strikes and strikes  
its burst surfaces: it sags, stays at the end of  
its brief tether—a helmet of dark circles, death caul.  
Here is the last umbilical gasp, everybody's  
nightmare parent, the pitiless system  
rubbing our noses in it. But pity poor lantern-head  
with his lights out, glob by greasy glob  
going back where he came from: as each seed-shaped  
dropp falls free, it catches and clutches  
for one split second the light. When the pumpkin  
lapses to our common ground at last—where  
a swaddle of snow will fold it in no time  
from sight—I try to take in the empty space it's left  
on top of the wooden post: it is that empty space.

Eamon Grennan

## Untitled: Back They Sputter

Back they sputter like the fires of love, the bees to their broken home  
Which they're putting together again for dear life, knowing nothing  
Of the heart beating under their floorboards, besieged here, seeking  
A life of its own. All day their brisk shadows zigzag and flicker

Along a whitewashed gable, trafficking in and out of a hair-crack  
Under wooden eaves, where they make a life for themselves that knows  
No let-up through hours of exploration and return, their thighs golden  
With pollen, their multitudinous eyes stapled to a single purpose:

To make winter safe for their likes, stack-packing the queen's chambers  
With sweetness. Later, listen: one warm humming note, their night music.

Eamon Grennan

# Watch

1.

Watching it closely, respecting its mystery,  
is the note you've pinned above this heavy Dutch table  
that takes the light weight of what you work at,  
coaxing the seen and any mystery it might secrete  
into words that mightn't fall too far short, might let you  
hear how the hum of bees in the pink fuchsia  
and among the buttercups and fat blackberries  
is echoed by that deep swissshhh sound that is  
your own blood coursing its steady laps  
and speaking in beats to the drum of your left ear.

2.

When you watch the way the sycamore leaf curls,  
browns, dries, and drops from the branch it's lived on  
since spring, to be blown by a soundless breeze  
along the seed heads of the uncut grass, then  
the mystery that is its movement—the movement,  
that is, from seed to leaf-shard and so on  
to fructive dust—holds still an instant, gives a glimpse  
of something that quickens away from language  
into the riddling bustle of just the actual as you  
grab at it and it disappears again, again unsaid.

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