

Xo Nus | Sun Ox

SAMPLER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Across the Sound: shards from the history of an island

(November Press, Cork, 2003)

Whale (November Press, Cork, 2010)

What the Wolf Heard (Shearsman Books, 2016)

Nostoc (Shearsman Books, 2020)

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Dáire beag, Caoimhe, agus Paddy

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*Autumn is an exorcism
'Ecce Crucem' to repel the spirit,
that candle glow besmirched
within our ambered fur,
while all our days
are receding and
shortening
like an echo.*

A HARE'S PRAYER

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I

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Scenes from an Opera

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Mater Dolorósa

In the shallow harbour blue
of an Italian village,
the Virgin Mary waits
beneath the water.

A fish brushes across
her out-held palms
and she is a mother again,
testing the heft of a breastplate
in a previous century,
the living armour from
which stagehands will tease
red ribbons in stuttering motion
as her son lies dead
and she falls to bended knees.

When she breaks the
water's surface,
her rigging of blue ribbons
fastening her to
the ballast
of men's shoulders,
they will try to steady
her path
into this life in which
she is no longer a mother.

Jesus of Palermo

There is an altarpiece in Palermo
in which a blurry painted Christ
hangs crucified
in Adidas tracksuit bottoms.

Down the narrow alleyway
the women queue but have yet to help
Him down from the Cross.

Over in the crowded market place
un-resurrected flesh is trolleyed
back and forth in the heat.

The women will decide when
to remove the body
wash it,
and prepare it for burial.

Actaeon at Father Mathew Hall

Pillared in a spotlight
with a deer pelt
for his hindquarters
and a feathered collar
of crossbow arrows,
he shuffles towards
the front of the stage
to sing about the one
who had pursued him
through centuries of
dark forests and
brought him to ground,
the weight of a dog
clasped to his neck
as heavy as the dream
of the original sin
cast in cold pewter,
as the deerskin of song
slips and slides
from his shoulders.

Shipping Forecast

i Fastnet

Waking briefly to the
middle of the night knowledge
that Fastnet is out there
broadcasting its opera of light
to the winds
as a whale sinks
the cockles, limpets and
barnacles of its heart
darkwards
having listened to the
lonely hearts of the
Shipping Forecast
and then singing it
to Shannon and Rockall,
FitzRoy and Trafalgar,
as if insisting on an echo
in the dense static
of the Atlantic.

ii Dogger

My mother recounting
how the once-famous
local opera singer
arrived in the supermarket
and began to give a performance
in her dressing gown

and seemed to sing with the same
relish as the city folk,
deep within their shoals
of light, listen to the
late night Shipping Forecast
for news of the darkness
out in Dogger,
a row of candles
bordering the stage
as she sings to the moon
somewhere out there
in the North Sea.

iii Humber

Every 4AM, during the
dark months, it appears
out in Humber, pointed
towards German Bight,
a ghost freighter ship
devoid of cargo, its
rusting hulk sharply
delineated by its own
lights, never moving,
locked in constant
position like a buoy.

When the soprano
steps alone from the
shadows to sing, she
is unaware that the
moon and the stars
are a death mask and
the universe has long
since died beyond
the stage lights,
leaving just a body of
darkness all the way
up to the Gods.