Rain

I love all films that start with rain:

rain, braiding a windowpane

or darkening a hung-out dress

or streaming down her upturned face;

one big thundering downpour

right through the empty script and score

before the act, before the blame,

before the lens pulls through the frame

to where the woman sits alone

beside a silent telephone

or the dress lies ruined on the grass

or the girl walks off the overpass,

and all things flow out from that source

along their fatal watercourse.

However bad or overlong

such a film can do no wrong,

so when his native twang shows through

or when the boom dips into view

or when her speech starts to betray

its adaptation from the play,

I think to when we opened cold

on a starlit gutter, running gold

with the neon drugstore sign

and I’d read into its blazing line:

*forget the ink, the milk, the blood—*

*all was washed clean with the flood*

*we rose up from the falling waters*

*the fallen rain’s own sons and daughters*

*and none of this, none of this matters*.

**The Circle**

***For Jamie***

My boy is painting in outer space,

and steadies his brush-tip to trace

the comets, planets, moon and sun

and all the circuitry they run

in one great heavenly design.

But when he tries to close the line

he draws around his upturned cup,

his hand shakes, and he screws it up.

The shake’s as old as he is, all

(thank god) his body can recall

Of that hour when, one inch from home,

We couldn’t get the air to him;

and though today he’s all the earth

and sky for breathing-space and breath

the whole damn troposhpere can’t cure

the flutter in his signature.

But Jamie, nothings what we meant.

The dream is taxed. We all resent

the quarter bled off by the dark

between the bowstring and the mark

and trust to Krishna or to fate

to keep our arrows hafway straight.

but the target also draws our aim –

our will and nature’s are the same;

we are its living word, and not

a book it wrote and then forgot,

its fourteen-billion-year-old-song

inscribed in both our right and wrong –

so even when you rage and moan

and bring your fist down like a stone

on your spoiled work and useless kit,

you just can’t help but broadcast it:

look at the little avatar

of your muddy water-jar

filling with the perfect ring

singing under everything.

**Waking with Russell**

Whatever the difference is, it all began
the day we woke up face-to-face like lovers
and his four-day-old smile dawned on him again,
possessed him, till it would not fall or waver;
and I pitched back not my old hard-pressed grin
but his own smile, or one I’d rediscovered.
Dear son, I was mezzo del cammin
and the true path was as lost to me as ever
when you cut in front and lit it as you ran.
See how the true gift never leaves the giver:
returned and redelivered, it rolled on
until the smile poured through us like a river.
How fine, I thought, this waking amongst men!
I kissed your mouth and pledged myself forever.

**The Ferryman’s Arms**

About to sit down with my half-pint of Guinness

I was magnetized by a remote phosphorescence

and drawn, like a moth, to the darkened back room

where a pool-table hummed to itself in the corner.

With ten minutes to kill and the whole place deserted

I took myself on for the hell of it. Slotting

a coin in the tongue, I looked round for a cue –

 ­while I stood with my back turned, the balls were deposited

with an abrupt intestinal rumble; a striplight

batted awake in its dusty green cowl.

When I set down the cue-ball inside the parched D

it clacked on the slate; the nap was so threadbare

I could screw back the globe, given somewhere to stand.

As physics itself becomes something negotiable

a rash of small miracles covers the shortfall.

I went on to make an immaculate clearance.

A low punch with a wee dab of side, and the black

did the vanishing trick while the white stopped

before gently rolling back as if nothing had happened,

shouldering its way through the unpotted colours.

The boat chugged up to the little stone jetty without breaking the skin of the water, stretching,

as black as my stout, from somewhere unspeakable

to here, where the foaming lip mussitates endlessly,

trying, with a nutter's persistence, to read

and re-read the shoreline. I got aboard early,

remembering the ferry would leave on the hour

even for only my losing opponent;

but I left him there, stuck in his tent of light, sullenly

knocking the balls in, for practice, for next time.

**Nil Nil**

just as any truly accurate representation of a particular geography can only exist on a scale of I:I (imagine the vast, rustling map of Burgundy, say, settling over it like a freshly starched sheet!) so it is with all our abandoned histories, those ignoble lines of succession that end in neither triumph nor disaster, but merely plunge on into deeper and deeper obscurity; only in the infinite ghostlibraries of the imagination -their only possible analogue -can their ends be pursued, the dull and terrible facts finally authenticated.

Francois Aussemain, Pensees

From the top, then, the zenith, the silent footage:

McGrandle, majestic in ankle-length shorts,

his golden hair shorn to an open book, sprinting

the length of the park for the long hoick forward,

his balletic toe-poke nearly bursting the roof

of the net; a shaky pan to the Erskine St End

where a plague of grey bonnets falls out of the clouds.

But ours is a game of two halves, and this game

the semi they went on to lose; from here

it's all down, from the First to the foot of the Second,

McGrandle, Visocchi and Spankie detaching

like bubbles to speed the descent into pitch-sharing,

pay-cuts, pawned silver, the Highland Division,

the absolute sitters ballooned over open goals,

the dismal nutmegs, the scores so obscene

no respectable journal will print them; though one day

Farquhar's spectacular bicycle-kick

will earn him a name-check in Monday's obituaries.

Besides the one setback -the spell of giant-killing

in the Cup (Lochee Violet, then Aberdeen Bon Accord,

the deadlock with Lochee Harp finally broken

by Farquhar's own-goal in the replay)

nothing inhibits the fifty-year slide

into Sunday League, big tartan flasks,

open hatchbacks parked squint behind goal-nets,

the half-time satsuma, the dog on the pitch,

then the Boys' Club, sponsored by Skelly Assurance,

then Skelly Dry Cleaners, then nobody;

stud-harrowed pitches with one-in-five inclines,

grim fathers and perverts with Old English Sheepdogs

lining the touch, moaning softly.

Now the unrefereed thirty-a-sides,

terrified fat boys with callipers minding

four jackets on infinite, notional fields;

ten years of dwindling, half-hearted kickabouts

leaves two little boys -Alastair Watt,

who answers to 'Forty', and wee Horace Madden,

so smelly the air seems to quiver above him –

playing desperate two-touch with a bald tennis ball

in the hour before lighting-up time.

Alastair cheats, and goes off with the ball

leaving wee Horace to hack up a stone

and dribble it home in the rain;

past the stopped swings, the dead shanty-town

of allotments, the black shell of Skelly Dry Cleaners

and into his cul-de-sac, where, accidentally,

he neatly back-heels it straight into the gutter

then tries to swank off like he meant it.

Unknown to him, it is all that remains

of a lone fighter-pilot, who, returning at dawn

to find Leuchars was not where he'd left it,

took time out to watch the Sidlaws unsheathed

from their great black tarpaulin, the haar burn off Tayport

and Venus melt into Carnoustie, igniting

the shoreline; no wind, not a cloud in the sky

and no one around to admire the discretion

of his unscheduled exit: the engine plopped out

and would not re-engage, sending him silently

twirling away like an ash-key,

his attempt to bail out only partly successful,

yesterday having been April the Ist

the ripcord unleashing a flurry of socks

like a sackful of doves rendered up to the heavens

in private irenicon. He caught up with the plane

on the ground, just at the instant the tank blew

and made nothing of him, save for his fillings,

his tackets, his lucky half-crown and his gallstone,

now anchored between the steel bars of a stank

that looks to be biting the bullet on this one.

In short, this is where you get off, reader;

I'll continue alone, on foot, in the failing light,

following the trail as it steadily fades

into road-repairs, birdsong, the weather, nirvana,

 the plot thinning down to a point so refined

not even the angels could dance on it. Goodbye.

**11:00 Baldovan**

Base Camp. Horizontal sleet. Two small boys

have raised the steel flag of the 20 terminus:

me and Ross Mudie are going up the Hilltown

for the first time ever on our own.

I'm weighing up my spending power: the shillings,

tanners, black pennies, florins with bald kings,

the cold blazonry of a half-crown, threepenny bits

like thick cogs, making them chank together in my pockets.

I plan to buy comics,

sweeties, and magic tricks.

However, I am obscurely worried, as usual,

over matters of procedure, the protocol of travel,

and keep asking Ross the same questions:

where we should sit, when to pull the bell, even

if we have enough money for the fare,

whispering, Are ye sure? Are ye sure?

I cannot know the little good it will do me;

the bus will let us down in another country

with the wrong streets and streets that suddenly forget

their names at crossroads or in building-sites

and where no one will have heard of the sweets we ask for

and the man will shake the coins from our fists onto the counter

and call for his wife to come through, come through and see this

and if we ever make it home again, the bus

will draw into the charred wreck of itself

and we will enter the land at the point we left off

only our voices sound funny and all the houses are gone

and the rain tastes like kelly and black waves fold in

very slowly at the foot of Macalpine Road

and our sisters and mothers are fifty years dead.