

Neither here nor there: new generation Northern Irish poets (Sinéad Morrissey and Nick Laird)¹

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‘Skies change, not cares for those who cross the sea’²

Confirmation that a new generation of talented poets is beginning to re-shape the face of Irish and Northern Irish literature can be found in two recent anthologies: Selima Guinness’s *The New Irish Poets* (2004) and John Brown’s *Magnetic North: The Emerging Poets* (2005).³ Amongst the defining characteristics of the new poetry, according to Guinness, are a postmodernist distrust of grand narratives, an alertness to wider geopolitical concerns, and a preoccupation with domestic and family, rather than national history. For Brown, whose focus is exclusively on Northern poetry, the coming poetic generation displays a high degree of mobility and disparity in their work, a determination to cross borders, break silences and proffer ‘bifocal or comparative visions’ (p. 12) of changing private and public terrain. While not wishing to question the validity of these assertions in relation to a substantial number of the younger poets, I would suggest that many traits identified by Brown and Guinness are equally demonstrable in the writing of their literary forebears, the Heaney–Mahon–Longley and Muldoon–McGuckian–Carson generations. Indeed, Brown himself recognises continuities in content, form and style, and how poets from each generation developed different strategies in facing up to a common imperative, the need to address the appalling evil that destroyed so much of, and in, the province from the late 1960s onwards: ‘Darkness remains both a felt, elemental or metaphysical presence . . . the image of poetry as a “door into the dark” is with us more than we care to acknowledge’ (p. 12). As he also rightly points out, while altered political and social conditions since the ceasefires may have led to a diminution in the political pressures and expectations placed on the poets, the imprint of the recent past – of ‘ancestral’, communal and family memory – is still clearly visible in their work.

Rather than offer a broad, potentially fleeting survey of a range of writers from this new generation, this chapter will focus instead on the début collections of two writers, Sinéad Morrissey and Nick Laird, whose work exemplifies many of the attributes identified by Guinness and Brown. Other fine young poets born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as Frank Sewell, Colette Bryce, Leontia Flynn or Allan Gillis, might have equally been selected for scrutiny and enabled me to contrast distinctive, individual perspectives from the last and first decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Born respectively in 1972 and 1975, Morrissey and Laird came of age at a turning point in the province's history, the time of the first ceasefires, after a childhood and adolescence dominated by near-continuous political violence. Despite prolonged absences from the North, both are beneficiaries of the relative normality⁴ that has existed there since the ceasefires of 1994 and 1997, and the cultural and economic transformations that have accompanied them. Their particular geographical and cultural relocations have clearly enriched their work and enabled them not just to look back on both their own and their parents' experiences, but also to look upwards and outwards to engage with other cultures, places and times.

With three volumes to her credit, Sinéad Morrissey has perhaps the most substantial profile to date among the new generation of poets. Born in Portadown on 24 April 1972, and educated at Belfast High School, she lived in the province until 1990. In a recent interview, she explains that since her parents were atheists, she was not culturally aligned to 'either community . . . so I think that's given me a degree of impartiality'.⁵ At eighteen, she became the youngest ever recipient of the Patrick Kavanagh Award for Poetry, and went on to study English and German at Trinity College, Dublin. She returned to Belfast in 1999, and in 2002 became Writer-in-Residence at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University. From its outset, *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), her first collection, negotiates the intersections of private and public spaces in the North. The 'double vision' of the opening poem's title refers simultaneously to this conjunction as well as to unspecified differences in perspective between the speaker and her unidentified addressee. The poem's initial descriptions of Belfast occupying 'a shallow bowl of light' or of the Black Hill constituting 'a power failure / touching the sky' (my emphasis) have obvious political resonances. 'Double Vision's main focus, however, is on another kind of failure. Whereas her visual and political experiences of Belfast emphasise accessibility and excess ('I've seen it all'), the narrator's personal relationship with her partner reveals an absence of both qualities: 'the places in your head / Stay shut to me', 'with me none

the wiser'. Socially, intellectually, geographically, the pair may have much in common ('You've travelled up as I have'), but in their perceptions of the place and the situation they seem miles apart: inside his head there is 'None of what I saw'. For him, it would appear, Belfast is somewhere amenable to scrutiny ('gone into') yet somehow devoid of presence ('gone'). Yet in the closing stanza the city's road signs and street-lamps are invested with power, and seem almost to be conspiring together to mock the reluctant exile's return: '*You're back*', they chorus, 'Glimmering with victory'.⁶

Threats of erasure, images of dissolution⁷ recur in many of the North-based poems that follow. Set in the Thatcherite–Reaganite 1980s, 'CND' starts with another double-take, the grinning face of a nine-year-old activist juxtaposed with the grim caption on a balloon, 'I want to grow up, not blow up!'. The poem traces the girl's journey from 'innocence' to 'experience', evoking in stanza two her naïve pleasure at signing hate mail to the American President, collecting stickers, tasting beer. It is only when confronted with the macabre picture of two bomb victims ('two skeletons / Scared of the sky') that the fear of 'being nothing too soon and too suddenly'⁸ strikes her, silencing her 'for the day'. This last phrase stresses the temporariness of the blow delivered to her political enthusiasms, and encourages us to see the poem itself as a rejection of silence.

In contrast to 'CND', 'Ciara', 'Europa Hotel' and 'Belfast Storm' voice sorrow and anger at devastation close to home. 'Ciara' is another poem that arises from a childhood act of witness, and segues cleverly between times and perspectives. Like the focaliser's, our initial response to the image of a woman 'crying over potatoes' is incomprehension. Deftly, economically, Morrissey evokes the child's self-centred viewpoint. Her disappointments ('There would be no walk', 'Ruined Christmas') give way to something on a grander scale, the conflation in her imagination of 'boiling potatoes' and 'catastrophe'. Towards the close, a maturer voice intervenes to explain their symbolic function, standing in for a son 'who had his knees blown somewhere else'. That image of physical disintegration is repeatedly being re-run in his mother's 'shattered', 'fraying' mind, stranding her on the margins ('edge') of life. Metaphors of repleteness serve as an ironic counterpoint to the 'mess' the poem makes present, the 'frightening rain, pouring out / Of the Armagh sky' (p. 12) a sign of the fall-out⁹ and psychological 'legacy' of the Troubles. The reader's line of vision is directed upward again in 'Belfast Storm', which fancifully attributes the atmospheric effects to the angels' rage and distress, as they look down on the city 'heads in hands and howling it out all over us'.¹⁰ A first-person narrator suddenly

materialises at the beginning of line four, one who, after expressing surprise at the angels' reaction, sardonically acknowledges a difference brought about by the 'peace dividend':

I can't think what they haven't got used to by now
The great gap in the street where his knees hit the wall
Meant wheelchairs, rather than coffins. (p. 17)

Such black, mordant humour is not untypical of Belfast people from both communities, and surfaces again in another short poem across the page from 'Belfast Storm'. Lighter in touch and tone than Ciaran Carson's elegy for the bombed-out Smithfield Market,¹¹ 'Europa Hotel' generates empathy for a building targeted repeatedly by republican paramilitaries during the poet's childhood and teenage years. She imagines the hotel waking up to find its windows around its 'ankles' and smoke 'billowing' from its head. The Europa will have to continue in this 'impaired' state for the next fortnight, denied sight 'Of the green hills they shatter you for' (p. 16). This last line hints at the blinding absurdity of the militant republicans' bombing campaign, the mismatch between their idealised vision of 'Ireland' ('the green hills') and the destruction they wreak on their 'motherland'.

In a three-part sequence entitled 'Thoughts in a Black Taxi', Morrissey depicts her own return to Belfast and her problematic, liminal position as one who is neither/nor. Absorbed, watching loyalists preparing for the twelfth, she thinks about questioning 'the bare-chested men swanking about' high up on the bonfire. In time she recalls how her curiosity might be received:

One 'What are *You* called?' from them, and it would all go black.
I'd have to run to stay whole. (p. 19)

This prompts part two's recollections of earlier gaffes, such as demonstrating an unfamiliarity with loyalist paramilitary acronyms,¹² or laughing at German visitors disparaging Ian Paisley while travelling in a black UVF-run taxi heading into East Belfast. Most tellingly, she remembers her father urging her to conceal her identity, lest she be taken for a Catholic: 'Never say Morrissey again'. The closing stanzas take her back to her schooldays and the constant fear of being misidentified by nationalists. Going daily along the Grosvenor Road in Belfast High School uniform was 'like having *Protestant* slapped across your back':

I always walked with my heart constricting,
Half-expecting bottles, in sudden shards
Of West Belfast sunshine,
To dance about my head (p. 20)

Ostensibly, a third of the way into this first collection, attention switches to other locations and situations, yet not surprisingly the North and Morrissey's upbringing there remain a constant background presence. 'Bosnia' recalls a specific incident in the mid-1990s, when an anti-war protestor set fire to and killed himself in the grounds of the Palace of Westminster. The poet's critique of Western indifference at atrocities committed in areas of little or minor strategic importance arises in part one suspects from her experience of media coverage of the North in the 1970s and 1980s. Her imagery stresses the temporariness of the impact the man's suicide makes, comparing it to a 'short circuit', to a firework and spark which quickly slips from view. Instead of persuading the British and European governments to intervene in the Balkans, his gesture affects only 'the wrong people', those who recognised that 'it meant giving a damn' (p. 23). Fire reappears as the subject of the title poem, again as an object of spectacle. Paying no heed to the human cost, physical, psychological or financial, the watchers regard the conflagration as a theatrical performance, 'marvelled' at its visual effects, 'wondered' where it would next 'bestow its dance'. By conveying so strikingly the narrator's aestheticisation of violence, her translation of it into something sublime or epiphanic ('bright crusade', 'we watched with Moses') Morrissey displays the morally dubious position of the artist and citizen in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, the dangers of becoming desensitised to catastrophe, natural and man-made.

America's West Coast proves to be one of many stop-over sites in what turns out to be a remarkably assured, increasingly expansive quest for individuation. Recurring images and motifs – allusions to sea, light, colours, weather, windows, rooms, music, art – lend a measure of continuity to her wanderings, as a six-part sequence entitled 'Mercury' attests. This opens in an extremely restricted space, a 'Bottom Drawer', with a speaker riffling through the texts (diaries, letters, photographs) that collectively give 'testimony' to another's life. Selecting a metaphor to sum up the deceased woman's 'intricate', contained existence, Morrissey opts for a Chinese vase, 'painted in / By time', 'brittle as bone' (p. 33). In 'Nomad', she dwells upon the role of place in identity, concluding that 'where you are' necessitates 'facing the road'. Reflecting on her short lifetime, in which villages gave way to cities, 'scarecrows to gantries', she recognises that she now has 'No space to hold', that her past (the walled-up room?) is 'Somewhere you can't get back to' (p. 34). Although 'Gull Song' talks of flight and an achieved self-sufficiency ('I . . . come clear', 'I have nothing to fear in weather and distance'), a counterpoint to song is the heart's 'own crumpled urges' and the magnetic pull of her defiled homeland, a 'torn monastery', with 'open altars' (p. 35).

'Finding her Feet', part four of the sequence, steps into magical realist territory to depict conflicting impulses within the human psyche and specifically within the artist's imagination. In the opening stanza, its narrator describes diving into the sea to rescue one of the feet.¹³ Its attraction to 'coral' and preference for 'inward' journeying might suggest the draw of family and of literal and literary sites of origin; in these lines Morrissey may well allude to Ariel's song in *The Tempest* ('Full fathom five your father lies; of his bones are coral made') and to Seamus Heaney's 'Bogland', which compares Ireland's artists to 'pioneers' who 'keep striking / Inwards and downwards'.¹⁴ The other foot, meanwhile, was swanning around Bangladesh, 'In raptures with the stars' and his own success. In attempting to put a distance between himself and his 'roots' ('running away'), ironically this foot had run 'out of room'. At the close, irreconcilable differences between the feet – 'here' and 'there', local and international? – are resolved as a result of decisive authorial intervention. Poetry itself will serve as the home, room or structure where an accommodation can be reached with her poetic 'feet', and their contrary, competing tendencies.

In Mercury's fifth part, 'Leaving Flensburg', the winged feet bear her to a city on the German–Danish border, in the historically contested state of Schleswig-Holstein.¹⁵ The place provides her with a temporary 'grounding', but also visual and emotional experiences which she can draw upon 'for years'. With its dank, cold climate, the shipyard with its 'sad men welding steel' (p. 37), it inevitably evokes thoughts of what she has left behind and will return to. 'No Need to Travel', the sequence's final lyric, seems to mark a repatriation, followed as it is by poems dedicated to close family members. The tulips in a local garden blazon a resilience that has endured despite everything, a 'knowing how to thrust colour skywards / Flaunting the unlikely, shocking through bloom' (p. 38).

The destabilising effects of family division and loss are central to the next cluster of texts, which maintains the book's linked preoccupation with the problematic nature of identity and art's assuaging, restorative possibilities. 'Hazel Goodwin Morrissey Brown' records a final visit to the family home, which is the process of being disassembled. In an act which sets in motion the poem's creation, the narrator plucks from the débris an old photograph of her mother in her 'GDR-Worker phase', placing it alongside a recent business card, thus conjoining her times as a communist fellow-traveller and entrepreneur promoting 'Nu Skin' products in New Zealand. Cosmetic renewal gives way to reincarnation myth in stanza two, when the daughter in the poem 'discovers' – thanks to an antipodean psychic – that in a previous existence she had

been her mother's mother. The neatly arranged rhymes of the final verse ('fight'/'flight', 'space'/'race', 'airport'/'last resort') underline ideas of cycles of recurrence, her mother's journeying eastwards and southwards in pursuit of freedom presaging the poet's own. Later poems ('My Grandmother Through Glass', 'Losing a Diary') are unable to recapture the affirmation of this response to bereavement; departure generates an 'awful hush' (p. 45) in the former, while the latter locates the author 'in open sea', neither 'moored' nor 'married'. Her craft cannot recreate 'the sad, fixed honesty of how it was' (p. 46), she ruefully acknowledges.

Yet as *There Was Fire in Vancouver* concludes, a series of short lyrics praising light radiates a late sense of benison. This *fiat lux* begins with 'September Light', which delights in the sun's alchemy, 'rareness making gold' (p. 49). 'Twenty-One', a coming-of-age poem, picks up where that left off, thanking God for the gift of the world. An objective correlative of the print she wants to take, the poem celebrates 'blown blossom' and 'receding colours of the day', and concludes with a declaration of aesthetic intent, an envisioning of widening horizons. This is immediately followed by another self-reflexive piece, 'Guardians', which resonates with a psalm-like, lyric authority

Light is their element, they make waves
In the world with the force of their rays. (p. 51)

The immanent, Blakean spirits of the title are guarantors of stability ('Making sure the earth holds'), guides overseeing our ascent into a better state, a plateau 'where minerals dazzle', a place of transfiguration.¹⁶

Morrissey's light display reaches its climax in 'The Juggler' and 'Restoration'. Like the young Heaney in his eulogies to the skills of the ploughman, the diviner, the smith, the thatcher, Morrissey stresses initially the quotidian, humble origins of the juggler's art; she pictures him practising for hours between bins and mattresses in 'a rented back yard'. What she does not replicate, however, is Heaney's deployment of a child's perspective, opting instead for the standpoint of a somewhat cynical, world-weary narrator. 'God knows what / Anachronism he took up before', she comments, dismissing the juggler's act as merely 'a side-show', a rather crass attempt to turn back time. A more nuanced reaction begins to emerge in stanza three, with a recognition of the therapeutic effects the spectacle creates, providing – like the poet? – an escape from 'the *drain* / Of things modern' (my emphasis). From this point onwards the juggler, rather than the narrator, becomes *the* focal point ('we ring / Him with faces'), a figure imbued with understanding, resolve, resilience:

He knows
 How we anticipate failure
 And that what he owes

His audience is a defiance
 Of breakdown.

Accumulating references to ‘magic’, ‘radiance’, ‘weightlessness’ signal how much the speaker’s perception has been transformed, while the repeated use of first person plurals indicates how he has whirled the audience into a collective entity. Ultimately, his role is perceived as comparable to that of an artist or priest, since he cajoles ‘improbables . . . / Into truth’, and leaves us ‘not so far out / From faith as we were’ (p. 56).

The concept of faith as something fixed or grounded contrasts, of course, with Matthew Arnold’s vision in ‘Dover Beach’ (1867), which imagines it as a sea in retreat. Morrissey clearly has Arnold’s poem in her sights in ‘Restoration’, the book’s closing poem. In locating and dating its two parts, ‘Achill, 1985’ and ‘Juist, 1991’, the poet invites us to see the distinction between her worldview at thirteen and *Weltanschauung* six years later. Desolation appears at first to be the dominant note in the first poem, whose narrator recalls watching, along with a single gull, a beached dolphin being ripped ‘Of all its history’, by an apparently indifferent ‘Easter wind’. ‘Abandoned’, ‘washed up’, ‘on the edge’ of things, it might have seemed to mirror the teenager’s own exposed condition, facing a sea ‘wide and emptied of love’. Yet the memory of how ‘its body / Opened in the sun’, and re-use of the verb ‘Caught’¹⁷ to reveal her captivity, seem anticipatory, making us re-read the experience as a moment of epiphany. The positioning of ‘Juist, 1991’ immediately after ‘Achill, 1985’ results in the collection ending as it began with double vision, a sense of here and there. From the date in the title one assumes that the poet visited this small East Friesian island while taking her degree in German and English at Trinity. Whereas Arnold’s elegy opens in tranquillity, with a calm North Sea and white chalk cliffs glimmering in the moonlight, Morrissey’s poem ‘booms’ at its outset and remarks on a complete absence of light on the beach and in the sky. The sea, however, is a revelation in light, of light; touched, ‘the water explodes / In phosphorescence’ (p. 59). There, on Juist, here on the page, the sudden discharge of energy is illuminating, not life-destroying. The last lines seem possessed by an evangelical zeal, passing from uncertainty (‘No one knows’) into mystery, or rather *the* mystery of *creatio ex nihilo*:

Let there be light in this world
 Of nothing let it come from
 Nothing let it speak nothing
 Let it go everywhere (p. 60)

Like the sceptical audience watching the juggler, some readers may recoil from this apparent throwback to an earlier time and state; others might maintain that genesis is an entirely appropriate place for an emerging poet to set off from. Yet tensions remain despite the uplift in this resolution. Amid the assertions that light should simply 'be', a prohibition appears: 'let it speak nothing'. This seems to indicate a recognition of the limitations of, even a distrust of, the very medium she is employing.¹⁸

When Edna Longley writes that 'The speech or eloquent silence of the father is an important motif in Northern Irish poetry',¹⁹ she may have been thinking primarily, though not exclusively, of male poets. In contrast to Morrissey, whose book contains only one passing reference to her father (in 'Thoughts in a Black Taxi'), Nick Laird's *To a Fault* begins with a series of glimpses of his father, a figure who comes across as simultaneously present and remote. He first features in 'Cuttings', a poem whose title is entirely appropriate given its setting (a barber's shop) and Laird's clipped, highly visual technique. Signs that the location is Northern Ireland are immediately apparent, as the sunlight highlights 'a patch of *paisley* wallpaper'.²⁰ Although there is something theatrical about the barber and the way he whips off the cape 'with a matador's flourish', at the same time he is depicted as deft and diplomatic with the customers. Avoiding dangerous topics like 'the troubles or women or prison', he confines the conversation to safer substitutes, 'parking or calving or missing'. The idea of absent and repressed narratives is developed further in the narrator's subsequent focus on his father and, midway through the poem, on the calendar portraying the 'glories of Ulster'. This latter, bright aesthetic object is isolated in the mundane dullness of its surroundings (amid the utilitarian beige lino, red chair, and brown ceramic sink), its positive images subverted by the disclosure that it is merely advertising 'JB Crane Hire or 'some crowd flogging animal feed'. The penultimate verse consolidates the notion of the hairdresser's shop as an emblematic space within the province, a 'bandaged' place where diverse individuals – 'Eelmen, gunmen, the long dead, the police' – temporarily find common ground. Into this unprepossessing frame, an initially unidentified male figure appears, 'my angry and beautiful father'. The ambivalent feelings and 'contradictory awarenesses'²¹ compressed in that phrase are maintained in the concluding

images, which present him negatively ('his eyes budded shut') and positively ('expectant and open'), his head filled with 'lather' and 'unusual thoughts'. The father remains for the reader – as for the speaker perhaps – an elusive, enigmatic figure; what makes him so angry, we never discover. What Laird does present at the close is a man curious enough to reach for something beyond the quotidian and parochial, capable of engaging with the strange and the sublime.

Laird, like Morrissey, proves to be deeply engaged by the relationship between family and identity, conscious both of the need to belong and to break rank.²² Something of this anxiety can be seen in 'The Layered', one of *To a Fault's* lighter offerings. This finds the poet playing games with his name and depicting, somewhat cryptically, three family members. First up is Matthew Thomas or, as the poem has it, 'Empty Laird' (p. 28), a man who in his last years lamented a dearth of opportunities (educational, political?). His son, 'Laird Jnr', is unflatteringly represented as 'a nit-picker . . . a hair splitter', yet also as someone who felt terror at his own insubstantiality. Contrasted to these flawed males is the future Mrs Laird, whose physical presence, repleteness and confidence made an impression immediately on 'see-thru' Junior. The bizarre line with which the poem ends ('into my grave into my grave into my grave she was laid', p. 29) alludes to *Hamlet*, reinforcing the image of the son as a lack or absence which she – and text-making – filled.²³

Fecundity and criminality seem to be characteristics of the extended family portrayed in 'Pedigree' (pp. 35–7). Having established that the bloodline includes a shoplifter, a cattle-smuggler, a rustler-turned-killer, it is hardly surprising that the family blazon proposed by the narrator should be 'an enormous unruly blackthorn hedge', rather than a yielding willow. Trying to determine his own place in the family tree, the narrator – who shares a passing resemblance to the lawyer author – describes himself, understandably, as 'out on a limb'. When, mid-way through, the spotlight moves on to his more immediate forebears, an element of bathos enters in. The portrait of his father as a young man contains nothing of the dramatic, heroic, illicit or adventurous, only their absence; he is pictured fishing away his boyhood, longing for a Davy Crockett hat, polishing the medals of 'his legendary uncles' all of whom had perished at the Somme.²⁴ Having disclosed the fact that neither of his parents left school with qualifications, the narrator lays emphasis on his mother's subsequent endeavour to remedy that lack. His use of the adjective 'each' and the verb 'heave' convey her determination, commitment and energy, qualities seemingly absent in the father:

Each evening after work and dinner,
 she'd do her OU course
 and heave the brown suitcase of books
 from out beneath the . . . bunks. (p. 36)

In delivering his verdict on the relationships within his family – father–mother, brother–sister, but not father–son or mother–son – the speaker employs a strangely cheerless word: ‘There is such a shelter in each other’. Home, thus, appears to be associated with protection and proximity, but not with emotional warmth or intimacy.

Directly after this, the narrator switches his attention to a very different location and entity, when its primary addressee is introduced and takes centre stage. He describes his lover padding from the bathroom, ‘gentled with freckles and moisturized curves’. She is presented as an iconic figure, the embodiment of physical, linguistic and syntactical grace (‘perfect in grammar and posture’). In yet another self-reflexive touch, he identifies her as a kindred mark-maker in referring to her ‘singing . . . footprints’. In the middle of his eulogy, a call from the past breaks in, suddenly compelling him to confront the gulf between his present and that past. He is made uneasy by the tone his partner adopts in speaking to his family from ‘across the water’. Although the poem’s closing statement (‘this is a charge not a pleading’) seems to be an indictment of *her* for her inability to relate to them, one detects also feelings of guilt on his part, a fear perhaps that he can no longer ‘hear them right’ (p. 37), that *he* has forged a distance from his point of origin.

Subsequently Laird moves beyond the family circle to provide a number of highly evocative portraits of the province in the wake of the 1990s ceasefires. The aptly titled ‘Remaindermen’ contemplates initially the survivors of the Troubles’ years; praising their ‘weathered’ resistance and endurance (‘their ability to thole’). Theirs have been lifetimes taken up with deaths and emigration, watching

their cemeteries filling up
 like car parks on a Saturday,
 their young grow fat for export (p. 9)

Contrasted with these solitary, passive, pacific figures are the intransigent in the community, who the narrator characterises as preferring an ‘ice-bound’²⁵ world than one involving fluidity and compromise. In what proves to be one of many self-reflexive moments in *To A Fault*, the speaker notes how ‘someone’ charged with transcribing ‘the last fifty years of *our* speech’ (my emphasis) has yet to encounter the word ‘sorry’ or employ a question mark, an indication that truth might be plural. The poem ends with a wry, unconscious sign of the contrariness of the

local townspeople who, in erecting a triumphal arch, inadvertently encouraged visitors to leave; those arriving were greeted with a ‘Safe Home Brethren’, while those departing were wished a ‘Welcome’.

‘The Signpost’ maintains the collection’s focus on the violent semiotics of the North, and starts with a punishment beating carried out on a loyalist paramilitary by two former drinking-companions. In its narrative, demotic style and sardonic humour it anticipates *Utterly Monkey* (2005), Laird’s first novel, in which one of the leading characters, Geordie Wilson, is subjected to an identical ordeal, having to wait for his attackers to bring a second gun to knee-cap him after the first one jams.²⁶ The damage to his legs, the speaker observes drily,

put paid to plans for ascending Everest,
and playing for Rangers. . . .
(though it left open Glentoran, as his father suggested). (p. 10)

Splayed out on the ground after the shooting, his body is described as resembling a signpost, a pointed warning to others of the toll exacted for transgression. The closing stanzas find the paramilitary/victim in a bed at the Royal, gazing out over the Belfast skyline. At a remove now from the two ‘stringy cunts’ and guns which put him there, he observes two massive cranes, ‘their *arms* low over the city / *as if*’ (my emphases) in a gesture of benediction.²⁷ As in ‘Cuttings’, the poem ends in an expression of wonder, how ‘all that gathered weight’ remains ‘upright’. The irony, of course, is that East Belfast is hardly or simply a place of benison, restraint and moral rectitude. Significantly, when he manages to locate ‘his father’s house’²⁸ – a metonym no doubt for the province – he notes that it is in a state of darkness.

One of the most accomplished and complex of the early poems is ‘The Length of a Wave’ (pp. 6–7), which illustrates how effectively Laird is able to switch from domestic, familial and local preoccupations to larger concerns, such as politics and the function of art. This sense of restless, continuing motion is signalled in the poem’s opening line, which juxtaposes ‘the mythic coast’ and ‘the kitchen stove’; phrase-structures and word-sounds echo each other. The dominant presence in the early stanzas is again that of the narrator’s father, this time as an increasingly disturbed, disturbing figure. Although initially depicted indulging merely in a little *schadenfreude* – talking ‘of floods / riptides, the boy drowned in Bundoran’ as he warms himself beside the stove – the speaker then alludes to tidal mood-swings (‘dependent on the moon’), before informing us how twice he ‘broke the light-switch . . . punching it’. Outside the house, his father’s voice resonates still, yet loses in power both as a result son’s intellectual advances (‘I could judge’, ‘by knowing’)

and shift of concern, his desire for news from the poem's unidentified addressee, presumably a lover back in England.

The poem's second movement monitors a sequence of alternative sound-effects, beginning with the waves rippling out from a bomb-blast (perhaps that in Omagh in 1998?) 'to the corpses in the mortuary awaiting recognition'. Turning from the horror of that devastated scene, he attunes himself to noises closer to home, like the clatter made by a barley machine, a ball 'gonging' against a garage-door, the sound-swell created by speech, an 'adult' bird in flight, his sleeping beloved's 'tidal breathing', this last image transporting us lyrically into an unthreatening seascape, and far from the morgue's stillness.

In the third section the auditory imagination switches to frequencies particularly associated with Northern Ireland. Mention of 'the droning Chinook' reminds one of how often images associated with surveillance figure in poems by Carson, McGuckian and Zell. In evoking the sound of a rifle shot – he compares it to a 'domestic slap' – he hints at how common violence has become both outside *and* inside the domestic sphere. Initially 'the embassies of Home' with their 'quartered flags' appear as if wreathed in light, associated with sanctuary, stability, the assertion of individual identities. In the pivotal tenth line of this section, however, it emerges that they are a place where one struggles 'to stay intact'. What troubles the narrator's own sense of home is the verbal aggression exhibited by his father, whose final question ('Are you coming in or out?') encodes a demand for allegiance to family and origins. Although the young man's answer seems at first equivocal ('I'm still not sure'), the closing stanzas bespeak a deep commitment to originary locations, specifically the liminal beauties of Donegal. There he imagines watching 'light complicate the water', wading out into the 'stinging cold saltwater', which, like poetry, possesses transformative power. Its waves are credited as capable not only of restoring silver, but also, tellingly, of 'disinfecting wounds'.

Although it frequently alludes to continuing violence back home, *To A Fault* demonstrates the extent to which the decade since the ceasefires has freed up Northern Irish writers from the younger generation to engage with wider, global and historical concerns. The most striking illustration of this new breadth and confidence in Laird's collection is 'Imperial', an intricately fashioned parable about war and power-politics spanning the centuries, bearing its readers from ancient Mesopotamia to present-day Iraq. In this poem, whose appearance in the *London Review of Books* coincided with the beginning of the US campaign to topple Saddam,²⁹ Laird sets up a Saidian³⁰ analogy between nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century and contemporary

colonial adventurism; like Shelley's 'Ozymandias',³¹ the poem invites us to reflect on the transience of empire and the monumental follies political leaders continue to commit. At the same time, it should be added that Laird's perspective is itself ineluctably 'compromised' since it regards the east through western eyes.³²

Its first two parts portray the working practices of the archaeologist Sir Austin Henry Layard (1817–94), whose surname resembles the poet's own.³³ As a result of successful excavations at Nineveh and Babylon and the books in which he recorded his 'discoveries', Layard achieved celebrity status in early Victorian Britain. In Laird's poem he comes across as a contradictory figure. The early stanzas depict him in hostile mood, 'scattering' anyone who threatens his occupation. Anticipating the colonial administrators who would follow in his wake, he has arrived at certain conclusions about those whose cultural legacy, not to mention rights and territories, he has helped to appropriate ('the male Musselman is naturally this or commonly that', p. 11).³⁴ Fearful that 'his' relics might be pilfered, he has no qualms about carrying out 'summary punishments' from time to time *pour décourager les autres*. When it comes to artefacts, however, he is delicate in his labour, easing 'pieces out from the flesh of the earth / as a midwife might' (p. 11), so that they can be delivered intact 'to the *pale* hands in the *cool* basement of the British Museum', and their new, surrogate owners.

The three subsequent sections of the poem move into pastoral terrain, placing the archaeologist – and readers – in the role of observers of nature. Oxen plodding along beside the riverbanks become symbols of timelessness, like the old horse in Hardy's 'Breaking of Nations' poem.³⁵ What disturbs the tranquil, companionable mood, generated by images of cattle lying down 'in each other's shadows' or 'ambling . . . / . . . between milking and darkness', are the monstrosities Layard uncovers by the north-west walls of the palace in Nineveh.³⁶ Monuments to imperial might, these part-human, part-lion, part-avian³⁷ figures were created to instil fear, to warn those contemplating opposition or transgression of the swift and vicious retribution they could expect. Having established the predatory nature of the indigenous imperialist régimes (ancient Assyrian, modern Ba'athist), the narrator's focus turns to the *external* agents out to topple them. The 'voice from the south' which over-confidently predicts 'Nineveh's imminent demise is *simultaneously* that of the biblical prophet Jonah and the current American President, George Bush.³⁸ In contrast, the Old Testament original stresses the humiliations and deprivations the Ninevite king and people endure in order to ward off destruction,³⁹ which prompts Yahweh to deal with

them compassionately.⁴⁰ Laird's poem foregrounds those who make a swift profit from crisis: 'Stripped of sackcloth, the saved resume their businesses / . . . buying and selling' (p. 12). The 'saved' here might be identified as locals who have managed to survive the onslaught or, conceivably, Republican-backing, American entrepreneurs and their companies, rewarded with reconstruction contracts by a grateful administration. The term is clearly one associated with Christian fundamentalism.

In part three, the cattle reoccupy centre stage, their passive demeanour contrasted with the frenetic comings and goings of the empowered – money-men, prophets, warriors, an unnamed 'white man on horseback' (Layard?) and 'the slip of a cowherd who keeps them'.⁴¹ Docile, resigned, 'pool-eyed' watchers, they are themselves a recurrent object of the narrator's observations. The answer to his own question ('Can they remember?') has the effect of humanising them, but also of registering them in the long history of cruelties inflicted by humans on their own kind and kine. 'They catalogue hurt' (p. 12).

Imperialist discourse, then and now, privileges its own and rarely recognises the need to differentiate between the natives. Underlining this point, the poem's closing section, like its first, begins naming another interloper, following in the wake of Jonah and Layard. A successor to the latter, and beneficiary of his project, Gertrude Bell (1868–1926) served in the Arab Bureau during the Great War and subsequently as 'Oriental secretary to the British military high command in Iraq'.⁴² First-world intervention in the Middle East is characterised as a casual affair. After 'a pleasant afternoon' riding in the desert, Bell is seen trailing 'a walking stick behind her', marking out the frontiers for the 'new countries' the victorious western powers brought into being. Yet their attempts at inscribing their presence in the region face repeated resistance, which Laird renders primarily in nature imagery. By moving 'under the borders', the rivers subvert them. Pitted against the 'kingdom of here', its 'relics', 'oilfields' and 'satellites', is an older, elemental technology, 'the machinery of the wind / which starts up and ticks over' (p. 13), and erases man-made lines in the sand. Momentarily, at this critical juncture, the narrative shifts from third to first person, implicating its readers in the recurring history of intervention it decries: 'We are *again* among these ruins and the dying' (my emphasis). This, like the allusion to 'oilfields' and the reworking of one of T.S. Eliot's most famous phrases,⁴³ brings us very much into the twenty-first century and current 'grief' in Iraq. In speaking of 'Satellites mistaken for portents', the poem hints at the part faulty intelligence played in the justification for the coalition invasion. Broken into its component parts, prefix and

root, the participle epitomises much that has gone before in the poem and in history.⁴⁴

Politics and the abuse of 'legal' processes feature prominently in the 'The Given', a nightmarish parable reminiscent of Auden's 'O What is that Sound', H.G. Wells's 'The Country of the Blind' and Kafka's entire oeuvre. It details the progressive encroachment of the State into the most private of private domains, the human body itself; in each of its succeeding stanzas force and the law are deployed to snatch or confiscate one of the five senses. Yet the poem is as much an indictment of the passivity in the populace as it is of the authorities, since it is only after 'they came for sight' that any token resistance is mounted:

The door we've blocked with books now shakes.
We play them tapes we had prepared
then hiss and mouth our tongueless chorus. (p. 4)

Like C. Day-Lewis's 'Newsreel', it warns of the dangers of sleeping too long.

A concern with texts, textuality and intertextuality is apparent from the outset of Laird's volume. 'Poetry' (p. 5) sets the self-reflexive agenda. Here the art-form is primarily envisaged as observation, the recapturing of fragmentary images and spots in time. In the first of a sequence of analogies, the speaker compares his art to the view in the 'big window / on the top deck of the number 47', in which everyone and everything is envisioned 'through my own reflection'. There is something distinctly Kavanaghese in the way Laird intercuts the secular and the religious, and finds transformative potential in the everyday. There is poetry in

opening my eyes when everyone's praying.
The wave machine of my father's breathing,

my mother's limestone-fingered steeple,
my sister's tiny fidgets, and me, moon-eyed, unforgetting (p. 5)

The poem closes with a form of release, with an image of two unwieldy oak doors flapping open 'to let us out'. Like the building from which they leave (a church?), the poem resembles 'some great injured bird trying to take flight'.

'The Riddles of the Ardcumber Book' sees the poet donning a scholarly persona, as well as indulging in a little post-structuralist play. At the outset its speaker informs us that he has spent the previous twenty years of his life on a recently discovered theological text which incorporated in its margins a sequence of riddles composed 'in a rustic Latin'. The fact that it is the marginalia which has fired his passion is, of course,

highly significant, especially given Laird's own cultural 'provenance'. Interspersed in the academic's discourse are tantalisingly short, enigmatic fragments from the Dark Ages. Thus, in the midst of a comprehensive dismissal of previous scholarship on the riddles as either scant or slipshod, he slips into the text in brackets and italics quotations from his fictional primary text, '(*the fish is a quiet guest*)' (p. 32) and '(*the quill is the joy of the sparrow*)' (p. 33). Despite dismissing others' speculations on the anonymous author's identity, he is prepared to offer his own, picturing him as 'a cowherd bedded in heather / watching the shifting cross-hatching of shade / in the valley' or perhaps as 'a chieftain' – a Gaelic laird? – an escapee from the massacre, 'waiting out time / far from the burning and bloodshed'. That the riddler's word-games have had a salutary, even salvatory effect on the academic is suggested by his cryptic comment that 'They prevent me from falling'. Like myth, and like art,

the riddle springs from the need to vest life
in the garb of the coldly fabulous. (p. 33)

Having listed a delightfully disparate range of alternatives, the speaker asserts that 'the final solution' to the conundrum is not as 'Williams' claims 'God', but rather 'riddle', but then immediately attacks the idea of there ever being a definitive answer. Poetry lies in the 'seeking', he concludes, and readers should shun those making dogmatic statements as to its meanings.

John Redmond's assertion that *To a Fault* is uniformly 'depressing' is wide of the mark,⁴⁵ though he is right to be critical of its occasional stylistic drifts downmarket, into what he terms 'newladspeak'. Since the dust-jacket's biographical notes draw attention to the fact that Laird 'has lived in Warsaw and Boston', one might have expected a more substantial representation in the poetry of both. Neither poem located in Poland suggests that he gained much insight into a culture as complex as his own. 'A Guide to Modern Warsaw' reduces the city to a limited cluster of signs, contrasting the huge Sony logo which lords it over the site where the Great Synagogue once stood with the flimsy flyers 'at pavement level', offering sexual services, sessions in the martial arts', and voicing 'pleas for missing dogs'. A little earlier in the collection Laird had included a poem about Auschwitz, but by misspelling its Polish name (Oświęcim) rather undermines his historical and cosmopolitan credentials. 'Oświęciem' begins with a bee swarm encountered on a visit to the camp, and ends with a conceit linking the 'end-stopped histories' of the drones and the inmates. The analogy depersonalises the victims, leaves them as anonymous as the cattle in 'Imperial'. A restorative

manoeuvre, borrowed from Michael Longley's 'The Linen Workers', is attempted at the close, when the narrator talks of opening the prisoners' cases and replacing in them the various objects confiscated by the Nazis and now displayed in the camp's museum. In a sinister final twist, he imagines leaving the cases in lockers in each of Europe's major airports, where they would sit alongside other signs of crime, 'stolen goods / and photographs in envelopes, and bombs' (p. 38). The intention may well have been to draw a parallel between the race crimes of the Nazis and atrocities committed by today's terrorists, but the scale and magnitude of the killing routinely carried out by the former make such a conflation deeply flawed.

At times 'pitched closer to anger than wonder' ('An Appendix', p. 56), *To a Fault* is nevertheless a book which delights and impresses much of the time. Poems like 'Imperial', 'The Length of a Wave' and 'The Riddles of the Arcdumber Book' will not look out of place in future anthologies, and reflect, like Morrissey's three volumes, the continuing strength in depth of Northern Irish poetry. This is evident in many other début collections published since 2000, such as Leontia Flynn's *These Days*, awarded the Forward Poetry Prize for the best collection of 2004, and Alan Gillis's *Somebody, Somewhere*, which received the 2005 Rupert and Eithne Strong Award for a best first collection and was short-listed for the prestigious *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award. Like so many of her peers in the new generation, Leontia Flynn is a highly self-reflexive writer, frequently given to 'baring the device'. Midway through *These Days*, for example, she wheels out a dream poetic mentor, who is forthright about what it takes to coin success. Abrasiveness sells well, he suggests: 'If you can fashion something with a file in it for the academics / to hone their malicious nails on – you're minted'.⁴⁶ The acute sense of displacement registered in Morrissey's 1990s poetry, composed while violence was still raging, is largely absent from Flynn's work, much of which appears to circle around family, domestic spaces, everyday objects, albeit 'under a ticking', intermittently 'bewildered.sky'.⁴⁷ Significantly, 'Naming It', the opening piece in *These Days*, transports us from 'the gloomiest most baffled / misadventures'⁴⁸ into a sudden 'clearing' where the unfamiliar can be relished. Mercurial, lyrical, street-wise and wry, her poetry exemplifies a quality she praises in an ex-partner, the ability to 'take the clockwork out of things', to strike 'a new sound from a dud motor'.⁴⁹

Equally impressive is Alan Gillis's first foray into poetry. One of many highpoints in *Somebody, Somewhere* is 'Progress', a wry but moving reflection on not-so-distant times in Northern Ireland, and one worth quoting in full. Its initially somewhat uncertain, tentative narrator

imagines the traumatic, devastating violence since the late 1960s being suddenly, miraculously put into reverse. As so often in Laird's and Flynn's poems, register and diction veer between the informal/conversational ('it's great now', 'So I guess') and formal/lyrical ('explosively healed', 'coalescing into the clarity'):

They say that for years Belfast was backwards
and it's great now to see some progress.
So I guess we can look forward to taking boxes
from the earth. I guess that ambulances
will leave the dying back amidst the rubble
to be explosively healed. Given time,
one hundred thousand particles of glass
will create impossible patterns in the air
before coalescing into the clarity
of a window. Through which, a reassembled head
will look out and admire the shy young man
taking his bomb from the building and driving home.⁵⁰

The poem deploys a simple idea, one which so easily might have descended into embarrassing and tasteless whimsy.⁵¹ Yet like Morrissey's and Laird's, Gillis's control of his material is exemplary, compelling readers to contemplate once more the devastation and horror which so recently afflicted somewhere which is and is not 'home'.

Notes

- 1 Much of this chapter previously appeared in *Northern Irish Literature 1956–2006: The Imprint of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). My thanks to the publisher for allowing the material to be reprinted here.
- 2 Horace, *Epistles*, I, xi, 27 ('Caelum non animum qui trans mare currunt'), as rendered by Seamus Heaney in 'The Flight Path', *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 24. The same line from Horace had been deployed by Derek Mahon twenty-five years earlier in 'Homecoming', *Ecclesiastes* (Manchester: Phoenix, 1970), p. 10.
- 3 Selima Guinness (ed.), *The New Irish Poets* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2004); John Brown (ed.), *Magnetic North: The Emerging Poets* (Derry: Verbal Arts Centre, 2005).
- 4 Violence had diminished, but not ceased. Months after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, a bomb planted by dissident republicans claimed the lives of 29 people in Omagh, Co. Tyrone. Punishment beatings continued, along with sectarian attacks and intimidation.
- 5 Interviewed by Annamay McKernan, *Tatler Woman*, 24 June 2002 www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/reframe.cgi?app=cipher&index=author.

- 6 Sinéad Morrissey, *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 9.
- 7 This pattern reappears in later poems such as 'After the Hurricane', p. 48.
- 8 There may be an echo here of Ted Hughes's 'Crow's Account of the Battle' (from *Crow* (London: Faber, 1970), pp. 26–7), which similarly envisages a nuclear apocalypse: 'Blasting the whole world to bits / Was too like slamming a door / . . . / Too like being blown to bits yourself / Which happened too easily / With too like no consequences'.
- 9 This image linked to nuclear war occurs once more in 'Thoughts in a Black Taxi', p. 19.
- 10 Later in the volume, in 'My New Angels', she returns to this theme: 'My new angels are howling, hard, / . . . / For every snuffed out light on a back road' (p. 52).
- 11 Ciaran Carson 'Smithfield Market', *The Irish for No* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1987), p. 37.
- 12 The UYM cited in the poem stands for Ulster Young Militants. The CAIN website identifies the group as the youth wing of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which probably dates from 1974. In April 2001 members of the UYM were charged with the murder of Trevor Lowry (49), a Protestant civilian, whom they misidentified as a Catholic: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/yorgan.htm#ym>
- 13 Significantly the feet in the poem are gendered male.
- 14 *The Tempest*, Act I, scene ii, lines 394–5; Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 56.
- 15 Flensburg, along with the state, passed from Danish to Prussian control following the war between the two kingdoms of 1864.
- 16 Morrissey composed the poem in the summer of 1993 in the Swiss Alps, returning there the following summer when news of the ceasefires came through.
- 17 The word appears at a critical moment in 'The Juggler', p. 56.
- 18 Earlier evidence of this unease about language comes in 'If Words' (p. 55), which depicts words as 'unfortunates'. Their lack of fixity is commented on later when she describes how they 'spill like sewage and dismay'.
- 19 Edna Longley, *The Living Stream* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 65.
- 20 Nick Laird, *To a Fault* (London: Faber, 2005), p. 3.
- 21 A phrase of Seamus Heaney's 'A Pilgrim's Journey', *Poetry Society Bulletin* 123, (winter 1984), p. 2.
- 22 Morrissey uses the image twice in 'My Grandmother Through Glass' (pp. 42–5), once in relation to herself (II), once in relation to her mother (IV).
- 23 When Polonius asks Hamlet if he will 'walk out of the air', the Prince replies with this mordant quip. *Hamlet*, Act II, scene ii, line 209.
- 24 A further reminder of the continuing significance of the Somme within the imaginations of the preceding generation of Northern Protestants.

- See Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 27–37, 257–60.
- 25 Images depicting Northern Ireland as trapped in an ice age are a recurring feature in early 'Troubles' poems, including Seamus Heaney's 'Tinder' (*Wintering Out*) and Paul Muldoon's 'Macha' (*Knowing My Place*). Ice images feature also in Trevor McMahon's 'Breaking', which speaks of how now 'Only the snow exists / fractured, / remaining through the breaking of / tribes' (*The Wearing of the Black* [Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974], p. 2) and in Michael Longley's poem 'The North', from *Lares* (Woodford Green: Poet & Printer, 1972), p. 13: 'There are no landmarks round here, / Only immeasurable shifts / Of the snow, frozen eddies / To guide us home. Snow and ice / Turn us into eskimoes . . . / We die walking in circles'.
- 26 Nick Laird, *Utterly Monkey* (London: Harper, 2005), pp. 16–18.
- 27 This image of the famous Belfast shipyard cranes, Samson and Goliath, which imagines them blessing the city is a surprising one. More typically they might be associated with masculinity, industrial might and sectarian aggression. Reference to their 'arms' serves as a reminder of what has happened to the limbs of the man who views them in this positive light.
- 28 Laird here makes a coded allusion to the gospel according to St Luke, 16: 27.
- 29 *London Review of Books*, 25:6 (20 March 2003). The American campaign began with missile attacks on various Iraqi sites in the early hours of that day.
- 30 In the opening chapter of *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1978]), pp. 42–3, 76–83, Edward Said details the massive investment in scholarship that accompanied Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition of 1798–99, 'an invasion which was in many ways the very model of a truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another' (p. 42).
- 31 Several of the observations made by David Pirie about 'Ozymandias', in *Shelley* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1988), p. 59, could be equally applied to Laird's poem. Amid the 'elaborate network of ambiguities' the poem contains stands one central 'monumental irony'. The structures depicted in both poems are 'a lasting statement' to the 'inevitability of change and the ultimate helplessness of all . . . megalomaniac dictators'.
- 32 I am grateful to my co-editor, Scott Brewster, for this insight.
- 33 A later poem, 'The Layered' (p. 28), finds the poet again playing name-games.
- 34 Said, in *Orientalism*, p. 227, maintains that westerners like Kipling, Layard and Bell fell easily into 'the culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalisations' in order to categorise 'reality', 'each category being not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation'.
- 35 Thomas Hardy, 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', *The Complete Poems* (London: Palgrave, 2001) p. 543.
- 36 With the head of a lion and body of a man, physiologically one such carving Layard describes is the exact opposite of Yeats's 'rough beast' in 'The Second Coming'.

- 37 From 1965 onwards Saddam Hussein used an eagle as an emblem for the Iraqi state.
- 38 The reference to ‘a preacher repeating his God’ may be an allusion to Palestinian leaders’ claims that President Bush had told them in 2003 ‘that God guided him in what he should do . . . and led him to Iraq to fight tyranny’: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4320586.stm>. See also ‘Bush puts God on his Side’, by BBC Washington Correspondent, Tom Carver, 6 April 2003: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2921345.stm>.
- 39 *Jonah*, 3, vv. 7–9.
- 40 *Ibid.*, v. 10. Somewhat imprudently, Jonah rebukes Yahweh for showing mercy and is subsequently taught a lesson. Jonah’s angry response, according to one leading biblical scholar, illustrates a xenophobic tendency in ‘postexilic Judaism’, a ‘narrowness’ which ‘frequently expressed itself in a hate of foreign nations’ and a ‘desire for their destruction’. See John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Chapman, 1968), p. 451.
- 41 This might be an allusion to the former Iraqi president, though Saddam Hussein’s father was a shepherd, rather than a cowherd.
- 42 Juliet Gardiner and Neil Wenborn (eds), *The History Today Companion to British History* (London: Collins and Brown, 1995), p. 73.
- 43 ‘Signs are taken for wonders’, from ‘Gerontion’ (1919), *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 37. The post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha appropriated the phrase for the title of a key essay in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 44 ‘The Evening Forecast for the Region’ (pp. 53–4) includes further allusions to the war in Iraq. At its close, the speaker decries how ‘the white so loves the world it tries to make a map of it / exact and blank’.
- 45 John Redmond, *Tower Poetry* (February 2005), www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/february2005/laird.html (accessed 6 October 2008).
- 46 Leontia Flynn, ‘My Dream Mentor’, *These Days* (London: Cape, 2004), p. 20.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 50 Alan Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2004), p. 55.
- 51 Two of Gillis’s precursors in depicting reverse versions of history are Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: Dell, 1991 [1969]), p. 74, and Martin Amis in *Time’s Arrow* (London: Vintage, 1992).