

## Death of a Naturalist

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townland; green and heavy headed  
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.  
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.  
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles  
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.  
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,  
But best of all was the warm thick slobber  
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water  
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring  
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied  
Specks to range on window-sills at home,  
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until  
The fattening dots burst into nimble-  
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how  
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog  
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog  
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was  
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too  
For they were yellow in the sun and brown  
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank  
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs  
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges  
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard  
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.  
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked  
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:  
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat  
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

## Whinlands

All year round the whin  
Can show a blossom or two  
But it's in full bloom now.  
As if the small yolk stain

>From all the birds' eggs in  
All the nests of the spring  
Were spiked and hung  
Everywhere on bushes to ripen.

Hills oxidize gold.  
Above the smoulder of green shoot  
And dross of dead thorns underfoot  
The blossoms scald.

Put a match under  
Whins, they go up of a sudden.  
They make no flame in the sun  
But a fierce heat tremor

Yet incineration like that  
Only takes the thorn,  
The tough sticks don't burn,  
Remain like bone, charred horn.

Gilt, jaggy, springy, frilled  
This stunted, dry richness  
Persists on hills, near stone ditches,  
Over flintbed and battlefield.

## The Other Side

I

Thigh-deep in sedge and marigolds,  
a neighbour laid his shadow  
on the stream, vouching

'It's as poor as Lazarus, that ground,'  
and brushed away  
among the shaken leafage.

I lay where his lea sloped  
to meet our fallow,  
nested on moss and rushes,

my ear swallowing  
his fabulous, biblical dismissal,  
that tongue of chosen people.

When he would stand like that  
on the other side, white-haired,  
swinging his blackthorn

at the marsh weeds,  
he prophesied above our scraggy acres,  
then turned away

towards his promised furrows  
on the hill, a wake of pollen  
drifting to our bank, next season's tares.

II

For days we would rehearse  
each patriarchal dictum:  
Lazarus, the Pharaoh, Solomon  
and David and Goliath rolled  
magnificently, like loads of hay  
too big for our small lanes,

or faltered on a rut --  
'Your side of the house, I believe,

hardly rule by the Book at all.'

His brain was a whitewashed kitchen  
hung with texts, swept tidy  
as the body o' the kirk.

III

Then sometimes when the rosary was dragging  
mournfully on in the kitchen  
we would hear his step round the gable

though not until after the litany  
would the knock come to the door  
and the casual whistle strike up

on the doorstep. 'A right-looking night,'  
he might say, 'I was dandering by  
and says I, I might as well call.'

But now I stand behind him  
in the dark yard, in the moan of prayers.  
He puts a hand in a pocket

or taps a little tune with the blackthorn  
shyly, as if he were a party to  
lovmaking or a stranger's weeping.

Should I slip away, I wonder,  
or go up and touch his shoulder  
and talk about the weather

or the price of grass-seed?