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Something to Write Home About
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The River Moyola flows southeast from a source in the Sperrin Mountains down through County Derry and enters Lough Neagh just a few miles from where I grew up. Over the years, the river has been deepened and straightened, but in the 1940s there was a ford at Lower Broagh and a trail of big stepping-stones led across from one bank to the other, linking the townland of Broagh to the townland of Bellshill. We used to paddle around the gravel bed on the Broagh side and I always loved venturing out from one stepping-stone to the next, right into the middle of the stream—for even though the river was narrow enough and shallow enough, there was a feeling of daring once you got out into the main flow of the current. Suddenly you were on your own. You were giddy and rooted to the spot at one and the same time. Your body stood stock still, like a milestone or a boundary mark, but your head would be light and swimming from the rush of the river at your feet and the big stately movement of the clouds in the sky above your head.

Nowadays when I think of that child rooted to the spot in midstream, I see a little version of the god the Romans called Terminus, the god of boundaries. The Romans kept an image of Terminus in the Temple of Jupiter on Capitol Hill, and the interesting thing is that the roof above the place where the image sat was open to the sky, as if to say that a god of the boundaries and borders of the earth needed to have access to the boundless, the whole unlimited height and width and depth of the heavens themselves. As if to say that all boundaries are necessary evils and that the truly desirable condition is the feeling of being unbounded, of being king of infinite space. And it is that double capacity that we possess as human beings—the capacity to be attracted at one and the same time to the security of what is intimately known and to the challenges and entrancements of what is

beyond us—it is this double capacity that poetry springs from and addresses. A good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air simultaneously.

The word ‘terminus’ appears as *tearmann* in many Irish place-names, meaning the glebe land belonging to an abbey or a church, land that was specially marked off for ecclesiastical use; and even though there were no places called Termon in the Moyola district, I knew in my bones from very early on that the Moyola itself was a very definite *terminus*, a marker off of one place from another. I knew it when I stood on the stepping-stone but also when I stood on the bridge that spanned the river at Castledawson. I loved to hang over the range wall and look directly down at the flow where the trout were darting about and the riverweed waved like a streamer under the stream. On one side of me was the village of Castledawson, where my mother’s people lived in a terrace house, with a trellis of roses over the front pathway and a vegetable garden at the back. My grandparents’ house in Castledawson could have been in any spick-and-span English mill village, any working-class terrace where the factory workers came and went to the sound of the factory horn. In this case the factory was Clarke’s linen mill and the horn blew morning and evening, at eight and at six, first to call the hands in and then to let them go home. Home to New Row and Boyne Row and Station Road, up past the Orange Hall and the Protestant church, up past the entrance to Moyola Park, where the Castledawson soccer team had its pitch, and Moyola Lodge, where the Chichester Clarkes lived their different life behind the walls of their demesne.

All that was mentally on one side of the river; on the other, there was the parish of Bellaghy, or Ballyscullion, where my father’s side of the family, the Heaneys and the Scullions, had lived for generations. Their dwellings were thatched rather than slated, their kitchens had open fires rather than polished stoves, the houses stood in the middle of the fields rather than in a terrace, and the people who lived in them listened to the cattle roaring rather than the horn blowing. Somehow, even at that early age, I

knew the Bellaghy side of my life was not only in a different physical location but in a different cultural location as well. There was no pitch there for soccer, or English Association Football, as the game was more officially called. In my mind, Bellaghy belonged not only to Gaelic football but to the much older Gaelic order of cattle herding and hill forts; the village, for instance, had a fair day on the first Monday of every month: the streets would be crammed with cows and heifers and bullocks, the whole place loud and stinking with the smells of the beasts and their dung. It was impossible to think of any such unruly activity happening on the main street of Castledawson. Castledawson was a far more official place altogether, more modern, more a part of the main drag. The very name of the place is from the orderly English world of the eighteenth century, whereas Bellaghy is from an older, more obscure origin in Irish. So, as I once said in a poem—a poem called ‘Terminus’—*I grew up in between*.

I grew up between the predominantly Protestant and loyalist village of Castledawson and the generally Catholic and nationalist district of Bellaghy. In a house situated between a railway and a road. Between the old sounds of a trotting horse and the newer sounds of a shunting engine. On a border between townlands and languages, between accents at one end of the parish that reminded you of Antrim and Ayrshire and the Scottish speech I used to hear on the Fair Hill in Ballymena, and accents at the other end of the parish that reminded you of the different speech of Donegal, speech with the direct, clear ring of the Northern Irish I studied when I went to the Gaeltacht in Rannafast.

Naturally enough, some of what Philip Larkin would have called the ‘words of my inner mind’ come from that world back there between times and languages. A word like ‘hoke’, for example. When I hear somebody say ‘hoke’, I’m returned to the very first place in myself. It’s not a standard English word and it’s not an Irish-language word either, but it’s undislodgedly there, buried in the very foundations of my own speech. Under me like the floor of the house where I grew up. Something to write home about, as

it were. The word means to root about and delve into and forage for and dig around, and that is precisely the kind of thing a poem does as well. A poem gets its nose to the ground and follows a trail and hokes its way by instinct towards the real centre of what concerns it. And in fact it was the word 'hoked' itself that got me started on 'Terminus':

When I hoked there, I would find
An acorn and a rusted bolt.

If I lifted my eyes, a factory chimney
And a dormant mountain.

If I listened, an engine shunting
And a trotting horse.

Is it any wonder when I thought
I would have second thoughts?

It's hard to grow up in Northern Ireland and not be *forced* into second thoughts, sooner or later. With so much division around, people are forever encountering boundaries that bring them up short. Second thoughts are an acknowledgement that the truth is bounded by different *tearmans*, that it has to take cognizance of opposing claims. If one person says that too many cooks spoil the broth, another maintains that many hands make light work. If one says a stitch in time saves nine, another says there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. Ulster is British, says one; Ulster is *Uladh*, an ancient province of Ireland, says the other. On one side of the march drain, you say potato. On the other side, I say potato. Such contradictions are part of being alive as a member of the human species. But in Northern Ireland they have attained a special local intensity.

When they spoke of the prudent squirrel's hoard
It shone like gifts at a nativity.

When they spoke of the mammon of iniquity
The coins in my pockets reddened like stove-lids.

I was the march drain and the march drain's banks
Suffering the limit of each claim.

The word 'march' was one that I used to hear again and again when I was a youngster—but not in the usual context of protest marches and Orange marches and Apprentice Boys marches. In those days, in that place, the marching season was every season because it was the land itself that did the marching. The verb meant to meet at the boundary, to be bordered by, to be matched up to and yet marked off from; one farm marched another farm; one field marched another field; and what divided them was the march drain or the march hedge. The word did not mean to walk in a military manner but to be close, to lie alongside, to border upon and be bordered upon. It was a word that acknowledged division, but it contained a definite suggestion of solidarity as well. If my land marched your land, we were bound by that boundary as well as separated by it. If the whole of the liberating sky was over the head of the god Terminus, the whole of the solid earth was under what he stood for, the march hedge and the march drain.

In the kitchen of the house where I grew up there was a cement floor, and one of my first memories is the feel of its coldness and smoothness under my feet. I must have been only two or three at the time, because I was still in my cot and can remember taking the boards out of the bottom of it in order to step down to the actual floor. The boards were fitted in like slats but they hadn't been nailed down, and this meant they could be lifted out one by one—because, I suppose, they needed to be removable for cleaning every time a child soiled them. At any rate, I'll never forget that contact of warm skin and cold floor, the immediate sensation of surprise; and then something deeper, more gradual, a sensation of consolidation and familiarity, the whole reassuring foundation of the earth coming up into you through the soles of your feet. It was like a knowledge coming home to you. I was holding on to the rail of the cot, but it could have been the deckrail of the world. I was in

two places at once. One was a small square of kitchen floor, and the other was a big knowledgeable space I had stepped into deep inside myself, a space I can still enter through the memory of my warm soles on the cold cement. When my feet touched the floor, I knew I was on my way somewhere, but at the time I could not have said exactly where. Nowadays I would say it was to poetic discovery. And I would quote what the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Bashō had to say about the conduct of the poetic life. 'What is important', Bashō wrote,

is to keep our mind high in the world of true understanding, and returning to the world of our daily experience to seek therein the truth of beauty. No matter what we may be doing at a given moment, we must not forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self which is poetry.

Bashō makes the mind sound a bit like that Roman image of Terminus, earthbound and present in the here and now and yet open also to what Bashō calls the everlasting self, the boundlessness of inner as well as outer space.

The Moyola wasn't the only boundary that entered into me when I was a youngster. I used to carry a can of fresh milk in the evenings from our house to the next house down the road from us. This was—like our own—a thatched house, but unlike our house it was also a pub, and it is there still, more or less the same as it was in the 1940s, thatched and whitewashed, your typical picturesque roadside inn.

My journey from home to the back door of this house was short, no more than a couple of hundred yards, and yet in my child's mind I covered a great distance every time, because between the two doorsteps I crossed the border between the ecclesiastical diocese of Derry and the diocese—or more properly, the archdiocese—of Armagh. The diocese of Derry stretched away to the northwest, into Inishowen and Donegal, and the archdiocese of Armagh stretched for nearly a hundred miles southeast to the

River Boyne and the town of Drogheda on the edge of Meath in the Irish Republic; so while I felt safe and sound on that short stretch of the county road, I still experienced a slightly mysterious sense of distance and division.

Delivering the milk was a genuine expedition into an elsewhere. And the expedition gained in strangeness because the line that marked the division between the here and the there of it was more or less invisible. There was no indication on the road that you were leaving one jurisdiction for the other. But underneath the road, in a culvert that you would hardly notice if you didn't know to look for it, there ran a small trickle of water, and this water was part of a long drain or stream that marked the boundary between the townland of Tamniarn and the townland of Anahorish, as well as the boundary between the parish of Bellaghy and the parish of Newbridge, and then, as I said, the boundary between the diocese of Derry and the archdiocese of Armagh. The name of this march drain or boundary stream was the Sluggan, another Irish word meaning a marsh or a quagmire, and the Sluggan ran on down through a low-lying spread of old wet meadows and plantations to become the border between the townlands of Creagh and Leitrim before it emptied into the waters of Lough Beg, a couple of miles away.

Every day on my road to and from school I crossed and recrossed the Sluggan, and every time my sense of living on two sides of a boundary was emphasized. I never felt the certitude of belonging completely in one place, and, of course, from the historical as well as the topographical point of view, I was right: all those townlands and parishes and dioceses that had once belonged firmly within the old pre-Plantation, ecclesiastical geography of Gaelic Ireland had been subsumed in the meantime and been taken over and taken into another system and another jurisdiction. Many of the place-names I have just mentioned appear in a list of lands confiscated by the English after the Elizabethan conquest of Ulster, lands that were subsequently granted to Sir Thomas Phillips, the governor of what was then the county of Coleraine, in the period between the Flight of the Earls and the beginning of the Plantation of Ulster. The part of the grant which concerns me here is the

area known as the 'Lands of Moyola' and which included the names of Tamnarian, Leitrim and Shanmullagh—the old Gaelic name for the place we nowadays call Castledawson:

Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.

My left hand placed the standard iron weight.
My right tilted a last grain in the balance.

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

One of the great figures of Irish history in the pre-Plantation period was Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, the last native leader to hold out against the Tudor armies of Queen Elizabeth I, the last earl to make a stand and one of the first to suffer within himself the claims of the two different political allegiances that still operate with such deadly force inside Northern Ireland to this day. By English law, O'Neill was the Earl of Tyrone and therefore, in the understanding of Queen Elizabeth, the English Queen's loyal representative in the kingdom of Ireland. But by Irish birth and genealogy, O'Neill was descended from the mythic Irish leader Niall of the Nine Hostages, and to the Irish he therefore appeared as the hereditary leader of the Gaelic O'Neills, with a destined role as the defender of the Gaelic interest against the English. This is not the place to go into a history of the Elizabethan wars in Ireland, which ended with the defeat of the Irish under Hugh O'Neill and Red Hugh O'Donnell at Kinsale in 1601; but there is one incident that happened in the course of those long-drawn-out campaigns that never ceases to fascinate me.

The event occurred one day early in September 1599, after O'Neill's forces had drawn the English Army up into his own territory, in the wooded countryside of Louth and Armagh. The leader

of the English expedition was Queen Elizabeth's favourite courtier, the Earl of Essex, and the Queen had been ordering him into action for months before he had taken this initiative. But O'Neill was a master negotiator and a great one for putting off the moment of confrontation, so he contrived to get Essex to come for a parley with him, on the banks of the River Glyde in what is now County Louth. O'Neill was on horseback, out in midstream, with the water up to his horse's belly and his Irish-speaking soldiers behind him, speaking English to Essex, who was standing facing him on the other bank. Essex was under orders to pursue O'Neill as a traitor, but here he was in conversation, more like the old friend he had once been than the enemy he was destined to become—for O'Neill had been at the court of Elizabeth a generation earlier, and his patron in England at that time had been Essex's father, Walter Devereux, the first Earl. So, for each of them, this meeting by the river was a mysterious turn, a hiatus, a frozen frame in the violent action, a moment when those on either bank could see what was happening but could not hear what was being said. Both men were alone and exposed to the consequences of their actions; O'Neill was already regarded as a traitor, and Essex, by agreeing to a truce with him at this moment, was going to be seen as a betrayer by the Queen and in fact before the end of the year would be executed for treason. O'Neill's ultimate defeat lay ahead also, in a couple of years' time. But for the moment, the balance trembled and held, the water ran and the sky moved silently above them:

Baronies, parishes met where I was born.
When I stood on the central stepping stone

I was the last earl on horseback in midstream
Still parleying, in earshot of his peers.

There was no way, given their historical circumstances, that O'Neill and Essex could cross to each other's side. Their march had turned into something irrevocably military. They were at the terminus, in an extreme sense of that word. There was no room for

two truths. The brutality of power would have to decide the issue, not the play of mind. And yet as we think about the scene, we want each of them to be released from the entrapment of history. We want the sky to open above them and grant them release from their earthbound fates. And even if we know that such a release is impossible, we still desire conditions where the longed-for and the actual might be allowed to coincide. A condition where borders are there to be crossed rather than to be contested:

Running water never disappointed.
 Crossing water always furthered something.
 Stepping stones were stations of the soul.

I wrote the 'Terminus' poem in the mid-1980s, when the political situation in Northern Ireland was totally locked and blocked; in the post-hunger-strike world, when the IRA's campaign showed no sign of abating and the Thatcher government was prepared to live with what was termed an acceptable level of violence. Maybe that is one reason why the poem ends in stasis, with the Earl arrested in midstream and his opposite out of reach on the bank beyond him; the poem is saying that the inheritance of a divided world is a disabling one, that it traps its inhabitants and corners them in determined positions, saps their will to act freely and creatively. But before that moment and since that moment, things nevertheless were and have been different.

Nearly thirty years ago, for example, long before I gave any thought to Bashō or Terminus or Hugh O'Neill or the Sluggan drain and all that they might mean, I wrote a poem called 'The Other Side'. It began with a recollection of something a Presbyterian neighbour had said about a field of ours that marched a field of his and was divided from it by a little grassy stream, but then the poem went on to play with the notion of separation, of two sides of the march drain being like the two sides of the divided community in Northern Ireland—two sides divided by the way they pray, for example, and in little subtle but real ways (as I was suggesting earlier on) by the way they speak. The poem, however, ended up

suggesting that a crossing could be attempted, that stepping-stones could be placed by individuals who wanted to further things.

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 party to
 lovemaking 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?

There were times during the last thirty years when I thought 'The Other Side' might be too consoling. Given the actual conditions on the roads and the streets, I thought it might be too benign, too tender in the face of assassination and explosion, too hopeful. And yet the subject had called words from my inner mind. They had dandered in and reminded me of the possible boundlessness of our sympathies. In the end they reminded me also of what Bashō called 'the world of true understanding', which is always lying just beneath the surface and just beyond the horizon of the actual words we speak. They reminded me that the marching season

need not just be the season of parades and provocation but that in the ground of the language and the ground beneath our feet there is another march which promises far more creative conditions for the mind and soul. For it seems to me that the confrontation between O'Neill and Essex represents where we arrive if we walk in a military manner, a condition of stasis and embittered *rigor vitae* that hampers the emergence of a better future; but the encounter at the march drain represents the possibility of going out on the stepping-stone in order to remove yourself from the hardness and fastness of your home ground. The stepping-stone invites you to change the terms and the *tearmann* of your understanding; it does not ask you to take your feet off the ground, but it refreshes your vision by keeping your head in the air and bringing you alive to the open sky of possibility that is within you. And that still seems something to write home about.