



Three Poems

Ciarán O'Rourke
(<orourkci@tcd.ie>)

Citation: C. O'Rourke (2023)
Three Poems. *Sijis* 13: pp. 293-
297. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-
3978-14629

Copyright: © 2023 C. O'Rourke. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Introduction:

In Ireland, it is common for poets to turn to ancient Greek and Roman mythology for inspiration, re-inventing the classics in a modern form. While writing my second book, *Phantom Gang* (The Irish Pages Press, 2022), I decided that I would try, similarly, to incorporate a series of myths or fables into the collection, but with the crucial difference that the poems would use day-to-day news stories as their source material, rather than ancient literature and legend. Once I had hit on this idea, I became somewhat obsessed with putting it into practice. When read in a certain way, after all, the “breaking news” we consume – almost by the hour, in our age of advanced capitalist connectivity – can be seen to contain just as much dramatic conflict, as many faltering protagonists and faceless monsters, as the greatest texts of the literary canon. And the stakes, being real, are very often higher. By attending to present history, in all its violence and contradiction, I felt that poetry could learn to free itself from old mannerisms and encapsulate our world.

Whether or not they fulfil that aspiration, the three poems below continue the investigations begun in *Phantom Gang* – albeit with an increasing focus on the ways in which nature (including the climate itself, as well as the life and habitats of non-human species) is re-shaped and sometimes destroyed by the innovations of empire and capital, those two inter-locking systems that have so defined modern world-history, and which continue to frame our individual lives.

Incidentally, the title of the first poem, “Pigs’ Meat”, is meant to indicate the theme of that piece, but it also harks back to the work of the English leveller, Thomas Spence. After Edmund Burke had condemned the “swinish multitude” of revolutionary France in 1790, Spence founded a journal of radical writing in retort, called *Pigs’ Meat, or Lessons from the Swinish Multitude*. I owe my awareness of this little-known periodical to a certain John Patrick Flynn, an anarchistic Irish librarian with a love of revelry and an omnivorous passion for subversive culture (and much besides), whom I first met over a decade ago while working as a book-stacker in the windowless vaults of the library of Trinity College Dublin. As ever, it is in such spaces and conjunctions, unlikely as they may seem, that radical ideas survive and poetry takes root. Long live the swine!

“Pigs’ Meat”

Last year, three hundred thousand pigs
died out, in moving pens, before

the teeming abbatoir, their pre-
determined destination, could

chop their livid limbs to bits –
in the USA, a boring

butcher’s nation. Trans-
ported, head to rump, in cages,

and shuttle-trucked, en-masse,
for days, the vast majority

of cases – veterinary
minds surmise – gave in

to stress of heat, or frost,
to mid-traumatic panic, pain,

arriving to the slaughter slain:
a carcass, pre-deceased. The pig

a meditative creature, known
to regulate high temperatures

by bathing in the mud, temp-
eramentally disposed

to feeling understood, an amiable,
romantic thing: a birthing sow

will slow-assemble
detritus in a ring, weather-

beaten sticks and leaves,
to formulate a mound (the hollow

cavity within, a canopy
above) in which to settle,

lain a-side, waiting finally
for cries, a tiny mewling in the dark –

in which all pigs, today, do end.
When delivered to the factory,

a nearly million, furthermore,
were drawn across the killing floor,

their shivered legs not knowing
any longer how to walk.

“A Battle”

From Utah, USA, a skein
of avid astro-physicists
has engineered a scheme
to battle the disasters
of planetary heat –
by mining on the moon
a plume
of trans-galactic dust,
whose finely fired particles
(flung by rocket-shot)
will filter burning
solar rays, and mitigate
the horoscope
of the torrid earth ahead –
a bulletin and break-through
quickenning the day,
as deeper south, in red Chile,
the coarsened air already
shifts, re-altering its shape,
a smoke-blown russet-brown
the bare-kneed, running
children breathe, as hill
by hill the summer trees
go up
in rolling flames: a rapid
cataract of fire,
planting panic
in its wake – as crops
and cattle scatter
under ash, or merely die –
a raging vista
garishly conveyed
by a picture-man, in
tactical retreat, his quick,
consuming camera lens
amazed, in brief, (before
he leaves) by
a ruminating ox:
staring back, it stands
in statuesque paralysis,
left behind, unmoving,
among the omnipresent fumes.

“The Gift”

Darkly shining, reindeer-rich,
an iridescent province

glistening with stars,
the Sámi north

was lately re-discovered
by the rest: as a paradise

portfolio
waiting to be seized,

its shrubbery concealing
a fully laden seam

of rarest-earth
deposits underground: thus

conjuring new markets
for eco-industry

and bracketing
the life-span

of fauna running free –
in a region growing warmer

that Tacitus surveyed. Browsing,
macroscopic, partially

afraid, he saw the Roman
centre from the fringe:

the ancient
amber slopes, he wrote,

were peopled and traversed
by ragged, roaming tribes,

their bed the earth,
their clothing only fur,

whose merry fingers
plaited baldachins of wood

for shelter from the wind,
their pleasure, every season,

to investigate the deer –
better this by far, for them,

than groaning over labour
in the sludge, from year

to year, or straining
to domesticate

a station in the city,
straddling the brink

of poverty and fear.
Caring not for

either gods or goods,
or the modern disciplines

of men, they kept a kind
of happiness and gift

within themselves. They
never wished for more,

he said in near-
bewilderment, nor even

knew the meaning of *a wish*.