



## 'Windfall', 8 Parnell Hill, Cork

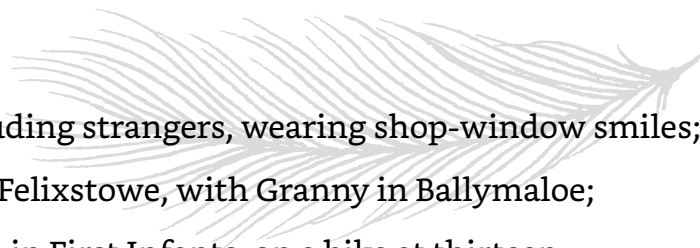
But, then, at the end of day I could always say –  
Well, now, I am going home.  
I felt elected, steeped, sovereign to be able to say –  
I am going home.  
When I was at home I liked to stay at home;  
At home I stayed at home for weeks;  
At home I used to sit in a winged chair by the window  
Overlooking the river and the factory chimneys,  
The electricity power station and the car assembly works.  
The fleets of trawlers and the pilot tugs,  
Dreaming that life is a dream which is real,  
The river a reflection of itself in its own waters  
Goya sketching Goya among the smoky mirrors.  
The industrial vista was my Mont Sainte-Victoire.  
While my children sat on my knees watching TV  
Their mother, my wife, reclined on the couch  
Knitting a bright-coloured scarf, drinking a cup of black coffee,  
Smoking a cigarette – one of her own roll-ups.  
I closed my eyes and breathed in and breathed out.  
  
It is ecstasy to breathe if you are at home in the world.  
What a windfall! A home of our own!  
Our neighbours' houses had names like 'Con Amore',  
'Sans Souci', 'Pacelli', 'Montini', 'Homesville'.  
But we called our home 'Windfall'.



‘Windfall’, 8 Parnell Hill, Cork.

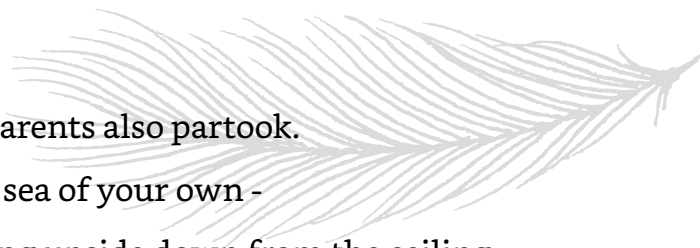
In the gut of my head coursed the leaf of tranquillity  
Which I dreamed was known only to Buddhist Monks  
In lotus monasteries high up in the Hindu Kush.  
Down here in the dark depths of Ireland,  
Below sea level in the city of Cork,  
In a city as intimate and homicidal as a Little Marseilles,  
In a country where all the children of the nation  
Are not cherished equally  
And where the best go homeless, while the worst  
Erect block-house palaces – self-regardingly ugly –  
Having a little home of your own can give to a family  
A chance in a lifetime to transcend death.

At the high window, shipping from all over the world  
Being borne up and down the busy, yet contemplative, river;  
Skylines drifting in and out of skylines in the cloudy valley;  
Firelight at dusk, and city lights;  
Beyond them the control tower of the airport on the hill –  
A lighthouse in the sky flashing green to white to green;  
Our black-and-white cat snoozing in the corner of a chair;  
Pastels and etchings on the four walls, and over the mantelpiece  
‘Van Gogh’s Grave’ and ‘Lovers in Water’,  
A room wallpapered in books and family photograph albums  
Chronicling the adventures and metamorphoses of family life:  
In swaddling clothes in Mammy’s arms on baptism day;  
Being a baby of nine months and not remembering it;  
Face-down in a pram, incarcerated in a high chair;



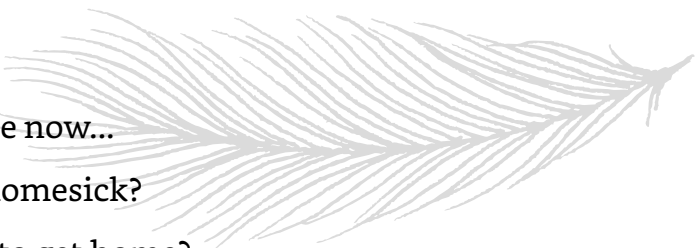
Everybody, including strangers, wearing shop-window smiles;  
With Granny in Felixstowe, with Granny in Ballymaloe;  
In a group photo in First Infants, on a bike at thirteen;  
In the back garden in London, in the back garden in Cork;  
Performing a headstand after First Holy Communion;  
Getting a kiss from the Bishop on Confirmation Day;  
Straw hats in the Bois de Boulogne, wearing wings at the seaside;  
Mammy and Daddy holding hands on the Normandy Beaches;  
Mammy and Daddy at the wedding of Jeremiah and Margot;  
Mammy and Daddy queueing up for Last Tango in Paris;  
Boating on the Shannon, climbing mountains in Kerry;  
Building sandcastles in Killala, camping in Barley Cove;  
Picnicking in Moone, hide-and-go-seek in Clonmacnoise;  
Riding horses, cantering, jumping fences;  
Pushing out toy yachts in the pond in the Tuileries;  
The Irish College revisited in the Rue des Irlandais;  
Sipping on an orange presse through a straw on the roof of the Beaubourg;  
Dancing in Pere Lachaise, weeping at Auvers.  
Year in, year out, I pored over these albums accumulating,  
My children looking over my shoulder, exhilarated as I was,  
Their mother presiding at our ritual from a distance -  
The far side of the hearthrug, diffidently, proudly.  
Schoolbooks on the floor and pyjamas on the couch -  
Whose turn is it tonight to put the children to bed?

Our children swam about our home  
As if it were their private sea,  
Their own unique, symbiotic fluid



Of which their parents also partook.  
Such is home - a sea of your own -  
In which you hang upside down from the ceiling  
With equanimity, while postcards from Thailand on the mantelpiece  
Are raising their eyebrow markings benignly:  
Your hands dangling their prayers to the floorboards of your home,  
Sifting the sands underneath the surfaces of conversations.  
The marine insect life of the family psyche.  
A home of your own - or a sea of your own -  
In which climbing the walls is as natural  
As making love on the stairs;  
In which when the telephone rings  
Husband and wife are metamorphosed into smiling accomplices,  
Both declining to answer it;  
Initiating, instead, a yet more subversive kiss -  
A kiss they have perhaps never attempted before -  
And might never have dreamed of attempting  
Were it not for the telephone belling.  
Through the bannisters or along the bannister rails  
The pyjama-clad children solemnly watching  
Their parents at play, jumping up and down in support,  
Race back to bed, gesticulating wordlessly:  
The most subversive unit in society is the human family.

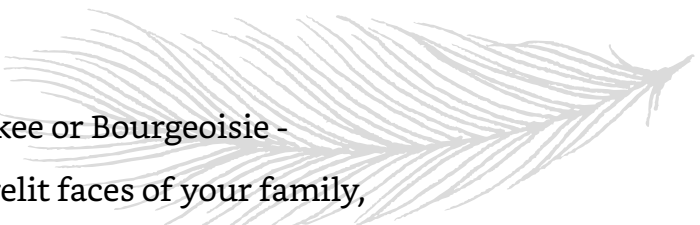
We're almost home, pet, almost home...  
Our home is at...  
I'll be home...  
I have to go home now...



I want to go home now...  
Are you feeling homesick?  
Are you anxious to get home?...  
I can't wait to get home...  
Let's stay at home to tonight and...  
What time will you be coming home at?...  
If I'm not home by six at the latest, I'll phone...  
We're nearly home, don't worry, we're nearly home...

But then with good reason  
I was put out of my home:  
By a keen wind felled.  
I find myself now without a home  
Having to live homeless in the alien, foreign city of Dublin.  
It is an eerie enough feeling to be homesick  
Yet knowing you will be going home next week;  
It is an eerie feeling beyond all ornithological analysis  
To be homesick knowing that there is no home to go to:  
Day by day, creeping, crawling,  
Moonlighting, escaping,  
Bed-and-breakfast to bed-and-breakfast;  
Hostels, centres, one-night hotels.

Homeless in Dublin,  
Blown about the suburban streets at evening,  
Peering in the windows of other people's homes,  
Wondering what it must feel like  
To be sitting around a fire -



Apache or Cherokee or Bourgeoisie -  
Beholding the firelit faces of your family,  
Beholding their starry or their TV gaze:  
Windfall to Windfall - can you hear me?  
Windfall to Windfall...  
We're almost home, pet, don't worry anymore, we're almost home.

### **Background:**

*From an interview with Ciara Dwyer in The Irish Times 18/10/2009*

Durcan studied archaeology and medieval history then went on to marry Nessa O'Neill. They had two daughters: Sarah and Siabhra. They lived in London's South Kensington then moved to Cork. Their life together is in the poetry.

"It's a cliché," he says, "but the fact of the matter is that Nessa changed my life, then Sarah and Siabhra changed my life. When Sarah was born, Nessa was the breadwinner. We were in a small flat in London. Nessa worked and I was at home with Sarah, then Siabhra was born a year later.

A couple of years later, we moved from London to Cork and Nessa finally wound up as the teacher in a Cork prison, where she was the only woman in the prison. Imagine the tension of going into an all-male prison every morning, imagine how fatigued she must have been, but when she came home, she would take over minding Sarah and Siabhra."

Durcan writes of their happy home in a beautiful but heartbreaking poem called 'Windfall', 8 Parnell Hill, Cork. He tells of the married couple smiling at

each other as they ignored the phone. "That poem is a recollection of all that they gave and all that they were to me. I left this poem out of other selections because at the time I just couldn't face the hurt and the pain of it."

I ask him how his marriage ended. He suffers from depression and I wonder if it was all down to that. He tells me that there is no simple answer.

"Hardly a day goes by that I don't think about our marriage. Though our marriage ended at the beginning of 1984, when I'm talking to myself, which is what I mainly do, I put the breakdown of our marriage down to my stupidity. I was simply plain stupid and not mature enough as a human being or as a young man."



*"My work as a poet has always been searching for the other place. The notion of "utopia" is fundamental to something about myself, and I think about human nature... All my life I have been looking for a Mont Saint Victoire. And it is no accident that most of my books have the names of places in them."*

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Durcan 'Passage to Utopia' in *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, ed, Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998)



## Summary and analysis:

The title of the poem gives the address of the home Durcan remembers with such longing. By giving the address, Durcan makes the poem specific to him. This is a catalogue of his memories and it is firmly rooted in one place. The idea of place is important to Durcan, who says that he has always been searching for utopia: a place he seems to have found – albeit sadly for a brief time – in his family home in Cork.


The poem opens with Durcan remembering a time in the past when, unlike the present, he could always hold onto the idea that he was 'going home'. The word 'home' is so important to the poet that it is repeated over and over again throughout this 137 line-long poem. The knowledge that he was going home made Durcan feel tremendously privileged – 'elected, steeped, sovereign' – and he loved spending as much time as possible there, looking down at all the activity in Cork city and on the river. Durcan describes this time in his life as 'Dreaming that life is a dream which is real'. His dream has come true and he has everything he could wish for.

There is a surreal image in Durcan's description of the River Lee as reflecting itself as an artist might sketch his self-portrait. It gives the river a rather exotic, artistic feel and raises it above the level of the ordinary in this poem where there is wonder to be found in the everyday.



For Durcan, the 'industrial vista' was his 'Mont Sainte-Victoire' – a mountain in France much beloved by the painter Cezanne who painted it many times. Durcan has said that all his life he has been searching for his own personal Mont Sainte-Victoire and here he says that this view over Cork city from his





happy home made him feel complete.

The poem moves from the exterior to the interior now as Durcan puts the finishing touches to a scenario he considers ideal: his children are sitting on his knees and his wife is nearby. There is a feeling of both ecstasy and relaxation here. Durcan can breathe easily because he is 'at home in the world'. The sense of belonging, of harmony makes life infinitely better.

Durcan turns now to the name of the house and explains that he and his wife called it 'Windfall' because they could scarcely believe their luck in having a home of their own. The simple beauty and meaning of this name contrasts with the aspirational and affected names of the neighbours' houses. Durcan repeats the address, almost like a mantra and he goes on to say that he achieved a level of inner tranquillity here that he had previously supposed to be the preserve of Buddhist Monks in 'lotus monasteries'. There is an element of humour here: even the most ardent lover of Cork could hardly compare its hills to the Hindu Kush mountain range, but the point is clear. Cork city is below sea-level and is 'Down here in the dark depths of Ireland' but Durcan is raised high by living here, so harmonious and happy is his life.

The poet is not so blind to the realities of life that he does not see the problems that exist in his home town. Cork, with its small centre and winding streets is both as 'intimate and homicidal' as the notoriously dangerous Marseilles, which is, like Cork, the second largest city in the country and also a port. Durcan is aware that not all of the children in Ireland are as fortunate as his and that many do not have a happy home and are not 'cherished equally'. He extends this social commentary to note that the inequality in the country means that even the best may be homeless (as he effectively is at the end of the

poem) while the undeserving rich can build themselves huge, ugly edifices. To Durcan, a home is such a blessing that it can make a family feel as if they are in heaven: it gives them 'a chance in a lifetime to transcend death'.

Outside, there is activity in the busy port and airport while inside all is peaceful. The family cat snoozes on a chair as Durcan recalls all the pictures and photographs that catalogue the family's life and interests. As well as art works and books, there are the more mundane but cherished photo albums which chronicle all the major events and changes in the family's life. There are pictures of baptisms, babies growing into toddlers, visiting grandparents, starting school and so forth. The images of family holidays and trips at home and abroad are the sort that might be in any album yet there is sadness in the descriptions too. Durcan begins lines 59 to 61 with the childish words 'Mammy and Daddy' and we can feel his longing for a family life that is over. Interestingly the places at which 'Mammy and Daddy' are pictured symbolise war (Normandy beaches - D-day landings), marriage (the wedding they attend) and 'Last Tango in Paris (a doomed love affair).



Familiar rituals, such as homework and putting the children to bed are seen now as something special.

The third section of the poem focuses on the family interacting with one another when alone. While the second section emphasised action, variety and the extended family, the doors of the house are now closed to outsiders and Durcan recalls the sense of ease and joyous freedom the family felt. This is

their home and they can do whatever they want. The home is like a sea in which everyone moves fluidly and freely. The place in which they swim is reminiscent of a womb. The 'symbiotic fluid' image could be a blend of amniotic fluid in the womb and symbiosis in which both parties benefit from the relationship (unlike pregnancy where it is only the baby who benefits!).

The home is a place in which the members can do whatever they are happy to do. Intrusions are not welcome and the parents refuse to allow their lovemaking be broken off by the telephone. Instead they decline to answer it and are moved to new expressions of love. Durcan calls the family 'the most subversive unit in society' as the parents and children are utterly united in support of one another's play, be it the adult or childish variety. The outside world has no influence here.

Durcan longingly recounts all the ways in which home is casually mentioned by family members and the ordinary phrases take on a new importance when we remember that he is no longer in a position to use any of them.

The poet's changed situation is described in heart-breaking terms. He admits that he was put out of his home 'with good reason' but now he wanders from place to place, feeling homesick but without the comfort of knowing he will one day be home again. He says this is 'an eerie feeling beyond all ornithological analysis' which may mean that he is like a bird without a nest or a place to roost.

In the final section of the poem, Durcan describes the emptiness of wandering around suburban streets, envying the families he can see through the windows of their homes. It doesn't matter whether a person is an American Indian or a middle-class European: home is the same for all loving families. He

calls out to his old home: 'Windfall to Windfall', almost like a distress signal. However, there is no answer and the poet is reduced to offering himself words of false comfort that he knows he will never hear again. The affectionate, soothing tone of 'We're almost home, pet, don't worry anymore, we're almost home' is ironic in that there is no home and no family awaiting him.

The name of the family home – 'Windfall' – was associated with a fruit blown from a tree at the start of the poem but now it is linked too to the image of something 'felled by a keen wind' and 'blown about the suburban streets'. We are left with a deep sense of sadness for a longing that will never be fulfilled.

