

The World Unmade by Frank Ormsby - read an extract

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We present an extract from *The World Unmade*, the new book by poet and Ireland Professor of Poetry. Frank Ormsby.

Subtitled Writings from the Ireland Chair of Poetry, in The World Unmade Frank Ormsby explores the poetic diversity of Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on the poetry of the Troubles. He draws on his own experience as editor of a literary magazine and a number of anthologies. He also explores the structuring of his next collection, The Tumbling Paddy, which extends the range of his most recent poems. He retains a sharp eye for the absurdities and fragilities of history, as well as its impact on the present.

A number of your poems focus closely on the world of everyday objects and small-scale things. Why is there such an emphasis on attention to detail in your work, do you think?

On one level it stops you being pompous. My most recent books are full of images of everyday objects such as tin buckets, rain barrels and scarecrows and these keep you rooted in the fabric of ordinary life. However, even from my first book, *A Store of Candles*, I seem to have had this preoccupation with the minutiae of day-to-day existence. There's a section there which looks at the small ads that you find in newspapers: 'The small ads give notice of a world / Where little is wasted'. The emphasis here is on how items that appear insignificant actually have an inherent value.

In a more recent book, *The Rain Barrel*, there's a poem called 'Small Things' about a trip to Belfast's Waterworks Park in search of a heron which had taken up residence there. I had recently come out of hospital and my daily walk around the park had become a small, comforting ritual during which I frequently crossed paths with a group of men I imagined were doing something similar. However, the heron was nowhere to be seen that day and the old boys obviously wanted to make up for the fact that I'd missed it, so they directed me to keep an eye out for the egrets instead. When life is fragile it's the small things that bring us pleasure: 'the old boys / in their baseball caps delighting in small things, / the small things made precious by their delight.' I suppose my delight in small things is also evident in my use of the haiku which is both compact and expansive. In the sequence 'Small World' from *Fireflies* I think the form allows me to reflect the extraordinary qualities of the ordinary:

Sensing a haiku

opportunity – those two

blackbirds, right on cue.

There's an interesting range of birds and animals in your poetry – from agricultural animals to wild or exotic creatures – and these seem to be growing in imaginative importance for you. Can you say more about why you gravitate towards animal life?

I think I'm conscious of the otherness of animals, and this is a stimulating, liberating experience. Many of the creatures that have found their way into my latest poems are not native to Ireland or have been encountered in another environment: racoons, cicadas, the rhinoceros, all appear in stylised forms in the new book. *Animals* feature in my earlier work too but even the cow sequence in *The Rain Barrel* registers that sense of difference – 'We never got used to cows, / the oddness of the odd / inhabiting our fields'. However, I don't devote much creative energy to thinking deeply about my own relationship with the animal world; it's the imaginative response that's the important thing.

Racoon

My favourite among the lone foragers,

he comes up out of the woods at dusk

as though he has had an invitation to dinner.

We retreat indoors and he goes head to head

with our trash cans, mounting the first

in what looks like rough foreplay,

then shouldering and up-ending and rifling

with a verve that sounds half-glee, half-hunger.

Avoiding a full-frontal with that muscular snout

we lock ourselves in the kitchen. He is dressed

for autumn in his mask and the grey-brown banded jumper

that almost makes him invisible.

Indifferent to our attentions

he makes off at last, a snuffling Algonquin, carrying

whatever his spree has yielded. He grumbles as he runs,

would not, even if he understood such matters,

forgive the world its unshared plenty.

One of the things that strikes me most in re-reading your work is how funny many of the poems are. Even recent work that deals with quite dark themes, such as your experience of Parkinson's Disease. Do you feel that humour is essential when confronting difficult subjects?

I've always had quite a dark and irreverent sense of humour. There are examples of this throughout my work, but the first that springs to mind is one of the Normandy poems which manages to deal with both the savagery of war and racism:

I Stepped On A Small Landmine

I stepped on a small landmine in the bocage

and was spread, with three others, over a field

of burnt lucerne.

The bits they shipped to Georgia at the request

of my two sisters were not entirely me.

If dead men laughed, I would have laughed the day

the committee for dead heroes honoured me,

and honoured too the mangled testicles

of Leroy Earl Johnson.

More recently, the humour in my Parkinson's sequence is a mixture of flippancy and defiance. There are undercurrents of anger and frustration but undoubtedly the process of writing these poems helped me to a sense of perspective, wry equanimity and the discovery that it's possible to get some enjoyment from uncomfortable truths. I have written about both the symptoms of Parkinson's, for instance the tremors and loss of my 'teacherly gulder', and the – sometimes worse – side effects of the medication such as hallucinations. This theme is continued in the new collection in the poem '*I appear to have mislaid*'.

I appear to have mislaid

I've got more to lose than I thought:

room-key, passport, pocket diary,

wallet, debit card, mobile phone,

the piece of paper on which I have written

my National Insurance number,

the piece of paper on which I have written

the first line of a poem, and the title

of a book I'm thinking of buying,

the pieces of paper on which I have recorded

my hotel registration details, my luggage ticket,

and the boarding pass for my flight home,

my reading glasses, the tablet to be taken

*mid-afternoon, my insulin pen, my security badge,
miscellaneous receipts and expenses,
a piece of paper with your telephone number and address,
a recent photo of you. Jesus, I'm tired. I would go to bed now,
were it not that I appear to have mislaid
the key to my suitcase. My pyjamas are in there,
I am almost certain.
I have more to lose than I thought.
I have everything to lose.*



The Poetry Programme

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It's interesting that this poem is full of missing pieces of paper with numbers, addresses, lines of poetry and book titles. A number of your recent poems reflect directly on the written word in this way. Can you tell us a little about your process of writing – do you return to earlier notes and drafts, or rely on new inspiration each time?

As I said earlier, there are some poems that come out almost fully formed, but there are others that I have struggled with, and still more that eventually spring from a single line or image that I have stored away. If the process of writing becomes too laborious you can end up with a

poem that is essentially inert, and that's tough going for the poet, as well as the reader, so sometimes it is better to leave a poem and come back to it. In some cases, I might have set a poem aside for years and then suddenly I think of a way I might complete it. This return to unfinished poems is an important thing for me. I edited John Hewitt's *Collected Poems* and learned a lot by going through his papers and manuscript poems. When Hewitt returned to Belfast in the early 1970s, he set about finishing unfinished poems from the 1940s that he'd kept in his notebooks for decades. Similarly, I wrote a sequence of poems about a part of New York State that I used to visit, Westchester County, but many of the drafts remained unfinished and I found myself coming back to them a year later, two years later, in some cases three years later. This is also true of some of the poems in *The Tumbling Paddy*, and I'm hoping by returning to the poems now I'll be able to bring them to their final state.

THE POET'S CHAIR

WRITINGS FROM THE IRELAND
CHAIR OF POETRY

THE WORLD UNMADE

FRANK ORMSBY

