The Cupped Field
Reading Deirdre O’Connor’s poems can feel like watching a sunset from a darkening forest where you are not quite sure if you are lost. There is that kind of sublime in them: an intimate, luminous lyric voice acknowledging a world in which we can never be sure we are oriented as we think we are. Written with great compassion, precision, and nuance, these gorgeously made poems face into the heartbreaks of time and loss, of selves and ex-selves. They loosen vision from its nostalgias, and “shake/ the cobbled order of ground,/ so silence [can] be heard/ clearly again.”
— Mary Szybist, author of Incarnadine

One of the secrets in the arts of the lyric voice is knowing what loneliness is. How to be alone and not alone at all. The Cupped Field is a book where lyric voice reigns. And so, it is no surprise that whether she writes about aging parents or relationships between lovers or dying of loved ones, about Greta Garbo or a deer that slammed into a car and now lies weeping on the road, Deirdre O’Connor always asks this larger question: What is the secret of our loneliness? “Loneliness is snow arriving by night,/ horseback snow, the clatter of hooves.” Yes. But also: “Loneliness is a loosening/ flock of starlings over a walled city.” Indeed. But then, again: “The self is winter’s luxury for the alone.” Absolutely. But she also sees “a serotonin bee, perhaps, a bee of loneliness.”

Deirdre O’Connor is an exquisite lyric poet. Open this book on any page—perhaps open it on poems like “Déjà vu” or “On the 365th Day of the Year” and you will see it. These are not just good poems. They are spells.

How is she able to do it? Perhaps because she knows that loneliness, for a lyric poet, is not just a state of being; it comes with a purpose. What is that purpose? To hear among the “mind’s countries” the music. What kind of music? That of mystery. The “mystery within trumping/ the mystery without,” yes. But also the mystery of how “we lie down every night without/ having seen our kidneys, never gaze/ upon our hearts; still,/ we sleep well enough.”

This mystery is the candlelit cathedral at midday inside these poems, yes. But there is also the mystery and music of a body sitting still as a body can, inside the illusion of time.

As I said, Deirdre O’Connor is an exquisite lyric poet. It is the truth.
— Ilya Kaminsky, author of Deaf Republic
The Cupped Field offers surprising and accurate images, exquisite observations, thoughtful and deep wisdom. There are some amazing turns of empathy, as when the poet enters the pain of the distant past and of the distant present. Her poem channeling a woman in the North of Ireland—“the absence of human strife// that she was never a part of// ricocheted// amid the architecture”—brought back and clarified my own brief visit to Belfast some years ago. In the poem titled “Sunflowers,” the heavy-headed flowers “. . . exude/ a crowded sorrow,/ like refugees/ at a fence. They make me/ think of backpacks/ crammed with diapers, toddlers in arms/ and eight-year-olds/ walking along . . .,” evoking a contemporary heartbreak. The Cupped Field shares with us the experience of loss, while also reminding us of the anniversaries we might celebrate of the days when those we love did not die. Here is a poet who knows that the mind is complex, a map of many countries, in some of which people are starving. The poet tells us that the mind resides in the brain, which is held in the skull, “the darkest place in the body,” yet it is “buoyant inside,/ thinking it swims/ in regions beyond itself.”


The Cupped Field reveals the pressure of the poet’s gaze turning everything she beholds to metaphor. So often the inner and outer world collide in these poems. Painterly in quality, they reconstruct a moment to hold “the mystery within” and “the mystery without.” The history of place, family, the difficulty of watching those we love die—these are just some of the subjects to which O’Connor returns. A gifted lyric poet, she frequently “unlatches us from time” so we may better comprehend the vexation of matters like memory and the mind. Yet her poems equally inhabit the present, her imagination expansive enough to encompass the politics of our time. Even when, for instance, O’Connor sits in “meditation” overlooking a seemingly pastoral landscape, her knowledge that others do not have the luxury of safety suffuses the poem.

— Shara McCallum, author of Madwoman
The Cupped Field

Poems by
Deirdre O’Connor

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Cleaver: “A Man and a Name” and “Self-Portrait as Autistic Sky”

Cordella: “Neighborhood Elegy” and “The Darkest Place”

Crazyhorse: “Relic”

Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies: “A Version of Her Suicide: In the North of Ireland”

Guesthouse: “On Seeing an Exhibition of Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka’s Glass Marine Invertebrates”

McSweeney’s Internet Tendency: “Domestic Sestina”

Natural Bridge: “Indelible Letter”

Pebble Lake Review: “If the Aspen” (as “Some Days So Far Off They May Be Today”), “The Yoke,” and “Notes for those who will spend a long time watching someone die”

Xconnect: “Almost Elegy” and “Premonition”


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Premonition

I

(far)

Itinerary: Lahinch
At the Site of the Laurelton Village for Feeble-Minded Girls of Childbearing Age
Garbo
A Version of Her Suicide: In the North of Ireland
Neighborhood Elegy
To Your Mind: Fill In the Blank
St. Patrick's Cathedral
Sunflowers
Self-Portrait as Autistic Sky
II
(near)

23  Meditation in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
24  A Man and a Name
26  Almost Elegy
28  Indelible Letter
29  Rock and Hard Place
30  Reprieve
31  We Must Become Our Own Mothers and Fathers
32  The Darkest Place
33  Domestic Sestina
35  Wake
36  Notes from the Periphery

III
(near)

39  The Yoke
40  If the Aspen
41  Loosening Masonry
43  Anniversary: One of the Days My Mother Did Not Die
45  Portrait of Him among Bees
46  Déjà vu
47  Aunt’s Lullaby
48  Notes for Those Who Will Spend a Long Time Watching Someone Die
49  The Continuum
52  Relic
53  Death Listens without Ears to the Language I Now Speak
IV

(far)

57 Say the Mind
58 On the 365th Day of the Year
59 The Future
60 Archival
61 Notes on My Death
62 A wafting pin oak leaf
63 The Burden
65 Ballycastle Meditation
68 On Seeing an Exhibition of Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka’s Glass Marine Invertebrates
. . . the marble ear, in which you always speak

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*
The Cupped Field
Premonition

Loneliness is snow arriving by night,
horseback snow, the clatter of hooves

on the street and their sudden
distance. Their muting also by snow.

Rooms not thought of in years
fill with revising and silence,

a white blocking the colors
of noise. The diffuse recollected,

dust in a bin, might be mine:
ancient motes and light, hurtling matter.

I feel the black and white sounds
of near and far, the sense of a red scarf

quieted, as if the blood had been wrung from it
in a terrible wash that did not include me.
I

(far)
Itinerary: Lahinch

Today I click
among flower artists,
a still life with dead fish,

a picture of waves crashing
on the shopfronts of Lahinch.
The white roses’ interior gold

vs. the scales’ whitesilver,
and how the Lahinch photographer
made the water flames:

the orange light of emergency
jostling chimneys,
slapping windows and doors

beyond the promenade
where wetsuits hang on racks
like sharks.

Impossible in repose
to say how far we are
from emergency.

Years ago, a deer
slammed into my mother’s car,
and afterwards it lay weeping
on the side of the road, the car
awash, she said, in glass and fur,
tears striping the face of the doe.

I shocked myself
by dropping to my knees.
Sometimes the body prays

without intending to.
Or one self sinks while the other stands
on shore, the ocean

closing over, its great rolling horses
corralled, a finger of sun
holding the horizon down.
At the Site of the Laurelton Village for Feeble-Minded Girls of Childbearing Age

No ghosts. Only witness trees
casting dark on lawns. Cool nets.

Rustles above, alongside.
Where the fields were, maybe,

green beans, cukes, tomatoes.
Where the grass now sways hip-high,

hips in cotton dresses swayed.
Where the orchards: pear, plum, apple.

Baskets of them in arms.
Where stone was lifted and made

an institution.
Porches painted white.

Can’t you see the ones called morons
mending dresses,

idiots shelling peas,
the deviant

berry-pickers, water-fetchers,
milkers of cows,
and those incorrigibles
who couldn’t be trusted

with a shovel,
weeding the long rain-loosened rows

on hands and knees? Scrubbing floors,
hanging sheets to flap

and then by supper
spread again on beds.

Can’t you see yourself
standing inside the corn

grown higher than faces?
How you might watch the whores

and nulliparae dance
like boys and girls,

music drifting
from open windows, curtains wafting

as if in a film and you alone
in knowing what you were

missing? No one seeming to notice,
no one bashing through stalks to lead you

back by the ordinary arm.