

Paul Muldoon, 'Cuthbert and the Otters'

Notwithstanding the fact that one of them has gnawed a strip of flesh
from the shoulder of the salmon,
relieving it of a little darne,
the fish these six otters would fain
carry over the sandstone limen
and into Cuthbert's cell, a fish garlanded with bay leaves
and laid out on a linden-flitch

like a hauberked warrior laid out on his shield,
may yet be thought of as whole.
An entire fish for an abbot's supper.
It's true they've yet to develop the turnip-clamp
and the sword with a weighted pommel
but the Danes are already dyeing everything beige.
In anticipation, perhaps, of the carpet and mustard factories

built on ground first broken by the Brigantes.
The Benedictines still love a bit of banter
along with the Beatitudes. Blessed is the trundle bed,
it readies us for the tunnel
from Spital Tongues to the staithe. I'm at once full of dread
and in complete denial.
I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead.

In the way that 9 and 3 are a perfect match
an Irish war band has 27 members.
In Barrow in Furness a shipyard man scans a wall for a striking wrench
as a child might mooch
for blackberries in a ditch. In times to come the hydrangea

will mark most edges of empire.

For the moment I'm hemmed in every bit as much

by sorrow as by the crush of cattle

along the back roads from Durham to Desertmartin.

Discart meaning "a hermitage."

In Ballynahone Bog they're piling still more turf in a cart.

It seems one manifestation of the midge

may have no mouthparts.

Heart-sore yet oddly heartened,

I've watched these six otters make their regal

progress across the threshold. I see how they might balk

at their burden. A striped sail

will often take years to make. They wear wolf or bear pelts,

the berserkers. Like the Oracle

at Delphi, whose three-legged stool

straddles a fiery trough

amid the still-fuming heaps of slag,

they're almost certainly on drugs. Perhaps a Viking sail handler,

himself threatened with being overwhelmed,

will have gone out on a limb and invented a wind tiller

by lashing a vane to the helm?

That a long ship has been overturned on the moor

is as much as we may surmise

of a beehive cell thrown up along the Tyne.

The wax moth lives in a beehive proper. It can detect sound

frequencies up to 300 kHz. The horse in the stable

may be trained to follow a scent.

What looks like a growth of stubble

has to do with the chin drying out. I straighten my
black tie as the pall-bearer

who almost certainly filched
that strip of skin draws level with me. Did I say "calamine?"
I meant "chamomile." For the tearoom nearest to Grizedale Tarn
it's best to follow the peat-stain
of Grizedale Beck. A prototype of backgammon
was played by the Danes. Even Mozart would resort to a recitative
for moving things along. Halfway through what's dissolved into the village

of Bellaghy, this otter steps out from under the bier
and offers me his spot. It seems even an otter may subordinate
himself whilst being first in line to revolt.
He may be at once complete insider and odd man out.
Columbanus is said to have tamed a bear
and harnessed it to a plough. Bach. The sarabande.
Under the floor of Cuthbert's cell they've buried the skull of a colt

born with a curvature of the spine.
Even now we throw down a challenge like a keel
whilst refraining from eating peach-pits for fear of cyanide.
Refrain as in *frenulum*, "a bridle."
We notice how a hook on the hind wing of a moth
connects it to an eye on the forewing. A complex joint
if ever there was one. According to our tanners,
the preservation of hides involves throwing caution
to the wind. Their work permits
allowed Vikings to sack Armagh in 832. The orange
twine helps us keep things straight. I once sustained concussion,
having been hit by a boom in Greenwich,

and saw three interlocking red triangles on my beer mat.

The way to preserve a hide is not by working into it Irish moss or casein

but the very brains

of the very beast that was erstwhile so comfortable in its skin.

Irish monasticism may well derive from Egypt.

We don't discount the doings of the Desert Fox

any more than Lily Langtry's shenanigans with Prince

Louis of Battenberg. The 1920s vogue for sequins

began with Tutankhamun. Five wise virgins

are no more likely than five foolish

to trim a fish-oil lamp to illumine

the process of Benedictine nuns spinning and weaving yarns.

I don't suppose we'll ever get to grips with the bane

of so many scholars – the word *SINIMIAINIAIS*

inscribed on a Viking sword. As for actually learning to grieve,

it seems to be a non-starter. The floor of Cuthbert's cell is flush

with the floor of Ballynahone Bog after the first Autumn rains,

the gantries, the Woodbines, the drop scones,

the overflowing basin's chipped

enamel, the earth's old ointment box, the collop of lox,

the drum-roll of wrens

at which we still tend to look askance.

This style of nasal helmet was developed by the Phrygians

while they were stationed at Castledawson.

The barrow at Belas Knap was built before the pyramids.

Same thing with Newgrange.

The original seven-branched menorah's based on a design

by Moses himself. When it comes to the crunch

we can always fall back on potassium bromide
as an anticonvulsant. A chamomile tisane

in a tearoom near the Bigrigg iron mine.

Since the best swords are still made from imported steel,
the more literal among us can't abide
the thought an island may be tidal.

This is the same Cuthbert whose chalice-cloth
will be carried into battle on the point
of a spear. I can just about visualize a banner

of half-digested fish fluttering through the air
from the otter-spraint
piled high at the threshold of Cuthbert's dry stone holt.
A sea trout is, after all, merely a brown trout
with wanderlust. It wears a tonsure from ear to ear
like any Irish aspirant.

We'll still use the term "smolt"

of a salmon that first leaves fresh water for salt. Vikings will fletch
their arrows with goose long into the era of Suleiman
the Magnificent. A tithe-barn
often cedes another tenth of its grain.

We won't have been the first to examine
our consciences at Bishop's Cleeve.

Benedictine monks will extend their tradition of persiflage

far beyond the confines

of Northumbria. Long after the Synod

of Whitby has determined the penis-bone of an otter may double
as a tie-pin. A grave's best filled with Lough Neagh sand.

We use a guideline when we dibble

cauliflower plants so things won't go awry.

A calcium carbide "gun" still does duty as a pigeon-scarer

in the parish of Banagher, a parish where a stag

has been known to carry in its antlers

a missal, a missal from which a saint might pronounce.

Let's not confuse candelabras with chandeliers.

I'd as lief an ounce

of prevention as a pound of cure,

particularly when it comes to the demise

of a great skald. Coffin is to truckle

as salmon is to catafalque.

Could it be that both the trousers *and* the coat of mail

were invented by the Celts?

It's no time since Antrim and Argyll

were under Aedan Mac Gabrain's rule.

We come together again in the hope of staving off

our pangs of grief. An altar-cloth carried into battle

by the 82nd Airborne. A carton

of Lucky Strikes clutched by a G.I. on the bridge

at Toome. I want to step in to play my part

while the sky above the hermitage

does a flip chart.

Gray, blue, gray, blue, gray. However spartan

his beehive hut, Cuthbert has developed a niche

market in fur, honey, amber

and the sweet wine we'll come to know as Rhenish.

Sometimes it takes only a nudge

to start a long ship down a trench.

In 832, by most tallies, the Vikings did a number
on Armagh not once but thrice. I want that coffin to cut a notch

in my clavicle. Be they "lace curtain" or "shanty,"
Irish-Americans still hold a dirge-chanter
in the highest esteem. That, and to stand in an otter's stead.
The chiasitic structure of the Book of Daniel
mimics a double axe head.
As with the stubble, so with the finger- and toenails.
I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead.

In South Derry as in the coalfields of South Shields
a salmon has been known to dance along a chariot-pole.
In the way we swap "scuttle" for "scupper"
we're flummoxed as much by the insidiousness of firedamp
as our sneaking regard for Rommel.
I think of an otter-cortege
passing under a colonnade of fig-trees

barren despite their show of foliage.
We know neither the day nor the hour of our summons.
The same Cuthbert of Lindisfarne
whose body will be carried aloft by monks fleeing those same Danes.
Mountbatten of Burma. Montgomery of Alamein.
All with the same insignia on their scale-armored sleeves.
Refulgent all. From *fulgere*, "to flash."