

Poetry

By Harry Clifton

After many years abroad, Harry Clifton lives in Dublin and teaches Creative Writing at Trinity. Besides his many collections of poems, he has also published a travel memoir called *On the Spine of Italy*. His new collection, *Herod's Dispensations*, is published by Bloodaxe Books.

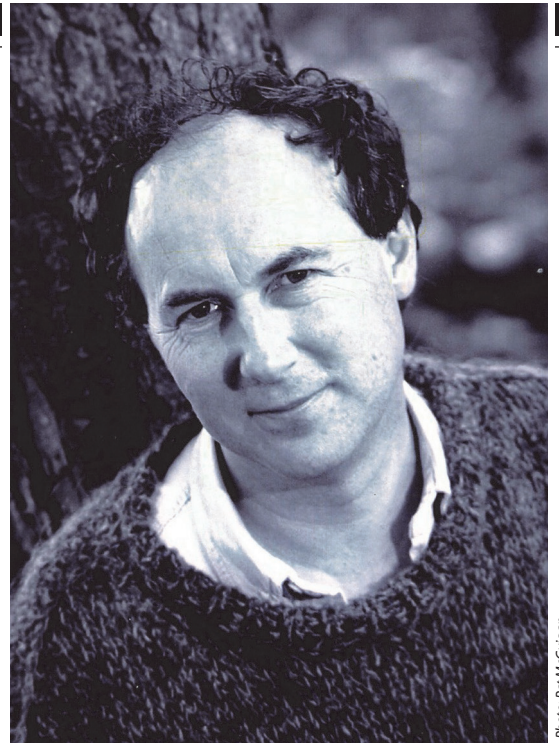


Photo: Pat McGuigan

MOTHER

You were shouting at me, from the bottom of the stairs.
 'Get up, get up, get on with your life!'
 I had no job to go to. It would be twenty years
 And various women, before I had a wife

Let alone dependants – and the rest, as they say,
 Was poetry. You were only a voice,
 The rest of you invisible. The day
 So far advanced, and the illusion of choice

Already fading, what was there to get up for?
 I could imagine you, though. Still can,
 Octogenarian, tense, on the ground-floor

Of a house with so many mansions, listening
 Even yet, for a single word of answer that might sing
 To the tune of money, and not scan.

WHY DID YOU NAME YOUR NEW COLLECTION *HEROD'S DISPENSATIONS*?

Originally this text was called *Art, Children and Death*, but the title was changed and the text dismantled by myself, and reassembled with the addition of new poems out of a sojourn in China. At this time the combined old themes of art, children and death, with the new themes of migration, decay of collective belief, and defence of innocence suggested *Herod's Dispensations*, a catch-all title meaning roughly 'the world as it is', and drawn from the sonnet *A Flight into Egypt* with the lines:

Protection of innocence, Herod's Dispensations
Transit lounges, midnight railway stations

HOW HAS LIVING IN MANY COUNTRIES INFLUENCED YOUR POETRY?

I come from an international (British-Chilean) background and grew up in mid-century Ireland, an ingrown self-obsessed country at the time. So, living in other places – Africa, Asia – was rectification of an imbalance, an attempt after 'contemplative' years at university to become 'active' in the world. Living in other places has given me constantly changing angles and perspectives on what would have obsessed me anyway had I never lived away – namely the search for absolutes in a world of relative values, as explored in an early poem *The Walls of Carthage*.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR TEACHING WORK IN TRINITY COLLEGE.

I love the gregariousness of teaching as an antidote to solitude. Being in touch with the young teaches you that nothing fundamental – love, loneliness, social fear – really changes. Their conflicts were/are my conflicts, give or take their lives in the new technology.