

**The Lighthouses  
Daragh Breen**



**Smithereens Press**

# The Lighthouses

Daragh Breen



Smithereens Press 14

*The Lighthouses*

is first published by Smithereens Press

<http://smithereenspress.com>

on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2016.

Copyright © Daragh Breen 2016.

All rights reserved.

Cover image: Nugget Point Lighthouse, 1870-1880s, Nugget Point,  
by Burton Brothers studio. Te Papa (O.026592).

Author photograph by Eileen O'Brien.

Text set in Calibri 12 point.

[smithereens.press@gmail.com](mailto:smithereens.press@gmail.com)

## The Lighthouses

*for Eileen*

*In a small hole in the ground  
wasps made a paper skull,  
congealing in miniature weirs  
as they piled over each other.*

*To increase the tight cavity space,  
the growing nest like a cranium  
pressing against flesh,  
the wasps carried water  
from a nearby puddle,  
secreted it against the earthen wall,  
then devoured the softened soil  
and deposited it outside.*

*Hundreds of wasps clambered  
about the moistened wall,  
a shoal tight in a dragnet,  
a skull lodged tight in the dark.*

Skelligs (High); 1826, inactive since 1870

Skelligs (Low); 1967, 53 metres, 3 white flashes, separated by 2.5 seconds, every 15 seconds

Storms offshore constantly shed their wave skins  
as the chasing shoals hover beneath the surface  
to feed on the scattered debris.

On the coast road to Dun Quin  
a white alabaster Christ crucified in the rain  
overhangs a sheer cliff  
with the grief of waves  
keening against the stone face below.

A fury of seabirds and gulls rise  
from out of the foam-frayed waves  
like blown snow  
and bring a blush of whiteness  
to the cold dark cliff  
where they rest and wait.

The storm-thawed light is the same distilled light  
as that of the travelling cinemas  
that once came through here,  
a sheet hung against the damp wall of a hall  
by representatives of the Lumière Brothers,  
Magi of the Second Coming of Light,  
breaking an egg-shape of white against a screen  
that began to leak human shadows.

This is where the ghosts come ashore,  
peeling the noise of gulls  
from their tired bodies like sleep,  
trailing tide-lines of salt  
along the winter beaches  
in their wake.

Mutton Island; 1817, inactive since 1977  
Aran North; 1857, 35 metres, white flash every 15 seconds  
Inishmore; 1818, inactive since 1857

Morning on Inis Mór, the musty rust smell  
of where ocean meets land,  
the gauze of drizzle snagging like cobwebs  
against the stone walls  
and the pre-history muscle-smell of bulls,  
creatures that broke free of the water one morning  
coming snorting ashore fully formed.

Dusk, just above the horizon,  
the sun is the blood-soaked reds  
of a foal's birthing sack,  
as it torches the water it becomes a bonfire.

The constant wind is a ragged gown  
that trails mosses and lichens across the bare rock.  
Lone trees, like soft wax  
blown onto the wind  
and stiffened in an instant  
by the cold of the night in which they are formed,  
keen in the drizzle for their landscape.  
Narrow tombs of stone walls stretch  
their bones around the tiny fields.  
Out on the water, random light  
plays on the surface  
making a lure of it all.

Slyne Head; 1836, 35 metres, 2 white flashes, separated by 2.4 seconds, every 15 seconds

Slyne Head; 1836, 18 metres, inactive since 1898

Inisheer; 1857, 34 metres, white light 6 seconds on, 6 seconds off, red light is shown over rocks to the East

Across the surface of Connemara bogs  
damp bricks of turf are domed in small piles  
like worm-casts on tide-receding beaches,  
in the coffin-still pools they leave behind  
the late summer sun sets, spilling its colours  
like a fall of Japanese sacred fish.

These colours, these wind-pigments of loneliness  
have been gathered by William's brother  
and layered onto canvasses of rural horse fairs  
and archaeological excavations of circuses  
rendered in rancid flesh, the soft mushroom flesh  
of the clowns' faces, drowned in earth,  
their red make-up smeared like haggish Ophelias.

Amongst the hillocks of rusting metal  
on the narrow harbour at Rossaveal,  
waiting for a ferry to the Aran Islands,  
three elderly Japanese women sit patiently  
in white wide-brimmed sun hats,  
they have come to see where the sun sets.

The low weeping waves at autumn's dusk  
slowly drag their grey manes back  
towards the lobster pots that  
the local women's ghost sons  
have lowered  
across the mouths of the inlets.

Tarbert Island; 1834, 18 metres, white light 2 seconds on, 2 seconds  
off, red light West over Bowline Rock  
Fort Point; 1841, 16 metres, white flash every 2 seconds, red flashes to  
South East

A murder of currachs  
like up-turned crows' beaks  
crowd towards the rocks,  
their tarred ribs shining  
shell-like and black in the rain,  
the waves heave  
their meagre fish-catches onto salty shoulders,  
testing the strength of the long legs  
of their thin oars.

Cows were brought out to these small islands  
one by one, knocked over first on the beach,  
hooves bound and tilted into the bottom  
of the currachs, the men straining on their oars  
as they manoeuvred through the waves  
with these cargoes of meat screaming on their backs.

One island moved their new bull  
out to an isolated islet rock  
and listened to his groaning  
all through the night. His silhouette  
could be seen in the shadow-void of  
lightning,  
and then just as quickly fainting back into  
the pursuing thunder's darkening hail.  
At dawn they woke to witness the bull  
stumbling ashore on the strand, seaweed  
dripping from him, having swum the narrow sound.

One of the Blasket Islands' best known airs,  
'Port na bPúcaí', was borrowed from a  
lovelorn male humpback whale  
singing beneath a currach.

Bull Rock; 1889, 83 metres, white flash every 15 seconds  
Calf Rock; 1866, destroyed by a storm 27th Nov. 1881

Throughout the day, a winter's ghost moon  
can be seen low in the sky  
like a sea-chalked buoy waiting  
for the tide of night  
to give it substance.

A forgotten wall of lobster-pots remains stacked along a pier,  
their wooden frames covered in a mesh of patched blue  
and orange rope-work, a cobwebbing of fraying lichens.

Solitary trees bend their ragged manes  
into the wind and weep for the fishermen  
lost amongst the rocks a ghost's whisper away.  
The rain begins to move in off the sea,  
beaded to the wind like an armour,  
the brown mountains have random patches of snow,  
like moulting seal-pups, their old slopes leak white  
rushes of water like stigmata,  
Their hinterland is pocked with the cairns  
in which the winter sun sets daily,  
trailing fading light across the moist ground  
just as the ghost snail drags the shadow  
of the salt that killed him.

Out on the waves, Fastnet Rock lighthouse,  
its white gleaming marrow of bone  
straining amongst the storm waves  
with the infinite resolve of the four ghost elephants  
keeping the Rings of Saturn in place,  
balanced on their tusks.  
The swinging brightness of its light  
contains the fossils of all the storms  
that have trampled through its breached darkness  
as it is carouselled on the winds like a glinting talisman.  
The light is silent from without, but within,  
squalls rage constantly against glass.

Sheep's Head; 1968, 83 metres, three white flashes every 5 seconds  
Mizen Head; 1959, 55 metres, white light 2 seconds off, 2 seconds on  
Galley Head; 1878, 53 metres, 5 quick flashes separated by 2.5 seconds  
every 20 seconds

The sea is in its drowning colour,  
night can be heard loudly calving storms in its own dark,  
the bony dull skull of the moon is struggling  
against the black bulk of the clouds.

A crew of fishermen in their frail currach  
know that one of them will be re-born  
a seal before dawn,  
and Harpo Marx is in the Dursey cable-car  
swaying in a cabin of weak tin in the November sleet  
as he peers through the scratched Perspex,  
his nicotine-stained wings stiff beneath his trench-coat  
with the haunted Dursey Sound below,  
telling anyone that will listen to him that God and all his angels  
have flown south for the winter  
as the cable-car tumbles towards that tree-less island  
shaped like a muddied hoof-print  
in the wild snow of the waves,

*and then the vision of the badger,  
covered in soot,  
spilled from night's chimney,  
left heaped on the side of the road  
as we drove past,  
returning from your mother's funeral,  
and I was hoping that you wouldn't see it,  
but you were alone anyway,  
as if wearing a hood of wolf,  
and I felt that all I could do  
was to follow you  
bearing all the dead things of this world,  
and that all you wanted  
was hidden in the earth,  
clasped in a solid box of wood.*

Fastnet; 1854, inactive since 1904  
Fastnet; 1904, 49 metres, white flash every 5 seconds  
Baltimore Beacon; 1884, not lighted until recently

After the storm there is a wake-moon,  
low, glassy and globular. It has come  
to sit with the drowned.  
Leaving Sherkin Island in the rain  
the boat moves beneath us with a slow pall-bearers' motion,  
and Baltimore Beacon is alabaster-like  
in the fading wet light above us,  
a limb-less torso dragged ashore  
and resurrected on the cliff-tops.

And with us come the salmon  
returning to their ancestral spawning pools  
with their inherent memories of snow and ice  
encamped there like the announcement  
of the death of a king.

And then, like long thin oars, the sun lets down  
its light through the thicket of clouds,  
a currach on fire,  
and birds will be born in this sky  
and they will come screeching  
from its heat  
laying eggs of thunder  
amongst the rains  
when night finally collapses  
on the land.

*And then the high-tide comes screaming, washing past Achill, and 24 minutes later it comes howling past Inishboffin, through Tory Sound, 22 minutes later it passes Cleggan, it then swells into Clifden Bay 6 minutes later, in another 2 minutes it is climbing and clambering over the seal-born rocks of Roundstone Bay, and 1 minute on it gathers itself to swarm around Slyne Head, and then 10 minutes later it is washing past the Aran Islands, it is its own shoal, its own pod, pouring on and on*

*down through the rains it slumbers in to Dingle Harbour, and past the rusting guns and shipwrecked revolutions of overgrown Smerwick Harbour, and 12 minutes later it is lifting the dead surface of Bantry Bay, and 5 minutes later it raises the dying trawlers of Castletownbere with its twice daily, drowning echoes, and 2 minutes later it passes Schull, shouldering itself on past the white wingless angel that mourns over Baltimore, 3 minutes later it is spilling fish through Kinsale, before it splashes beneath the watchful glare of Ballycotton Lighthouse, having flooded past the industrial ghost pylons and steel ruins of Cork Harbour's forgotten industries, and on it pours, on and on*



Daragh Breen was born in Cork in 1970. He is the author of *Across the Sound: shards from the history of an island* (2003) and *Whale* (2010). His poetry has appeared in *Poetry Ireland*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Moth*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, *Cork Literary Review*, *The Penny Dreadful*, *CanCan*, *Black Mountain Review*, *Southword*, *West47*, *The SHOP*, *Acorn*, *Burning Bush*, *Cyphers*, and Poetry Ireland's

anthology *Everything to Play For: 99 Poems About Sport*, edited by John McAuliffe.

Daragh has been selected for the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series and has been invited to read at the Cork Spring Poetry Festival and the Soundeye Poetry Festival.



<http://smithereenspress.com>

[smithereens.press@gmail.com](mailto:smithereens.press@gmail.com)