

## The Strand at Lough Beg

*In Memory of Colum McCartney*

*All round this little island, on the strand  
Far down below there, where the breakers strive,  
Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.  
Dante, Purgatorio, I, 100-103*

Leaving the white glow of filling stations  
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields  
You climbed the hills toward Newtownhamilton  
Past the Few Forest, out beneath the stars-  
Along the road, a high, bare pilgrim's track  
Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,  
Goat-beards and dogs' eyes in a demon pack  
Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.  
What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?  
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling  
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?  
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights  
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down  
Where you weren't known and far from what you knew:  
The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,  
Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew.

There you used hear guns fired behind the house  
Long before rising time, when duck shooters  
Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes,  
But still were scared to find spent cartridges,  
Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected,  
On your way across the strand to fetch the cows.  
For you and yours and I and mine fought shy,  
Spoke an old language of conspirators  
And could not crack the whip or seize the day:  
Big-voiced scullions, herders, talkers in byres,  
Slow arbitrators of the burial ground. Across that strand of ours the cattle graze  
Up to their bellies in an early mist  
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze  
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge  
Drowning in dew. Like a dull blade with its edge  
Honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze.  
I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss

Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

from *Field Work*, 1979