

CELIA DE FRÉINE

A GUEST AT THE TABLE OF LANGUAGE

Nílim in éad leo siúd a labhraíonn an teanga le húdarás—
a ghlacann seilbh uirthi dóibh féin, miotais á dtarraingt
mór-thimpeall orthu mar sheál lena nguailí a théamh.

Ná iad siúd a roinneann béaloideas lena ngasúir, ag míniú
cén fáth a gcaithfeadh fathach bolláin isteach san fharraige
nó a gciceálfadh bandia a fear soir ó thuaidh trasna na tíre.

Ná ní saineolaí mé ar stair na teanga ach oiread mar nach
bhfuilim in ann í a nascadh le háiteacha a bhféadfadh sé
go raibh cónaí ag mo shinsir iontu seachas Baile Fraghain.

Ná níl comhbhá agam leo siúd a deir
go labhraíodh a sinsir an teanga
sular ghoid cumhacht impiriúil uathu í.

Ní ghoidtear teanga ariamh: is ann di sna bólaí i gcónaí
ach scaití is gá í a aimsiú sna mórbhealaí is sna cúlbhealaí
sular nglactar seilbh uirthi—ag bealach isteach chuig

tochailt seandálaíochta, seans, áit a mbeidh pasfhocal
ag teastáil leis an mbacainn a thógáil. Breathnaigh
id anam, faoi mar a rinne mise, agus tiocfaidh tú

ar an bpassfhocal sin. Seans go dtreoróidh boladh
na céarach beach síos cosán chuig seomra órga thú,
faoi mar a tharla domsa, áit ar aimsigh mé bord

ar a raibh focail go barra bachall—ainmfhocail i ngach tuiseal,
briathra i ngach aimsir, forainmneacha, réamhfhocail, aidiachtaí,
dobhriathra, iad uile i ngach uile riocht. Áit ar shuigh mé isteach

ag an bhféasta is a rug liom, an scian mhícheart á húsáid
agam go minic, meá á hól leis an gcúrsa mícheart scaití, cúrsaí
á n-alpadh san ord mícheart—seans gur bhain tinneas boilg dom

ach bhí frithnimh i gcónaí in aice láimhe. Le fírinne,
is ait liom an dán seo a scríobh—
ní maith liom dánta faoin teanga. Creidim má tá tú

chun scríobh i dteanga áirithe, gur chóir coinneáil ort.
Choinnigh mise orm ariamh agus is dócha go bhfuilim
ag cur síos anseo ar an gcaoi ar éirigh liom é sin a dhéanamh.

An chaoi a ndearnadh cuairteoir ag bord na teanga díom—
duine a fhaigheann cuireadh ar ais chuig an bhféasta
arís is arís eile, tús áite á thairiscint di scaití.

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I don't envy those who speak the language with authority—
who claim it as their own, draw myths about them
as a shawl with which to warm their shoulders,

or those who pass lore onto their children, explain
why a giant might throw boulders into the sea
or a goddess kick her man northeast across the country.

Neither am I an expert on the history of the language,
just as I cannot link it to places my forebears
might have lived in apart from Freynestown.

Nor do I empathize with those who say
their forebears once spoke the language until
it was stolen from them by an imperial power.

Language is never stolen, it is always in the ether
but must at times be sought in the highways and byways
before being reclaimed—perhaps at the entrance

to an archaeological dig where a password
may be required that the barrier be raised.
Look into your soul as I did and you will find

that password. Perhaps then the scent of beeswax
will lead you down a path to an inner chamber—
as happened to me—where I came upon a table

piled high with nouns in all their cases, verbs in all
their tenses, pronouns, prepositions, adjectives,
adverbs in all their various manifestations. Where I sat

down to a feast and helped myself, often using the wrong
knife, sometimes drinking mead with the wrong course,
eating courses in the wrong order—I may have suffered

indigestion, but an antidote was always to hand. In truth,
I find it strange that I should write this poem—
I do not like poems about language—I believe that

if you are going to write in a particular language
you should just get on with it. I have always gotten on
with it, and I suppose what I'm doing here is describing

how I have done just that. Become a visitor at
the table of language—one who is invited back again
and again to the feast and at times given pride of place.