

The Interior of a Heron's Egg: Michael Donaghy, 1954–2004

By Joshua Mehigan

I once heard a well-known poet grumble when faced with the prospect of following Michael Donaghy onstage. The poet didn't offer an explanation and didn't have to. Those in earshot simply understood that Donaghy abundantly possessed a skill lost to most of us: He was entertaining.

I had the pleasure of watching Donaghy perform his poems multiple times, and from what I can gather these performances were representative. Right away he distinguished himself by reciting his poems, rather than reading them from the page. Ignoring the podium, he would step unassumingly to the front of the stage and begin talking. Those familiar with his work know that he relished a chance to blur the boundary between fact and invention. Thus, at the beginning of a reading it might dawn on a listener, after some impossible statement, that the wryly decorous tone coming from the stage wasn't introductory patter but a monologue.

His voice was gentle and intelligent. The lucidity of his poems, reinforced by that voice and delivery, lent his performances a plausibility not often found in the occult precincts of contemporary poetry. In Donaghy's early poem "Smith," the speaker rents a hotel room with a signature "practiced into spontaneity." That signature could be an emblem of Donaghy's art. With the adroitness of a good actor given good material, he conjured a vivid world of his own creation.

Michael Donaghy was born in the south Bronx to Irish parents on May 24, 1954, and raised in a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Some Irish Americans may find it easy to imagine the sort of upbringing he might've had: a father who could be prodded into comic recitations; convivial music; drinking; the specter of Irish Catholicism; and lots of storytelling, including plenty of lies redeemed by their ingenuity. This fantasy would seem to be corroborated by his poems, remarks in interviews, and public persona. Such an upbringing would have infused him with a romantic appreciation of his background. But the same sources show he had a realistic, sometimes cynical, appreciation of it, too.

Donaghy was an accomplished flautist and bodhrán player, passionate about Irish folk music. While at the University of Chicago (where he also edited poetry for the *Chicago Review*), he played in various bands, sometimes earning enough as a musician to support himself. He founded the group Samhradh Music and later cut an album with the innovative Lammas, who combine Celtic and Breton folk music with jazz. Music regularly appears as a subject in his poems. One whole section of his book *Errata* is concerned with music. In an interview, Donaghy's friend and fellow poet John Stammers once asked him about the connection between music and poetry. "For every jig or reel," Donaghy said, "it's as if it's been tested in the wind tunnel of memory. . . . And there's a perfect analogy there with the oral tradition in poetry."

In 1985 Donaghy published *Slivers*, a pamphlet that went on to form part of his first collection, *Shibboleth* (Oxford University Press, 1988). That year he moved to England to be with musician Maddy Paxman, whom he later married. From the start, he demonstrated an awareness of traditional technique that was unfashionable for young American poets. But in Britain he found that it had never really gone out of style. Alongside unrhymed free verse, Donaghy published poems in *Shibboleth* that rhyme and scan. Of these, many are relaxed enough to accommodate a sort of contemporary bardic quality:

Massive my heart, the heart of a hero, I knew it,
Though I was ten, pimpled, squint eyed, dung spattered.
(“Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night”)

And some are tight enough to allow for interesting rhythmic variation:

The slate grey cloud comes up too fast.
The cornfield whispers like a fire.
The first drops strike and shake the stalks.
Desire attained is not desire.
(“Deceit”)

Donaghy also published a few poems in an “avant-garde” vein of free verse. Most of his work, however, is either relaxed verse or free verse organized by some rhetorical or syntactical principle. And like his influences Elizabeth Bishop and Anthony Hecht, he experimented with the villanelle, the sonnet, the prose poem, and even the dreaded sestina.

For Donaghy, a poem’s conceit might be as much an organizing principle as its formal structure. He has often been called a latter-day metaphysical, a tendency found in such poems as “The Dreamer and the Dreamed Have Dinner” or “Machines,” which considers the parallel graces of bicyclist and harpsichordist,

Who only by moving can balance,
Only by balancing move.

In this closing chiasmus, suggestive of a renaissance lyric, the poet shares his straightforward pleasure in composition. Likewise in the charming dialectic of “The Present”:

For the present there is just one moon,
though every level pond gives back another.

But the bright disc shining in the black lagoon,
perceived by astrophysicist and lover,

is milliseconds old. And even that light’s
seven minutes older than its source.

And the stars we think we see on moonless nights
are long extinguished. And, of course,

this very moment, as you read this line,
is literally gone before you know it.

Forget the here-and-now. We have no time
but this device of wantonness and wit.

Make me this present then: your hand in mine,
and we’ll live out our lives in it.

Many of his early poems reveal just such a refreshing courteousness and purity of design. But this is only one aspect of this poet's complex style. *Shibboleth* echoes some more recent writers, as well, such as Cummings, Borges, and Auden. These echoes nearly always drew Donaghy into fresh territory. Also, with poems like "Analysand," "Smith," and "Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night," the poet began to explore the dramatic narrative mode that would figure so prominently in his performances.

Shibboleth won the Whitbread and Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prizes. Donaghy soon joined the vanguard of the British poetry scene, publishing poems in the *TLS*, *Poetry Review*, and *Guardian*. He also began publishing in important American magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*.

Errata (Oxford University Press, 1993)¹, his second volume, was chosen by Michael Longley, John Osborne, and company for the Poetry Society's 'New Generation' promotion, along with books by Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Glyn Maxwell, and sixteen others. Donaghy later dismissed the promotion, which he compared to television executives' attempt "to manufacture the Monkees as a pop group."

In *Errata*, Donaghy continued to mix fact and invention, exploiting the ambiguities of unbelievable reality and believable fiction. Was there really a Sligo fiddler named Jack O'Ryan who froze in Central Park? Is there really a species of worm that blossoms into a flower? Were there really "incense contests" in Heain-era Japan? And should we believe the title of the book's third section, "True"? In an endnote, the poet assures us that "[m]ost of it is," but then begins the section with "The Chamber of Errors" ("It never gets as crowded as Tussaud's.")

Certain lines and strategies from *Errata* could pass equally well for one brand of postmodernism or for lost Lewis Carroll. But his characters' stories and his speakers' inner lives are so thoroughly imagined that the resultant poems are inevitable and true in the larger sense abandoned by postmodernists. Donaghy acknowledged this cherished method in a discussion with Mick Delap of *Magma Poetry*: "No matter how hard we 'tell the truth,' we're fictionalizing. . . . I'm never aiming at a documentary truth."

Among the many narratives and monologues of *Errata* is my favorite of Donaghy's lyrics, "A Discourse on Optics." The first section, "The Heirloom," is a stunning example of the poet's rare ease with ideas:

Now its silver paint is flaking off,
That full-length antique beveled mirror
Wants to be clear water in a trough,
Still, astringent water in November.

It worked for sixty years, day and night
Becoming this room and its passing faces.
Holding it now against the light
I see the sun shines through in places.

It wants to be the window that it was,
Invisible as pleasure or pain,
Framing whatever the day may cause—

¹ *Shibboleth* and *Errata* have been reprinted in a single volume, *Dances Learned Last Night: Poems 1975–1995* (Picador, 2000).

The moon. A face. Rain.

I'll prop it up outside against the skip
So clouds can ghost across the rust.
Though I can't see myself in it,
Still, it's the only mirror that I trust.

Donaghy's final collection was *Conjure* (Picador, 2000), which won a Forward Prize and was shortlisted for the Whitbread and T. S. Eliot Prizes. It shows a poet comfortable in his own mature idiom. "The Palm" tantalizingly depicts a brush between two Belgian legends. Django Reinhardt, the endnote tells us, once stayed at the same hotel as "one 'P. DeMan'":

That motorcycle downstairs never starts
but, like a statue with a stomach flu,
disturbs him with its monumental farts.
His phone won't stop. His arts review is due
and must be in the post by half-past three
to make this issue of *Je Suis Partout*.

.....

Although he thinks she's buying out the town
the critic's wife sits on an unmade bed
in room 6, naked, as her palm is read
by a guitarist in a dressing gown.

Conjure is dedicated to Donaghy's and Paxman's son, Ruairi, born in 1996. The dedication page disturbingly quotes Horatio's lines from *Hamlet*: "It beckons you to go away with it/As if it some impartment did desire/To you alone . . ." The final poem, "Haunts," addresses Ruairi directly:

Don't be afraid, old son, it's only me,
though not as I've appeared before,
on the battlement of your signature,
or margin of a book you can't throw out,
or darkened shop front where your face
first shocks itself into a mask of mine,
but here, alive, one Christmas long ago
when you were three, upstairs, asleep,
and haunting *me* because I conjured you
the way that child you were would cry out
waking in the dark, and when you spoke
in no child's voice but out of radio silence,
the hall clock ticking like a radar blip,
a bottle breaking faintly streets away,
you said, as I say now, *Don't be afraid*.

December 27 1999

In 2001 Michael Donaghy came from England to teach at the West Chester University Poetry Conference. Quite a few American readers encountered him there for the first time. That year, and at the next two years' conferences, he could often be seen sidling through a reception alone, moving from group to group, smiling wisely. In social situations, he was charismatic and very funny. One on one, he was open, well-spoken, and kind. I learned this firsthand one night, at a party where we bonded over our common interest in hoaxes. I mentioned that I'd just read the *Confessions* of the Shakespeare forger William Henry Ireland. This sparked a long conversation, during which he told me about a few hoaxes of his own. I liked him immediately and, listening to him, felt as if I were being made part of a secret club.

That night, he recounted for me how he'd once overheard some women at a stuffy literary party discussing the Welsh poet Sion ap Brydydd.

"Wait a minute," he'd interrupted. "I made up that poet! He's not real! It's in my first book."

Silence.

"No, really, I made him up . . . the thing with the heron's egg . . . all that."

But they'd just ignored him, he said—ignored Sion himself.

The moving remembrances written since the poet's death confirm my initial impression. His friends Sean O'Brien, Don Paterson, and Katy Evans-Bush have written three of the most notable tributes. They are all well worth reading, and evoke a man who strove to build his life on poetry, music, friendship, conversation, and fun. Though we may respond with shock to the loss of such a vital person, we can also be grateful for what he has left us: a body of work as distinguished for its acuity, humaneness, and imagination as for its many mysteries.