



A Dirge

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Derek Mahon

A Dirge

Giovanna, Duchess of Amalfi, 1490 - 1520?

Your ruined prison belvedere looks down
from its high cliff on a thriving tourist town
in siren land, the sea-front strung with light.
I wonder does your ghost walk there at night
as we like to think, a lantern in one hand,
its grave-clothes rippling in a south wind,
murmuring in its bat-cave with a sigh
like the Cumaean Sibyl, 'I want to die'?

The high-pitched spasm of the ubiquitous cricket
shatters the dusk with its imperious racket;
sometimes on the horizon a cruiser shines,
the emerald coastline echoes with warplanes.
Harshness is global, cosmic; even as I write
old cities have been bombed during the night —
symptoms persist, and our sententious theatre
still flatters our perverse and turbulent nature.

No more apricots, no more chargeable revels,
you are brought down by inexplicable evils
and that body of yours, that witty face
buried by owl-light in an unknown place.
Even so we revel in the infection, flirt
with the corruption of a provincial court,
seduced by scheming web and flowery skull
and dazzled by 'I am Duchess of Malfi still'.

Exposing gleefully your strange disdain
to the weird violence of vengeful men,
a morbid cleric and a choleric duke,
your poet comes with his demented book —
and I too who climb to your hill-top
not, like the wolf, to find and dig you up
but to pay homage from our own violent time
to one who lights time past and time to come.