

London letter

Cian O'Neill ponders the impact of the Irish financial collapse on the renewed flow of emigrants and on the reaction and writing by this new Irish diaspora

As on the hills a windless fall of snow' was Ciaran Carson's translation from Dante's *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Cold and climbing breath spills from the mouths of passers-by in afternoons soundlessly withdrawing from the isolated clouds lain in rings of stratified chalk on a calm, cerulean winter sky. The solstice nears. Hamleys is all lit up with its raggetag wonders and white-netted Christmas trees lean-in in pockets about the markets of Camden, Peckham and London Fields like friends debating whether to take another draught of forgetting, go pay alms at the spinning

me-it-trick shine of a Turkish canteen, or traipse home where the silence is. Another year ends, for some their last, with some things incorporeal also lost to us.

For the dying of modern Irish self-confidence some would have to atone, someone other than the coining everyman who speculated on property and lavished credit on trash in a mad lolling rush for the laque and the luxury that matched Thatcher's 80's for grace. Once more now, the look to the door as the young and obligated go to other places, there to hum a broken song of exile, yet live.

For this, we have precedent and not all emigration was economic: Joyce left Ireland because he had to get to the heart of Europe, where cultural litelblood thudded in a hot rush of the veins in limbs unhampered by binds of church. Yet that church is now a ruin and what, masochism, one ponders, is this new Irish exile, imposed by our own despite the country having finally matured into a secular democracy?

Much of Irish literature from the last century and before gave succour to those leaving and those left behind from such archetypes as the priapic Bloom and the cenobite Stephen. The current question is what models exist for these new emigres, going out into a very different sort of world. An unacknowledged Ulster diaspora exists in Scotland that has yet to be written into our palimpsest of national identity, alongside the experience of the bright graduates now going to Canada and the Antipodes. Who shall sing their song is unclear and if the song is not given voice, the sombre continuity of an oral tradition dominated by loss will be gone also.

To journey home down small right roads of dark trees rolling and Christmas candles in windows is to experience one's own life as something uncomfortably close to cliché or an old butter advertisement, it was so established in Irish rou-

time. It is the first Christmas of many, however, to be so sombre and this lends that journey an odd aspect in contemplation.

Perhaps, like *il poeta fiorentino* quoted above, we are lost in the wood and the IMF is the leopard that bars our path. Perhaps, instead, the leopard is the spectre of our erstwhile greed that promised to lead us to a true horde – not Heaney's word-board, not our rich cultural legacy – but led us instead into the bosky dark, and to turn and try and devour us, as greed and leopards will. Brian Cowen, that minotaur trapped in a drain, is no Virgil. This we know. Perhaps there is no elder to lead us through, this all being fresh territory for a nation unaccustomed to money and patently, patently ill-equipped to deal with it.

Amongst the Irish in London an admixture of resignation and disbelief seems the norm. None know what to say, but to repeat that the cost of living even as a pauper in the Republic is insupportably high, particularly for its artists, who to its co-equal credit and shame were ever the prime export of the island. Be the blame on brands or bricks, services or sand, it seems clear that the economic policy and political class of the Republic must undergo some thoroughgoing abscessions, not merely the defenestration of Fianna Fáil.

Perhaps it is time for the young to take their country's custody from those who danced a gibbon quadrille to the rhythm of backslapping, while the house and all our future fell to dust. From the vantage of a financially skittish, gloomy London, the bailout seems an opportunity for Ireland to once more get real and take its fate in its hands. With the house bust and the young leaving, there really is nothing to lose. Ireland's survival may yet lie in that better idea, the perfected eidolon of a tolerant and bohemian island of Ireland which is imperishable, being of our keen imagining.

