

Tom French
COMPANY



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for my care

On Colonsay

Dram followed dram.
Small hours whittled the company
down to one, then nothing
would do him but to set out
on the journey nobody chooses.

They say he was playing
the version he always favoured
of 'MacCrimmon Will Never Return'
when the cave mouth
gaped and swallowed him.

True to that tune,
light nor sight were seen again
but what beat all was when
the dog fetched up.

It was shadow and wraith,
pared down, trembling, smouldering,
giving off something no one
could put a finger on,
haunting all the thresholds
and crossing none.

A week of that was loads.
Then sack and stone were got,
a boat, a dry night settled on.
He came when he was called.
Some said a snatch

of 'MacCrimmon' drifted up;
more, it was water at the prow,
oars in their locks, wind on all
that was there, playing its own air.

The Seven Wonders Bar, Fore

The biggest wonder is I'm here at all,
dividing my time between lounge and bar
and the forecourt where I slip out to smoke
among gas cylinders and unleaded pumps.

News for the Deaf comes on and I catch,
from elevated brows and flashing palms,
the whole world go to hell and up in smoke.
Here, apocalypse and inferno are postponed

or come so slowly as to cause no remarks
as I elevate a coffin nail in greeting
to the visitors home to the home place again
to air the ghosts, adjust the storage heating.

They will send me on my way or drop me home
after I've had my fill and they've sold me
a drop of milk for the breakfast, loose tea,
a piece of meat approaching its *Best Before*.

Still Life, Chancellorsville, May 1863

Orderlies with hand trucks, in time, will come
to bring this shambles to its resting place.
Daylight should not be touching them,
heaped against tarpaulin, lying on clay,

cast where no one can fall over them,
facing in too many directions at once.
There are too many for so little body.
Able and given leave, their bodies would rise

and approach and make them theirs again
without thinking twice or trying them for size.
Here is too little and too much of man.

This patch of grass is the altar in the dews.
This is the glory and the gospel loosed,
the wrath unstored, the trampling and the truth.

Cold Harbour, 3 June 1864

Men who were able to handle a pen
help men who could not and took dictation
and wrote by campfire on scraps of paper
names and the names of places they came from.

It was like being back in infant school again,
inscribing names on things to bring home,
and when that task of writing was complete
the writing instruments were set aside

and those who could handle a needle took over
to stitch those scraps to the insides of clothes,
to waistbands and turn-ups, seams and cuffs,
so corpses might be recognized and fates known.

Under the place's name the next day's date;
one, keeping a journal, wrote — 'I was killed',
regarded that phrase, then held, for a moment,
for the ink to dry, those pages open.