

# Tim Murphy

## *Donaghy*

At the eighth Conference on Form and Narrative at West Chester, I saw a fellow smaller than I, dressed in a black leather jacket, ruinously handsome in the way that a few men nearing fifty can be. I walked up to admire him and was astonished to learn that he was Michael Donaghy, whose work I knew from a broadsheet published by *Acumen* in Britain. I asked what had brought him across the Atlantic, and he told me, "I came to meet Dick Davis, Sam Gwynn and you."

That night Michael would recite brilliantly to the assembly, but even many rows back in the auditorium, Alan and I could see that the poet looked deathly pale. Afterward we found our host Michael Peich with Donaghy in the lobby. They were about to leave for the hospital. Donaghy had suffered something worse than an attack of stage fright. His cardiac arrhythmia was acting up—despite his youthful looks, the poet was prematurely afflicted with ill-health. But arrhythmia affected only Michael's heart, not his verse:

### **The Bacchae**

Look out, Slim, these girls are trouble.  
You dance with them they dance you back.  
They talk it broad but they want it subtle  
and you got too much mouth for that.  
Their secret groove's their sacred grove —  
not clever not ever, nor loud, nor flaunt.  
I know you, Slim, you're a jerk for love.  
The way you talk is the what you want.  
You want numbers. You want names.  
You want to cheat at rouge et noir.

But these are initiated dames —  
the how they move is the what they are.

Michael's verse was jazzy it was sexy. He loved to jar people. Like Greg Williamson, he was an inveterate mixer of diction. His mind channel-surfed the world. He would hear a song, see a woman, read of ancient Greece—and all these disparate things would combine in a poem. "Initiated dames" indeed.

Donaghy spent his lifetime in three great cities: New York, Chicago and London. In the latter, he achieved wide recognition for his verse, winning major prizes for both of his collections. A skilled flautist and penny whistler, he augmented his miserable earnings from teaching and poetry by playing traditional Irish music with a variety of bands. He certainly carried that musical gift into his poetry.

Eight months after I met Michael at West Chester, we spent some time together in London, where I'd gone to launch my second collection, **Very Far North**, for Waywiser Press. Michael was teaching night classes in creative writing for City University of London. I recited poetry to his pupils, then accompanied them to a nearby pub for a round of ale. We were both on and off the wagon, but Michael's idea of sobriety did not involve desisting from marijuana and cocaine, which I had abjured twenty years earlier.

Michael's poems are full of violence, vodka, drugs, and melodrama. He assumed unpredictable voices—one could never tell whether his personae were imaginative projections or shards of self. He also invoked his Catholic upbringing in bizarre ways. Religious imagery is everywhere in his poetry. A tremendous spiritual tension drove his work, and his life. Charles Martin's great title "For a Child of Seven, Taken by the Jesuits," would be perfect for the yet-unseen Collected Poems of Donaghy.

**Co-Pilot**

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness,  
Sitting on my shoulder like a pirate's parrot,  
Whispering the Decalogue like a tiny Charlton Heston.  
*Tch*, he goes. *Tch Tch*. He boreth me spitless.

Tonight I need a party with a bottomless punchbowl  
Brimming cool vodka to the lip of the horizon.  
I'll yank him from his perch and hold him under  
Until the bubbles stop.

Michael couldn't kill the God perched on his shoulder, but death found him suddenly last fall, during the happiest period of his life, when he had married and fathered at last. He had already anticipated and rehearsed his own end in an eerie poem called "The Turning."

**The Turning**

If anyone asks you how I died, say this:  
The angel of death came in the form of a moth  
And landed on the lute I was repairing.  
I closed up shop  
And left the village on the quietest night of summer,  
The summer of my thirtieth year,  
And went with her up through the thorn forest.

Tell them I heard yarrow stalks snapping beneath my feet  
And heard a dog bark far off, far off.  
That's all I saw or heard,  
Apart from the angel at ankle level leading me,  
Until we got above the treeline and I turned  
To look for the last time on the lights of home.

That's when she started singing.  
It's written that the voice of the god of Israel  
Was the voice of many waters.

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But this was the sound of trees growing,  
The noise of a pond thrown into a stone.

When I turned from the lights below to watch her sing,  
I found the angel changed from moth to woman,  
Singing inhuman intervals through her human throat,  
The notes at impossible angles justified.

If you understand, friend, explain to them  
So they pray for me. How could I go back?  
How could I bear to hear the heart's old triads—  
Clatter of hooves, the closed gate clanging,  
A match scratched toward a pipe—  
How could I bear to hear my children cry?

I found a rock that had the kind of heft  
We weigh the world against  
And brought it down fast against my forehead  
Again, again, until blood drenched my chest  
And I was safe and real forever.

Since my return to the Catholic faith, I have prayed for Michael's soul every morning and evening—the response he asked in “The Turning.” Through this disturbing work I hear echoes of C. S. Lewis' *Perelandra Trilogy*, where the Oyeresu (archangels) glimmer at impossible angles to the worlds they rule. I surmise Michael also had Stevens' Key West in mind. “The lights of the fishing boats at anchor there” prefigure the lights of the village seen for the last time by the young luthier as his death angel sings.

Above all, I hear the Bible, “the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying Alleluia.” (Revelation 19:6) Surely that is a source of Michael's unerring sense for lineation, something one finds so rarely in the fractured prose that generally passes for free verse. Donaghy is further proof of what R. P. Warren told me at Yale, and might also have told Michael in the Green Room of the West Side Y, when they met there in

1974: "Boy, if you want to write free verse, you must first learn to write formal verse."

The morning after his collapse at West Chester, Michael ridiculed the episode as "a gypsy wedding rioting in my heart." The previous day he had described his early job as a doorman in New York: "I kept my Hopkins hidden in my hat." Michael just spoke in perfect pentameter, and I tried for several years to write a poem about him. After his premature death, the unfinished project took on real urgency.

### **The Doorman**

*i.m. Michael Donaghy*

You kept your Hopkins hidden in your hat  
 to pass time when gypsy cabs were weaving.  
 A matron in whose presence hats came off  
 spotted the poet you were forced to doff  
 and whisked you to her gracious East Side flat  
     where thirty stories up  
     *Margaret are you grieving*  
     *over Goldengrove unleaving?*  
 her voice was tea poured in a china cup.  
 She bought you tickets to the 'Y,' that hall  
     where Eliot intoned  
 his *Four Quartets*, where Frost read *Mending Wall*,  
 and Dylan Thomas sang his lines half-stoned.

Busking for the supper on your plate,  
     you married Maddy late  
 as gypsy weddings rioted in your heart,  
 that tympanum where all our meters start.  
 A frail expatriate,  
 you wowed the 'Y.' Your patroness returned  
 to hear firsthand how much her guest had learned.  
 She watched you springing for the microphone  
     to read without a text,  
 master of pacing, phrasing, pitch and tone.  
 Pity the poor bastard who went next,

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yet even he is grieving  
your prematurely leaving  
a stage so few could ever wholly own.

It is a great grief that the angel of death took Michael in his fiftieth year; but *grace a Dieu*, he graced this world for two decades beyond the young luthier's age before *his* turning. The body of work Michael left us, with its "inhuman intervals," is "safe and real forever."

There was an outpouring of grief after Michael's death. Our friend Katy Evans-Bush, Michael's student and my colleague at the Eratosphere, provided me links to the London paper where condolences were offered. There were some memorable things said by minstrels and poets. Within days of the tragedy Paul Lake composed this reflection.

### **The Water Glass**

When water poised above the rim,  
He noted it was surface tension  
That held the audience and him  
Spellbound. That night, the whole convention  
Trembled on edge till Michael quipped,  
"What could a surface be tense about?"  
And laughter broke like water. Then  
He made a splash when he passed out.  
The doctors looking at his chart  
Were puzzled by the tinny tunes  
His organs made, but Michael felt  
"A gypsy wedding in my heart,"  
And we all laughed. Now it's as if  
With flute and whistle, he's danced off  
To join that gypsy caravan  
In noisy mirth, as dark drips down  
Night's tent, beyond the edge of town.

After Alan Sullivan came to my rescue and helped me finish  
The Doorman, Mister Gwynn weighed in with this:

### **For M. D.**

September 16, 2004

Younger than I, perhaps the braver man  
Or just the bigger fool, you kept on going  
Down the fast track. Wired and wound tight, you ran  
Circles around us all, Mike, surely knowing  
Someday we'd grant you, browsing through your pages,  
The same damned envious love we have for those  
Who've spoiled us with their terse and primal rages,  
Making our subtlest stanzas sound like prose.

Still, it's a lovely night, and these regrets  
Shouldn't keep us from one toast, you'd agree.  
I pull the cork, reach for the cigarettes,  
And tilt one for you, Michael Donaghy,  
Who spoke your lines like offerings to the gods,  
Cheating at nothing, nothing but the odds.

Paul and I were born three years before Michael, and Sam  
three years before us. Only Michael died at fifty. We are  
being given time to complete our work, time that was  
denied Mikey. Note Sam's words, "offerings to the gods." In  
the last three days I have earned Michael a plenary indul-  
gence which entails a spiritual exercise that I have reduced  
to verse.

### **The Dispensation**

My dear Lord, today is All Saints' Day,  
and the Church offers plenary indulgence  
to those who attend High Mass, who tend the graves  
of their forebears and confess their grievous sins.  
A mercy to be claimed or given away,  
it is my gift to Michael Donaghy

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for whom this day my unearthly love begins:  
a fine poet who is beyond condolence.  
Bless me Father, and let me not withhold  
my shameful sins, not that I ever would.  
Today I laid roses where headstones stood  
marking the burial plots of my most dear  
whom Jesus Christ already surely saves,  
who on the Last of Days have naught to fear;  
but Almighty Father, my dead friend must behold  
the light of my Redeemer's countenance.  
Rescue the soul of Michael Donaghy.



## ***Father Jack***

A diamond willow grew beside a brook,  
roots undercut, bending above the bank.  
Carefully carved, it made a shepherd's crook  
for one who sorrowed at a bully's prank.

He stoked the campfires as his charges slept  
and the dreamt bear crept from its forest cave.  
Comforting the youngest when they wept,  
tousling their heads, he said "A Scout is brave."

Why he renounced his vows no one can say.  
Certainly not for leading boys astray.

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## ***The Bowline for Nicholas Robbins***

A young sailor plummeted from a tree.  
Stunned as though a spreader had cracked his head,  
he lay six months unmoving, nearly dead.  
To rouse him from insensibility  
a wise doctor gave him a length of rope,  
said "Bowline." The rabbit popped up the hole,  
and hopped counter-clockwise around the bole.  
Prayers had been heard, a mooring made for hope.

## ***Antiphonal Responses***

### I. Look Before You Leap

Solitary confinement with your tears?  
If hope and love elude you, live in dread  
of what awaits your killer when you're dead:  
grief measured in eons, not in years.

### II. Prayer for Sobriety

Here is the sacramental cup we drink,  
here the unleavened loaf on which we dine,  
deliverance from the sins to which I sink.  
Here is the book, the work of my Divine  
Redeemer at whose Word the worlds revolve.  
Let me return His passion with resolve.

### III. The Reversion

Born to go astray,  
I fled the Catholic fold  
when I was twelve years old,  
a lamb who ran away,  
prey to the wolves, the cold.

My shepherd piped me home.  
Filing into a pew,  
I learned what Caesar knew:  
all roads lead to Rome  
where wolves are mothers too.

### IV. The Climb

The summit loomed above  
a muddy trail he trod.  
Sex led him to love,  
and love led him to God.

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V. Surrender  
Matthew 10:34

To wield  
a sword?  
My Lord,  
I yield.

VI. "As for Man..."  
Psalm 103:15

To every field, a flower.  
To every scythe, a pass  
where voles and angels cower.  
To every gale, the grass.

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**Tim Murphy's** latest books are *Beowulf, A Critical Edition*, a collaboration with Alan Sullivan which AB Longman published, and *Very Far North*, which came out from Waywiser in London. Last year, he "confessed to 35 years of mortal sins."