

**A Sample chapter from Adam Wyeth's new book
The Hidden World of Poetry: *Unravelling Celtic
mythology in Contemporary Irish Poetry***

Myths which are believed in tend to become true.

George Orwell

Badb

I was walking where the woods begin
with an almost sheer drop to the river
– so that I was eye level with the tops
of nearby trees and higher than the branch
when I came upon the crow sitting there,
so close I could have touched her with a stick.
She was creaturely and unwary, as the wind
bore her away and brought her back.
We shared the same tangy woodland smells
the same malt-pale October sunlight.
Then I must have made a sound,
for she came alert and looked at me.
And in that interval before the legs
could lift her weight from the branch,
as the beak sprang open to deliver
its single rough vowel, she held me off
with a look, with a sudden realignment
of the eyes above the gorging mouth.
It is the look known to legend and folk belief
- though also an attribute useful for a bird
without talons or guile to defend it.
Then she was gone, in a few wing beats
indistinguishable from her fellows wheeling
above the trees, carrying on their business,

neighbourly and otherworldly.

Maurice Riordan

Maurice Riordan was born in Lisgoold, County Cork, 1953, and educated at University College Cork where he later taught. In 2004, he was selected as one of the Poetry Society's 'Next Generation' poets. He is co-editor of the anthologies, *Dark Matter: Poems of Space and A Quark For Mister Mark: 101 Poems about Science*. Riordan believes that poetry is one of the means through which the human impact of science can be registered. 'One of the things that poetry does,' Riordan says, 'is open the doors of perception, or another way of putting it –it increases our stock of available reality, enlarging our capacity to understand and take in things.'

This poem first appeared in a festschrift by Faber in 1995 for Ted Hughes's sixty-fifth birthday. It was later published in Riordan's second collection, *Floods*, a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, and shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award. Riordan's writing is deceptive in that it appears effortless. Michael Glover describes his voice in the *Independent* as having 'a measured delivery that never strains after its effects, but lets the words speak for themselves.'

On first reading, this poem may seem little more than an intense but otherwise straightforward encounter with a crow. But a little scratch beneath the surface of Riordan's subtle lyricism reveals it is in fact laced with Celtic imagery and folklore. Badb (rhyming with 'have') comes from the Irish for the shape-shifting warrior Goddess (hence Riordan's use of the female gender) in Celtic mythology, who often took the form of a crow (in some interpretations the raven), symbolizing the cycles of life and death, wisdom and inspiration. Sometimes known as Badb *Catha* (battle crow), she often caused confusion among soldiers to move the tide of battle to her favoured side. Battlefields became known in Ireland as the Land of the Badb.

Birds play a major role in Celtic mythology, figuring as divine emblems and messengers of the gods. In more recent literature we are reminded of one of England's most renowned poets, Ted Hughes (for whom this poem is written). Hughes reinterpreted the crow in a book-length sequence of poems that is perhaps his most notable work, creating an extensive folk-mythology of his own. In his poems, crow is a kind of man-bird – undergoing various adventures in a dark and disastrous world.

But even without these facts the poem has a ghostly allure that insinuates something more. Riordan opens the poem in a conversational tone. The sound-making of the first line with the 'W' alliteration, 'I was walking where the woods begin,' has a sense of the elements about

it, the 'W' sound creating a wind chamber in the mouth as the line is spoken; making us feel we are out there with the poet immediately – 'eye level with the tops/ of nearby trees'.

The writing becomes alive through the use of all the five senses throughout. First of all there is sight, 'eye level'. 'Eye' is mentioned three times in the poem as is 'look'. Then touch, 'so close I could have touched her with a stick'; and 'woodland smells', while 'tangy' suggests taste, as does the onomatopoeic, 'gorping mouth.' 'Then I must have made a sound' leads us into the crow's beak springing 'open to deliver its single rough vowel' – before the flapping sound of 'a few wing beats'. All this rich detail draws us into the piece as if we are there – looking at badb, the crow; so close we actually feel 'that interval before the legs/ could lift her weight from the branch'.

But another reason for the five senses is to take us to the next level, the sixth sense, which is the power of perception seemingly independent of the five senses. It is to do with our intuition, the sense of hunches and gut reactions, also known as second sight. This occurs when the crow delivers 'its single rough vowel'. In Celtic mythology, the cry of the crow was often interpreted as the voice of the gods. It also appears when the bird and speaker meet eye to eye ('the look known to legend and folk belief'.) This extra sensory perception brings all the mythology of Badb together. When Badb took the form of a crow it was taken as a prediction that someone was going to die.

The slowed down, zoomed-in detail of Badb, brings us closer, so we become aware of the power of Badb, as she holds him off 'with a look,' an oblique reference to the strong roles female deities played in Celtic myth. Then 'in a few wing beats' we see Badb retreat back to the bird world, becoming an anonymous part of the flock, 'indistinguishable from her fellows'.

As they fly above, they become symbolic of the spirit world. The image of the birds 'wheeling/ above the trees' gives a sense that they are part of the heavens. The poet might not just be 'wheeling' from the rushing up of the crow, but also subconsciously linking this movement to the Celtic idea of the wheel. The ancient Celts sometimes buried model wheels with corpses as symbols of the sun to light the way of the dead to the otherworld. To the Celts, the Earth was alive and sentient, both matter and consciousness. They venerated all natural phenomena, including water, trees and of course the sun – all of which are mentioned in this poem.

Ted Hughes was a great believer in the occult, and that poetry had a form of sorcery and magic about it. The Irish name for a poet is *file*; which root meaning comes from 'to see'. (The Greek root of poet is 'to make') The function of the *file* was not just to celebrate the tribe but to be divine seer as well – hence Riordan's use of the sixth sense here. In many ancient cultures,

poetry and prophecy were said to derive from the same source.

'Carrying on their business' alludes to the Crow's connection with the spirit realms and maybe also refers to a line from Hughes's first masterpiece, 'The Thought Fox.' In the poem, Hughes describes the fox as, 'coming about its own business.' It is a poem about writing and being visited by the muse. 'Carrying on' is also a pun on 'carrion':the decaying flesh of dead animals. Badbsometimes took the form of a Carrion Crow, most notably on the shoulder of the mythical warrior, Cú Chulainn, after he died in battle.

The paradoxical last line, 'neighbourly and otherworldly' picks up on a previous line, 'she was creaturely and unwary,' providing an effective juxtaposition, subtly suggesting the Celt's outlook on life after death that the otherworld is next door to us. Three years after this poem was published Ted Hughes died, adding another dimension to the crow's symbol of prediction. Another spooky foretelling is found in Riordan's line 'malt-pale October sunlight'. In poetry, the seasons are often a metaphor for age. (October here can then be seen as Hughes being in the autumn of his years.) Moreover, to the Celts, autumn/winter is when the strength of the gods of darkness and the underworld grew great. Hughes died on October 28th, three days before Samhain,(pronounced 'Sow' en') the eve of the Celtic New Year, the last day of October.*Samhain* was a time to celebrate the lives of those who had passed on. It is seen as a festival of darkness. The long barrows where dead heroes were buried in pre-Christian Celtic society are also the fairy mounds, which are supposed to open up at *Samhain*.

As with many pagan and Celtic traditions, it later became amalgamated into Christianity, and is now of course popularly known as Halloween, the Eve of All Saints Day. But many of its rituals and superstitions still survive in rural parts of Britain and Ireland today. Seamus Heaney, a close friend of Ted Hughes, said, 'A good poem goes that little bit further and leaves you walking on air...' or in this case – 'wheeling above the trees'.