



**WORLDY
POETRY**
SALTONY

poet Colm Tóibín

Martin Hayes musician

host Leonard Schwartz

date



location

**Stavros Niarchos
Foundation Library**

LIMELIGHT POETRY & NYPL PRESENT

World Poetry Salon III:

Colm Tóibín,
Martin Hayes
and
Leonard Schwartz

September 16, 2025

Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library



Limelight Poetry is a 501(c)
(3) nonprofit organization
dedicated to promoting world
poetry, founded in 2024 in New
York City by poet Wang Yin.
It invites outstanding poets
and artists from around the
world to share their work in
various forms, with the goal
of showcasing poetry in under-
represented languages. Drawing
on the city's rich cultural
resources, Limelight Poetry
connects poetry with other
art forms, fostering a global
exchange of poetic expression.
It welcomes audiences into a
vibrant and inspiring world of
poetry, music, and beyond.



Colm Tóibín

Colm Tóibín was born in Ireland in 1955. He is the author of eleven novels, two collections of stories, and a volume of poetry, *Vinegar Hill*. His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. In 2000/2001, he was a Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library. He is the Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University. In 2021, he was awarded the David Cohen Prize for Literature.

VINEGAR HILL

The town reservoir on the hill
Was built in the forties.
If you lifted a round metal covering
And dropped a stone, you could

Hear it plonk into the depths.
There were small hollows in the rocks
That, no matter how dry the weather,
Were filled with rainwater.

These rock-pools must have been here
With different water in them
That summer when the rebels
Fled towards Needham's Gap.

4

From the hill, as the croppies did,
You can view the town, narrow
Streets even narrower, and more
Trees and gardens than you imagined.

It was burning then, of course,
But now, it is quiet. There is,
In the Market Square, a monument
To Father Murphy and the Croppy Boy.

We can see the hill from our house.
It is solid rock in the mornings
As the sun appears from just behind it.
It changes as the day does.

My mother is taking art classes
And, thinking it natural to make

The hill her focal point,
Is trying to paint it.

What colour is Vinegar Hill?
How does it rise above the town?
It is humped as much as round.
There is no point in invoking

History. The hill is above all that,
Intractable, unknowable, serene.
It is in shade, then in light,
And often caught between

When the blue becomes grey
And fades more, the green glistens,
And then not so much. The rock also
Glints in the afternoon light

That dwindles, making the glint disappear.
Then there is the small matter of clouds
That make tracks over the hill in a smoke
Of white as though instructed

By their superiors to break camp.
They change their shape, crouch down
Stay still, all camouflage, dreamy,
Lost, with no strategy to speak of,

Yet resigned to the inevitable:
When the wind comes for them, they will retreat.
Until this time, they are surrounded by sky
And can, as yet, envisage no way out.

SURTSEY

It was a sound really, a kind
Of strain.
The wind blew in

Seeds and little bits
Of soil. Birds,
As they always do,

Made nests, and soon
The island was given its ration
Of thin coarse grass

While its edges were soaked
In salt water.
Who knew if the island would flourish

6

Without people?
Could it amount to anything,
Or just be an anomaly, a blip?

This new island,
Unlike ones we laid waste to,
Does not suffer.

In time, of course,
It will have its own
Death sentences and crucifixions,

But, in the meantime,
The shaky frivolous racket
Is a seagull's uncertain cry.

And the wind
Is flute-music, soft harp sound.

And the volcanic rock

Has a mind of its own.
In the future
Perhaps the lucky ones

Left after the storm
Will huddle on this island,
Re-make the world

In all its mischief.
The island will pray
To an old Icelandic God

Asking to be
Left in peace.
It can't bear

The chattering,
Having enough trouble,
God knows,

From the fish
Fresh from cod wars,
Who dart and nibble

Celebrating
The island's novelty
Enjoying all the plankton,

The many new flavours
Sent to liven up
Their feast.

THE ENNISCORTHY ECHO

This is a world of muted things: no wind today,
The fields a scarce green, the sea the colour
Of the sky, and the sky almost no colour at all.
On the strand I meet Mike Parle, close
To seventy, home a good long time.

He liked New York; he used to go
On a Saturday to get The Enniscorthy Echo
At a booth in Times Square. 'Even if it was
A week or two late, it felt more like news
Than any of the other stuff you would read.'

Today, he is walking slowly, and stops
With a customary broad half-smile, and looks
Into the distance as if there is a story
That might somehow finally be told.
'I don't know you, do I?' he asks.

Of course he knows me! I say my name, tell
Him that he played hurling with Brendan
My brother. He smiles again, and nods his head.
I remind him about New York, Saturdays, the Echo.
'Oh, the Echo!' he almost laughs. He bites his lip

As though he has determined on a course of action.
He does not say anything more. I want to think
Of one memory, another name from the past, a fact,
That will startle him into recognition.
But nothing comes. We stand there.

'Not too bad a day now,' I say. 'Mild enough.'
He looks at the bank of white cloud over Rosslare
And then at me. He is thoughtful and engaged,
Passing the time easily, before maybe moving on.
'Mild enough,' he agrees. 'Mild enough.'

A FAMILY FRIEND

In Enniscorthy one night at a do in the hotel

When I went up to the bar

I saw a fellow in a monkey-suit -

Full lips, dark hair and a lovely smile.

As we began to talk, I realized that his father had laid out my mother

And one of my brothers.

But his father was soon to retire, he said.

And the job would be his alone.

We had another drink. Those with me who had come from Dublin

Must have presumed

That this was someone I knew well, maybe

A cousin or some old family friend.

10

It was hard to know what to talk to him about.

But the conversation drifted

To the town itself, the way it had declined,

The desolate look of Slaney Street.

It seemed natural. He was on a night-out,

He would soon re-join his table.

I enjoyed his effortless charm.

But I could not stop thinking

That he would be the one who would wash me

When I was dead. I dreamed of lying

All passion spent, him with his apron on,

Shoving cotton wool into my nostrils

Turning me over, putting more cotton wool
Into my hole.

Be tender, I almost said, as the best ones were.
Take your time up there.

Put your hand under my balls, caress what is left of me.
I will not complain.

Become businesslike for the coffin part,
As I did too as we sipped our drinks

And switched the conversation to more ordinary things -
The perennial nuisance

Of the traffic on the bridge, how treacherous
The Slaney river is precisely at the spot you wouldn't expect

And Lanzarote in February, where he had just been:
Best, we agreed,

Not to drink too much in the morning on holidays,
Or even at lunchtime. After that, of course, anything goes.

Happily, last orders were late that night. At the end, just a few of us
Remained, the bar staff already cleaning up.

Outside, the river between the hotel and the Wexford road
Had its glassy, determined, implacable look,

And my friend, the undertaker's son, stood smoking on the steps.
He was alone, just then, but soon

His friends came out, someone slapped him on the shoulder
And made some joke and they walked, all of them, back into the town.

IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Some guests pushed other guests so they
Could get a better view of the Obamas
And Joe Biden. At one moment, a group
Decided to move right up to the front,
Getting their colleagues to behave
Like security guards creating a safe corridor.

The place was packed with Irish-Americans in suits.
I saw Gabriel Byrne. Obama and Biden had a boyish
Way of telling each other jokes while Michelle
Obama stood apart, unamused. The White House décor
Was fussy, with too many different textures
In the wallpaper, carpets and coverings.

12

And the paintings were bad. At one moment,
Obama was close to us, but then someone
Got in the way. He was about to depart
When, luckily, Joe Hassett politely called him back
And brought me and Garry Hynes towards him.
Obama's hand was soft when I briefly shook it.

We were ushered then into a large, long room.
And this is the part that remains most memorable:
They left us to enjoy our drinks for a while
And then they decided it was time for us all to go.
But they made no announcement. Instead, the staff
Stood in a line at the back of the room, and moved

One step at a time towards us, letting no one get
Behind them. They did this nonchalantly, casually.
It was gradual, but it was also firm. We were so high
On our brush with fame, however, we hardly noticed,

Until when they were a third of the way towards the exit
And we realized they meant business; we would have to go.

Was this a trick of Nixon's? Was it conjured up by Barbara
Bush?

Was it a Jackie special? Was it put in place by the Clintons?
Or was it an Obama original? Anyway, it was clear that
The céad míle fáilte and the dear little shamrock meant
Less than nothing now. And, once the staff had hit half-way,
It would not be long before we were all outside the door.

Inside, with us gone, Obama would make decisions.
Outside, we, the disenchanting Irish, hailed taxis, unavailing.
We had expected to learn something in that house about
power

And politics. Instead, we witnessed what it is like
To wear your welcome out. It does seem tempting, even still,
To imagine the line of waiters as a metaphor for something,

For soft power, soft coercion, for how to take a firm stance
On foreigners. Or for time's purposeful discreet intent,
How it moves discreetly, inches forward without
Us noticing. Just as we are being distracted by wondrous sights
And thoughts and idle talk, it pushes us firmly
Into timeless night and will not let us back.

But that is stretching it. Instead, the thing itself, the fact,
Remains vivid in my mind. It was surprising and exact.
It left us all speechless, unsure if we would ever have
The courage to tell our friends at home in any detail
Of the ingenious and effective scheme used to get us
Out of the White House on St Patrick's Day 2010.

JERICO

i

The sky at night is full of stars
that outshine
the moon.

Across the narrow gorge
a man with goats
leans against a tree.

My companion pulls at my sleeve
so I will attend
to his warnings.

In an hour or two
the hordes could
take Tel Aviv,

Zip like lightning
over the
Allenby Bridge.

For a while, the washed
light over us is
calm and controlled.

What is the name
of that place,
over to the right?

It is bathed in
blueness, whiteness against
the parched brown.

Like water boiling,
the steam entangling
houses, trees.

Whisper the word oasis:
moisture against
prevailing dryness.

I dream I am old -
teeth missing, knees shaky,
hips painful -

Being helped along
and read to; at night
I barely sleep.

The house is almost dark,
a single room,
a single bed.

16

The air is like water:
I thrive in its heaviness
without a thought.

My helpers are all around:
the youth who guides me
as I walk,

His mother and aunt
who bring food
and fresh clothes,

His father and cousin
who sit in the doorway
as shops close up.

In the dwindling light,
the birds are
frantic in the air.

Those around me
often look sadly
into the distance.

But that is just the dream.
In the real world, we talk of
danger and strategy.

My companion has no
interest in dusty imaginings
but in territory.

This is Israel. Over there,
the West Bank,
the Hebron Hills.

ii

Years later, I ask
only to be taken
to the place

I saw from that hill,
shimmering in
the hot light.

I will meet myself
coming towards me,
staying in the shadows.

An old man
in a dry month,
as the poem goes.

I am allowed one
strong, bitter coffee
every day.

I will see a town
under the protection of
The Palestinian Authority.

It is in Area A
as decided by
the Oslo Accords.

There are, of course, ancient
sites; Antony and Cleopatra
were here, and Herod.
Jesus cured
the blind beggars
under the walls.

18

All around: construction,
but no one is allowed
to dig a well.

The main square is busy
with traffic, like
any other town.

Dreams sliced by the sharp
light become the hard
facts of the here and now.

I go to a barber's shop
and a café, glad to be
indoors from the heat.

We are in a car
waiting to go back
to East Jerusalem.

It does not matter
whether any of us look
behind or not.

SOUND II

The sound that came
When phone and fax were the same.

The wind before rain
That darkened the air.

The radio coming alive:
Single notes of O'Donnell Abu.

The Luas with its
Deadened bell, muffled further

By the canal water, solid,
Or almost so, at Charlemont Bridge.

The noise the waves make at Cush
As they crash in over small stones.

The seabirds gathered on the strand
At Morriscastle decide

What to do as I come close:
If they scramble, fly up,

The suddenness will bring
The flapping of wind against wing.

THE BLACKSTAIRS MOUNTAINS

The Morris Minor cautiously took the turns
And, behind us, the Morris 1000, driven by Auntie Kathleen,
Who never really learned to work a clutch.

I remember, getting out, the bleakness, the sheer
Rise, as though the incline had been
Cut precisely and then polished clean,

And also the whistle of the wind
As I grudgingly climbed Mount Leinster.
All of us, in fact, trudged most of the way up,

With Uncle Pat carrying a pair
Of binoculars borrowed from Peter Hayes
Who owned a pub in Court Street.

My uncle surveyed the scene
As far as Carlow with the binoculars,
And up towards the Wicklow Mountains.

And my father, when he was handed them,
Claimed that he could actually see the sea.
But, when it was my turn, all I saw

Was something vague in the distance
That no amount of focusing
Could convince me were foam or waves.

So much chatter and excitement!
My mother wearing slacks and a headscarf
And Auntie Kathleen her sensible shoes,

So much distraction that my uncle did not realize
Until we came back to the cars
That he must have left the binocular case

Somewhere, maybe when we stopped
Near Black Rock Mountain on the way down.
The adults all looked worried.

How could they face Peter Hayes
Or his wife and his sister who helped
Him run the bar with the news?

Then my brother Brendan said
That he would go back up and see
If he could find the case, but Kathleen

Was even more against the plan
Than my mother. It would take an hour
To get up and half an hour to get down.

And that was if he ran all the way.
But he looked for approval to my father
And Uncle Pat. He would be quick, he said.

And, so, he set out to bring back the case.
Soon, he was a speck, and then smaller
Until not even the binoculars could find him.

There was worry that a mist could descend,
But it stayed bright, uncloudy. It was one
Of those long July Sundays. We waited.

I don't know what we talked about,
Or what we did. Time passed, I suppose.
All of us worried that he wouldn't find

The case after all the trouble,
That he would look everywhere
But eventually appear empty-handed.

The adults always had something to discuss.
My father and Pat could talk history
Or hurling or tell stories about old priests.

My mother and Auntie Kathleen
Could ask the girls about school, the nuns.
And I could watch them. I do that to this day.

But none of us mattered
Against the one who had left us,
Who was still out of sight.

When he returned, pale-faced, silent,
With the case in his hand, he was greeted
By Pat with a ten-shilling note.

He had found the case where my uncle thought
It had been left: on that wall at the look-out point
A bit below Black Rock Mountain.

As we drove south in our convoy of two
Small cars, no one thought of anything much more
Than the night ahead, the day to come.

No one imagined another Sunday, years hence:
He has been found dead, your brother.
You should get a flight home

As soon as you can. In the time the taxi snakes
Towards the airport, and the next day
When I see him in his coffin,

I think of that journey up the mountain,
The single intent, and I imagine my brother
Searching once again for the leather case,

Not seeing it there on that wall, and then looking
All around, defeated, knowing that his climb
On this occasion has not worked out,

And I want him to be assured by someone:
There is nothing to worry about,
Things have changed, most of those awaiting

You are dead: Auntie Kathleen and Uncle Pat,
Harriet and Maeve, our mother and father,
And Niall too. Even Peter Hayes, his wife and sister.

No one will be disappointed.
The binocular case can linger where it will.
Even the binoculars themselves don't work.

It is better to take your ease, lie down
In the scarce grass, wait a while,
Close your eyes when night falls, dream

26

Of what can be seen through a convex lens:
The Barrow, the Slaney, sharp lines
In the landscape, a blur that might be Carlow town,

And fields, folding out for miles,
And then, what must be the coast,
The soft waves at Cush, the long strand at Curracloe.

But really just what I saw that day through
Those binoculars: something vague in the distance,
A dimness receding, first shimmering, then still.

WINTER WIND

Winter wind
Blowing from the sea.
The ditches
Soaked with last night's rain.

Hard to be sure that
The lights in the distance
Are really the lights
Of Rosslare

Or that the glow
In the air if you look to the right
Is what Wexford town
Has done to the sky.

Down there, the strand
Sits, much as it does
During the day.
Each wave

Unaware
How long
The night will last

OUT OF TOUCH

Or how faint the dawn will be.
I thought it would be good
Since my father had come back
From the dead after all the years,
To take him to places
He had known or studied in.

We began in London, walking up
Charing Cross Road, heading towards
The British Museum.

‘It was so strange

About your mother,’ he said.

‘No matter what book I found for her,

She wanted something else,

With more, more – what’s the word? - until I could find

Nothing that she liked.’

And then he turned, suddenly curious:

‘Is she dead, Colm? Is that what happened?’

Yes, more than twenty years ago, I told him.

‘Of course,’ he replied, ‘we’ve been out

FINAL CORRECTIONS

Of touch. I didn't even know she was sick.'
My father is sitting at the table
In the old dining-room in Parnell Avenue.
'You can type, can't you?' he asks

And hands me the pages
He has been working on.

'Your mother was a great typist.
I'll say that for her.'

Each time I turn, the wall opens out
And closes in on us again.

'It's hard to be sure who's dead
And who's still alive
Or who's in the town
And who's gone to England.'

All around the fireplace
Are balled-up bits of paper.

'I get dates wrong.
If you could check the dates.
That would be a great help.'

'You don't happen to know?'
He looks at me.
'Do you know..?'

I do. I know. You died in 1967.

'That soon,' he says to himself.
'Really? Was it the summer
Or did it, by any chance, happen later?'

It was the summer.

'Difficult to believe it was that early.
It has gone completely out of my mind.
I suppose they were all there.'

Yes, Kathleen and Pat, and my mother
Were by your bedside, if that is the word.

'But Brendan, was he not there?'

No, he was not there.

'Is he still alive?'

Don't ask. If you go on
Asking, I will have to tell you
That hardly anyone is left.

ii

My mother is placing
A carbon sheet precisely between
Two white pages and edging them
Into the typewriter.

The room is what it is
Until suddenly it is small.
As my father makes some final corrections
My mother whispers to me or to him

Or to someone just come in:
No one is to worry. I'll be all right.
In no time this'll be done.
We'll definitely meet the deadline.

And at least we're all here.
And soon we'll breathe easier.

PANGUR

Pangur, a neighbour's cat,
Comes to my flat
For peace and quiet.

He likes to lick
My bare toes
While I type.

But he cannot
Keep himself in check
And soon

He starts to bite.
'Pangur,' I bark,
'If you don't stop,

I will put you back
In the poem written
By that monk.'

BOARD OF ADVISER

Adonis
Forrest Gander
Jeffrey Yang
Robert Currie
Shen Wei
Bin Ju
Du Yun

BOARD MEMBER

John Tsung
Xiao Yu
Fangming Shi
Wang Yin
Jiaoyang Li
Yueyue Wenren

WORK TEAM

Patricio Ferrari – Host & Academic Advisor
Shangyang Fang – Host & Academic Advisor
Leonard Schwartz – Host & Academic Advisor
Matt Turner – Translation Consultant and Editor
Cleo Li-Schwartz – Translation Consultant and Editor
Qingqing Cai – Translation Consultant and Editor
Cléo Charpantier – Newsletter Editor
Qixin Zhang – Visual Concept Designer
Ruoyun Chen – Photographer & Documentarian
Peng Yu – Photographer
Yuling Zhang – Designer

**THE LIMELIGHT POETRY
STAFF AND BOARD OF
DIRECTORS EXTEND OUR DEEP
GRATITUDE FOR THE GENEROUS
SUPPORT OF OUR DONORS:**

Forrest Gander

Yu Fu

Anonymous

Joe Morra

Xu Bing

Yueyue Wenren

Yang Ming

Xiaoxia Li

Ruogu Liu

Yan Ci

Zhaohui Peng & Jun Jun

Ling Zhang

JEDIDIAH PUBLISHING INC

Bin Ju

Malena Zhang

Feng and Chen Partners Design LLC.

Qi Wenhua

Jian Liu

Hongling Zhang

Hong Chen

Bei Dao

Julia Du

Tang Yinjiu



limelight
poetry



New York
Public
Library



limelightpoetry.com



DONATE TO LIMELIGHT POETRY