

***GOLDEN AGE***

**By Fred Johnston**

I'd like to call her back, though the corridor is long  
and say how sorry I am that I didn't get her name -

Or that I never 'phoned and regret that too  
it was not bad manners, it was ugly, as youth often is.

Wretched behavior on a nightly basis  
We called it fun and it was. Now it's an effort to make

a cup of tea; one smokes too much, is prone  
to probing medical rituals, there are things to fear.

Does she think so too, as a sixth decade slips in,  
or is there, after time, nothing to think about?

What was so raging good about the 'Seventies  
or the bed-sits with Joni Mitchell for company?

Was that the glory we now, in our cups, aspire to,  
gift-wrapped in a grief we have no name for?

*CHARM AGAINST THE INVISIBLE*

Now and then the dogs are furious at the invisible  
charging the front door to warn away whatever lives in the air  
imps of fault and harrowing, plate-eyed ghosts, regrettable

sprites with leaves for hair, grass claws and meaty breath -  
the barking drowns them as cold water unwitches them  
put in their place, they must, one imagines, go underneath

the garden earth or the concrete driveway; in any case  
they prick the ears of dogs in the wee hours  
blow cold on my back when I cross the dark space

of hallway to the bathroom. Curdle the milk  
even in the fridge. Cause chimney fires at night  
that spark star-wards like devil's spit, yellow as yolk -

believing in them is no harm, it keeps you straight  
let the dogs do the rest, that's what they're fed for,  
lumpen logic only goes so far, the worst of things will wait.

*LOST PAGES FROM A GUIDE-BOOK*

Over the unsure-of-itself iron balcony  
Paris tart-sharp in copper-plate neon,  
breakfast is croissants, orange juice and coffee -

The rue-de-Something shivered like a cat  
Girls had paced the kerb half the night,  
There was a café where *les travestis* held court

You could write a book about it,  
The purring sound that rose off the pavement,  
Piss and petrol, a street-sweeper mounted

On circular brushes. Somewhere a radioful  
Of Maghreb music, manic and loud -  
The crack of a window opening over your head

So a first day opens like a flower or a tomb  
A light anxiety flushed belly-deep -  
No postcard this, but an X-ray, a scan to the bone.

***BLUES***

One day, love, you'll say just what you said just now  
and you'll be talking to yourself -  
the weather won't change, nor the sun go out; but  
everything will be unfamiliar, rooms that much more impassive

photos will dry up in their frames  
by the time we're back in our separate beds  
every window and door will have closed, locks secured  
and, if I know you at all, you'll sleep as if nothing has happened

that's the way, the unofficial version -  
everything whimpers in the dark, even the likes of us:  
'phones will forget themselves, hours and eras will go by  
we'll tell the truth to no one; how easy it was, when the time came.

***BUSINESS END***

I imagine her on the 'phone, I conjure her voice a face:

*Numbers high for your age, and other confidences*

meant to lure me out of the midnight sweats  
or the memory of my father on morphine in a hospice.

What expression does she wear, leaning into her lover  
(whose readings are normal for his age) for whom

she invokes a different lexicon, her voice intimate,  
not phlegmed with static and so damned clinical?

She'll see me undressing in a sterile light; I don  
my diaphanous blue gown, lurch like a drunk to a needle

and a table set for one; she'll make rehearsed gestures  
all without a blush. This, then, is the business end of love.

**Bio:**

Fred Johnston was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1951. In 1972 he received a Hennessy Literary Award for prose. In the mid-seventies he, along with Neil Jordan and Peter Sheridan, founded the Irish Writers' Co-operative, based in Dublin. In 1986 he founded Galway city's annual Cúirt literature festival and in 2002, the Western Writers' Centre in Galway, Ireland. A novelist, short story writer and dramatist as well as a poet, in the late nineties his play, 'No Earthly Pole,' on the life of Sir John Franklin, was staged at Galway's Punchbag Theatre as part of the Galway Arts Festival. In 2004 he was appointed writer in residence to the Princess Grace Irish Library in Monaco. His work has appeared in The Spectator, The Sunday Times, The Financial Times, Stand, The Irish Times, The London Magazine, The Edinburgh Review and elsewhere. He also writes and publishes poetry in French. He lives in Galway.