

Blackwater

These are plain graves, straightforward even though
there has been suffering here: twenty headstones,
cast one morning from the concrete for the dam
and stacked with pipes and blocks until required.

Five hundred foot of ice had already done the groundwork.
The glacier oozed and scraped, hollowed and rounded,
until only finishing touches were needed.
Three thousand men could swarm and swear,
sweat and cower and huddle from the wind.
And when the work was done
a dais was set up and crowds came out to cheer
as sluice gates clanked and water flowed.

These are plain names: William Brady,
John Day, Robert Fitch, John Wilson.
Right through that year each month
they must have buried one, and sometimes several,
each man overtaken by his personal calling
to be crushed or blown apart or drowned
and brought to this patch of grass and heather.
Some must have grumbled at the extra work,
the barked shins, the stumbling over boulders,
the thumbs stove on splintered rock.
Picks rose and fell to gouge each grave.

Yet many were lucky, escaping
with buckled limbs or jellied scars
that spoke later of their winters at the dam.
And each in the end found his own alternative,
at the Somme, or back home in Kildare
or nodding in a chair in Cumbernauld.