

In 1900 a relief boat, the Hesperus, arrived at the Flannan Isle lighthouse to discover all three keepers had vanished. They were never found.

I

The light was black as breccia rock,
the first sign that something was all wrong.

The skipper climbed up banks of shadow
the basalt-eyes of rabbits pitching from the gate,

his heart tocking over the wind, expecting
a boot-cap in the open doorway, a spill of red.

Only an unlit fire. The light cold & polished like a mirror.
Empty, crumpled bunks. A stopped clock.

Hairline crack in a teacup. The chair upturned.
That chair will spook him always, as though its bare

legs were human and could run like my Donald's, who'd gone
out last, leaving his oilskins on their peg.

II

They loved each other, those three.
A crowd, maybe. Took turns with chores,

played pontoon. Flesh is flesh, if it came to it.
I'd understand the wanting. Rumpled beds.

Sharing a heartache. Eilean Mòr: Isle
of cooled lava, both glossy and deep,

watched over by the sketchy faces of gannets.
St Flannan's chapel built snug like a hound's kennel,

tallow-white when the moon wants it,
surrounded by the porches of the warrens.

Thomas & James, Donald & Thomas, James & Donald,
'til something drags over the moon and they disappear.

And someone pushed. And someone pulled. And someone didn't let go.

The tower's light remained a while, gripping the waves by their lapels.

III

They were like siblings: Donnie, James, Tom;
one kind, one tough, one with a tongue.

They ran a tight tower. Spotless. It was an accident.
Two went to that nook in the rock where the ropes

are kept like eels waiting to be uncoiled.
Donnie stayed put, scoping the sea in time

with the light, drying the rim of a teacup.
He saw the hole in the water and what it meant

dazed into a deeper silence as if I myself had walked in
& kissed him. The waves unreeled, then hulked

right up to where the others knelt in their gully.
He tried to outrun the sea's rogue thought

but it reached over all their heads
& took them with it.

IV

Some days I can't see the difference
between those two explanations. I watch the light.

It picks out shades of storm-petrels, black-legged kittiwakes,
pods of pilot whales showing their strong backs.

The puffins stand and turn their faces to me.
I wait for them to take off their masks.