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ALAN TITLEY

# Gluaiseacht



**Alan Titley**  
**1947-**

*Life and Literary Status*

Alan Titley was born in 1947 in Cork city. A trained primary school teacher, he taught in Nigeria during the Biafran War in the late 1960s. A scholar as well as a prolific creative writer, he taught at third level for more than thirty years and was appointed Professor of Modern Irish in University College Cork in 2006. Alan Titley is arguably the foremost prose writer in the Irish language today. His style is often formally experimental, laced with dark humour and an irreverent tone. His sheer delight in language is evidenced by a loquacious and extravagant use of language. His oeuvre includes short story collections, novels, children's novels, dramas and poetry, as well as a large number of academic publications.

For further information, in English or in Irish, on Alan Titley and his work, see:  
[www.coislife.ie/udair/alan-titley/?lang=en#1488650113959-1cc57e50-44a0d018-982e8b00-a6f0](http://www.coislife.ie/udair/alan-titley/?lang=en#1488650113959-1cc57e50-44a0d018-982e8b00-a6f0)

**A note on the excerpts from the novel**

The novel *Gluaiseacht* (2009) was written for school children, which explains the pared back linguistic style, somewhat untypical of Titley's prose work. The author's familiarity with life in Western Africa, along with the horrendous challenges faced by those who seek refuge in Western Europe, is evident in this short novel. *Gluaiseacht* (which translates literally as movement or motion), is the powerful and

shocking story of a young boy who flees his war-torn homeland and makes the perilous journey across land and sea, finally ending up alone and penniless on the unwelcoming streets of northern Europe. Horror and humanity are portrayed vividly side by side here in a story that goes to the very heart of the issue of immigration today. *Gluaiseacht* was first published in 2009, before the plight of refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the fate of unaccompanied minors made headlines in mainstream media. This novel is read by children and adults alike; it offers no easy resolution but holds up an uncomfortable mirror to contemporary readers, safe in their European citizenship and relative privilege.

**Language and translation**

This novel is written in standardised Irish. The first-person speaker is a young minor and the sentences are therefore short and unadorned. Titley's linguistic dexterity is evident in the mellifluous quality of these short sentences, however. There is no published English translation of this text. Eilís Ní Dhúill has translated the excerpts below specifically for this project. This English translation remains faithful to the literal meaning of the Irish text, and is intended as a crib or bridging text. The assonance and consonance, abundant in the source text, has not been fully recreated in the following translation.

The excerpts below are taken from the novel *Gluaiseacht* by Alan Titley (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 2009). They are published with the kind permission of An Gúm.

## Gluaiseacht

Cén fáth? Cén fáth, a deir tú liom. Cén fáth ar tháinig mé anseo, agus anois go bhfuil mé ag imeacht? Cén fáth a bhfuilim ag gluaiseacht arís? Agus cá bhfuil mo thriall? Cén méid den scéal sin atá uait? Beidh orm gluaiseacht gan mhoill, níl a oiread sin ama againn. Cuid mhaith den oíche, is dócha. Mar sin, éist liom. Is beag duine a d'éist, agus na daoine a d'éist níor chuala. Na daoine a chuala ba chuma leo. Ach ó chuir tú an cheist, tá freagra ag dul duit.

Is cuimhin liom an baile arbh as dom, gan amhras. Ní baile é mar atá agaibhse anseo. Ní dheachaigh aon tsráid tríd. Bhí na tithe scaipthe. Ach iad néata, mar is cuimhin liom. Ach bhí sé geal, geal ó mhaidin go hoíche. Bhí an oíche geal freisin. An ghealach ann gach oíche. Uaireanta mar a bheadh aghaidh ag gáire. Uaireanta eile mar a bheadh slisne de phráta. Ach bhí sí os mo chionn gach oíche, ar shlí nach mbíonn sí anseo. An ghrian ag taitneamh de shíor. Níor cheap mé riamh go mbeadh grá agam do scamail arís. Ach beidh. Ní bheidh aon dul as agam.

Ní fhaca mé na saighdiúirí nuair a tháinig siad. Ní raibh mé ann. Bhí mé amuigh ag an tobar ag fáil uisce. Obair mná, tá a fhios agam, ach bhí mo dheirfiúr rólag le dul ann. Bhí mo mhathair ag cothú an linbh, agus ba mise an t-aon duine amháin a d'fhéadfadh dul ann. Ba ghráin liom í mar obair. Na cailíní go léir ag magadh fúm. Uaireanta b'fhearr liom bás a fháil den tart. Ach níorbh fhearr, dáiríre. Ní cúis gháire é an tart. Go háirithe an tart nuair nach bhfuil a fhios agat an bhfaighidh tú deoch eile go deo.

B'in é an fáth a ndeachaigh mé go dtí an tobar. An tart. Agus cuimhne mo mháthar sínte sa chúinne leis an leanbh. Mo dheirfiúr ag gol. Mo chuid deartháireacha chomh seang leis an maide. M'athair gan focal as. Eagla ar gach duine sa bhaile. Eagla roimh an eagla, shíl mé. Ach gan aon eagla ormsa. Chuaigh mé go dtí an tobar. Bhí na cailíní ann romham. Iad ag scigireacht is ag gáire. Cheapfá go raibh rud éigin ar eolas acu nach raibh ar eolas agamsa. B'fhéidir go raibh. Bhí fuath agam dóibh. Bhraith mé go raibh rud éigin á bhaint acu díom. Bhraith mé nár mise mé féin.

Is cuimhin liom anois an crann os cionn an tobair. Ní fhaca mé mórán crann ina dhiaidh sin go ceann tamaill. Crann mór a bhí ann a raibh mórán gruaige aige. Ba é an t-aon seanrud ar an mbaile a raibh aon ghruaig air. Seachas an gabhar. Ach bhí na gabhair go léir sean. Bhí meigeall orthu, agus féachaint na gcéadta bliain ina ngnúis. Bhíodh na cailíní timpeall ar an tobar, fad is a bhíodh na buachaillí timpeall ar an gcrann. Na buachaillí agus na hainmhithe. Na buachaillí agus na hainmhithe agus na cuileoga. Na buachaillí agus na hainmhithe agus na cuileoga agus an boladh. Níor thaitin boladh leis na cailíní. B'in é an fáth a mbídís in aice leis an uisce.

Bhí drochaoibh orm nuair a d'fhág mé an tobar. Ní raibh mé istigh liom féin ná le haon duine eile. Rinne cailín amháin drannadh liom, agus bhraith mé chomh beag le mo lúidín. Ní thuigim fós cén fáth ar bhraith mé mar sin. Bhí siúl fada agam ar ais go dtí an baile. Siúl fada fada. Siúl trí huair an chloig, mar a deirimid anois. Bhí mé liom fein, mar ba mé an t-aon bhuachaill amháin ag an tobar an lá sin. Laethanta eile, bhíodh duine nó beirt. Ar mo nós féin. Daoine nach raibh aon dul as acu. Ní deirimis mórán, fad is a bhímis ann. An t-uisce a thógaint, agus imeacht linn. Siúl fada, mar a dúirt mé, go dtí an baile. Ní dócha go dtuigfeá an taobh tíre arbh as mé. Ní raibh mórán ann. Gaineamh is mó, agus sceacha, agus crann thall is abhus. Ní raibh sléibhte mar atá anseo. Ná páirceanna, ná bailte móra. Shiúil mise ach ní raibh mé ag cuimhneamh ar rud ar bith faoi leith. Shiúil mise mar ní raibh aon rud faoi leith le feiceáil agam. Shiúil mé liom, mar b'éigean dom an baile a shroicheadh.

Nuair a shroich mé an baile, ní raibh aon duine ann romham.

Bhí gach duine imithe. Mo mháthair, an leanbh, m'athair, mo dheirfiúracha, mo dheartháireacha, na comharsana. Bhí siad ar fad imithe. Gan rian orthu. Bhí na hainmhithe imithe freisin, seachas cúpla madra. Agus bhí siad sin marbh. Bhí gabhar bán amháin laistiar de bhalla. Bhí ciúnas aisteach san áit. An gabhar féin, ní raibh gíocs as. Bhí an spéir ghorm fós os mo chionn, ach níor chuala mé éan ar bith. Bhí an baile go léir folamh. Cheapfá gur tháinig gaoth éigin agus gur scuab sí gach duine chun siúil.

Leag mé an t-uisce síos agus tháinig fonn millteanach orm rith as an áit. Ach cá rithfinn? Trí huair an chloig ar ais don tobar? Ina ionad sin, shiúil mé timpeall ar na tithe. Bhí gach teach mar ba chleachtach liom iad. Bhí gach rud mar a bhíodh. Bróga fágtha go néata i dtithe áirithe. Potaí cré agus bia te iontu i dtithe eile. Ach gan duine ar bith iontu. Labhair mé i gcogair ar dtús.

'An bhfuil aon duine anseo?'

Ach freagra ní bhfuair mé.

'An bhfuil aon duine anseo?' a dúirt mé i nglór níos láidre.

Tar éis cúpla nóiméad bhí mé ag béiceach in ard mo ghutha: 'An bhfuil aon duine anseo? Cá bhfuil gach duine? Cá bhfuil sibh?'

Ghlaoigh mé ar m'athair is ar mo mháthair. Ghlaoigh mé ar Hansa, taoiseach an bhaile. Ghlaoigh mé is ghlaoigh mé is ghlaoigh mé go dtí go raibh mo ghuth caite. Ach freagra ar bith, ná rian de fhreagra ní bhfuair mé. An gabhar féin, d'fhan sé gan corraí as. (Leathanaigh 5-11)

‘Is mise Fatima’, ar sise, ‘tá áthas orm gur tháinig tú slán.’

‘Mise freisin’, arsa mise, ach ní raibh mórán ama agam le smaoinemh i gceart air.

‘Cá bhfuil tú ag dul?’ a d’fhiafraigh sí díom.

‘Deirtear liom go bhfuil mé ag dul chun na hEorpa’, arsa mise.

‘Táimid go léir ag dul chun na hEorpa’, ar sise, agus an gáire sin i gcónaí ar a béal, ‘ach cén áit go díreach?’

‘Níl a fhios agam’, arsa mise, ‘ach ní féidir go bhfuil an Eoraip chomh mór sin’.

‘Tá an Eoraip ollmhór, lán de dhaoine.’

‘Lán d’airgead, leis,’ arsa mise, ag cuimhneamh dom ar na scéalta a chuala mé. ‘Deirtear go bhfuil ór le fáil ar na sráideanna, agus go bhfuil gach duine saibhir.’

‘Níl a fhios agam faoi sin,’ ar sise go ciúin, ‘ach is cuma liom fad is nach bhfuil aon chogadh ann.’

Ní dúirt mise faic, ach bhí cuimhne agam ar na corpáin sa bhaile, ar na madraí á líreac, ar an deatach ag éirí ó phota gan bhia. Thug sí an tost faoi deara. Rinne sí an tost a scagadh.

‘Bhí tú sa chogadh?’ Ceist a bhí ann.

‘Ní raibh mise sa chogadh’, a dúirt mé, ‘ach tháinig an cogadh chugam’.

‘Chugamsa freisin’, ar sise, ‘níor thug mé aon chuireadh dó. Tagann an cogadh chugat gan chuireadh, gan iarraidh. Do thuismitheoirí?’

‘Níl a fhios agam’.

‘Ionann sin agus iad a bheith marbh. Do chuid deartháireachta, deirfiúracha?’

‘Níl a fhios agam ach oiread’.

‘Ionann sin agus iad a bheith marbh chomh maith céanna’.

‘Agus tusa?’ Bhí mé ag iarraidh an cheist a chasadh ar ais chuici. Bhí róphianmhar domsa.

‘Mar an gcéanna,’ ar sise. ‘Tháinig na saighdiúirí’.

D’fhan an frása ag sondáil i mo chluasa. ‘Tháinig na saighdiúirí! Tháinig na saighdiúirí! Tháinig na saighdiúirí!’

Tháinig dream éigin chun an bhaile agam féin, agus b’in deireadh leis an mbaile. Tháinig na saighdiúirí agus d’imigh na daoine. D’imigh na daoine nuair a tháinig na saighdiúirí. (Leathanaigh 47-49)

‘Gach duine agaibh isteach san fharraige!’ ar seisean mar ordú. ‘Tá an turas thart! Tá an Eoraip ansin thall! An té a bhfuil snámh aige, snámhadh! An té nach bhfuil, bíodh an chearc aige!’ Agus dhein smutadh mór gáire.

Rug greim ar an té is túisce a bhí ina aice, is rop isteach san fharraige é. Bhain slais as duine eile a bhí ag glámáil chuige, agus bhuaib buta den ghunna ar chloigeann duine eile. Faoi sin, bhí cuid againn ag léim san fharraige. Cuid eile ina seasamh thart ag féachaint go fiáin ar an spéir. D’ardaigh scáil mhór dhubh aníos as tóin an bháid, fear a scuchfadh an ghealach anuas déarfá, is rinne áladh faoi fhear na leathshúile. Chualathas prap láithreach ón gunna, prap marbhánta múchta, ach mharaigh an scáil de phreab. B’in deireadh le haon útamáil. Thosaigh cách ar léim isteach san fharraige.

‘Beidh sé níos saoire má thagann sibh an treo seo arís!’ ar seisean de gháire, ag faire na ndaoine ag imeacht leo ina nduine agus ina nduine isteach san fharraige.

‘Beir greim láimhe orm!’ arsa Fatima, ós í a bhí i m’aice.

‘Ach níl aon snámh agam!’ arsa mise.

‘Cuma’, ar sise, ‘is leor a bhfuil agam don bheirt againn’.

Cheap mé gur chuala mé liú áthais agus gáire magaidh agus sinn ag léim den bhád. Cheap mé go bhfaca mé cleití i mbéal fir. Cheap mé go bhfaca mé crúca ag gearradh na spéire. Cheap mé go bhfaca mé poll dubh súile do mo leanúint síos is síos is síos i ndoimhneacht na farraige móire. (Leathanaigh 83-85)

Lean mé féin an gleo. Bhí gluaisteáin agus trácht ag imeacht seo is siúd is timpeall is ar ais. Ach chuaigh me san áit a raibh a bhformhór ag dul. Bhí laige éigin orm i gcónaí de bharr gur thit mé i bhfanntais, de bharr an easpa aeir, de bharr an turais farraige, agus de bharr an mhearbhaill a bhí orm faoi cén áit a raibh mé.

Bhí éadaí go leor ar chách anseo, agus mise nocht go maith. Ní hé go raibh sé ar leith fuar, ach bhí an léithe sin ag dul isteach ionam gach coiscéim dar thóg mé. Tuairim dá laghad ní raibh agam faoi cén áit a raibh mé. Bhí litreacha ar na bóithre, agus ar na fógraí ach de cheal léamh is scríobh ba bheag an mhaith domsa iad. Bhí mé san Eoraip, is fíor, ach Eoraip a bhí fliuch, agus tais, agus gruama, Eoraip a bhí gan dathanna.

Bhí Fatima imithe, bhí mo pháirtithe taistil imithe, bhí mise liom féin. Ní raibh airgead agam, ní raibh bia agam, ní raibh focail agam. Ach fós féin, is mé a bhí beo. Bhí mé beo mar tháinig mé slán. Bhí mé beo, mar ní fhaca mé an scian i súile na ndaoine a bhí ag siúl na slí ar gach taobh díom. Bhí mé beo, mar tá an bheatha go

maith, agus d'fhéadfainn canadh nó léim nó rince nó gáire. D'fhéadfainn gol, leis, ach in ainneoin na n-ainneoin níorbh é sin an fonn a bhí orm.

Chodail mé ar chúinne sráide an oíche sin. (Leathanaigh 124-125)

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EILÍS NÍ DHÚILL

# On the Move



Translated excerpts from

**Gluaiseacht**

by Alan Titley



## On the Move

1

Why? Why, you ask me. Why did I come here, and why am I leaving again? Why am I on the move again? And where am I headed? How much of the story do you want? I will have to get on the move soon, I don't have much time. A piece of the night, I suppose. So, listen up. Not too many listened, and those who did listen didn't hear. Those who heard didn't care. But seeing as you asked, you deserve an answer.

I remember the town I'm from, no doubt. It's not a town like the ones you have here. There was no street running through it. The houses were scattered. But neat, that's how I remember them. But it was bright, bright from morning til night. The nights were bright too. The moon appeared every night. Sometimes like a smiling face. Other times like a slice of potato. But it was over my head every night, in a way that it never is here. The sun was always shining. I never thought I'd love to see a cloud again. But I would. I won't have a choice in that. I didn't see the soldiers when they came. I wasn't there. I was at the well getting water. Women's work, I know, but my sister was too weak to go. My mother was breastfeeding the baby, and I was the only one who could go. I hated it. The girls skitting and making fun of me. At times I would have preferred to die of the thirst. Well, I wouldn't really. Thirst is no laughing matter. Especially when you don't know if you'll ever get a drink again.

That's why I went to the well. The thirst. And the sight of my mother laid out in the corner with the baby. My sister crying. My brothers as thin as rakes. Not a word out of my father. Everyone in the town petrified. Scared of being scared, I reckon. But I wasn't afraid. I went to the well. The girls were already there. Skitting and laughing. You'd think they knew something I didn't. Maybe they did. I hated them. I felt they were stripping me of something. I felt I wasn't myself.

I remember now the tree above the well. I didn't see very many trees for a while after that. It was a large tree with lots of hair. It was the only old thing in the town with any hair. Apart from the goat. But all the goats were old. They had beards, and looked hundreds of years old. The girls would gather around the well, while the boys stood around the tree. The boys and the animals. The boys and the animals and the flies. The boys and the animals and the flies and the smell. The girls didn't like the smell. That's why they'd stay next to the water.

I was in foul humour when I left the well. I wasn't myself. One girl snarled at me, which made me feel as small as my little finger. I still don't understand why I felt like that. I had a long walk home. A long long walk. A three hour walk, as we'd say now. I was on my own, because I was the only boy at the well that day. Other days, there'd be one or two more. We wouldn't say much, while we'd be there. We'd get the water, and head off again. A long walk, as I said, back to the village. I don't think you'd understand the kind of place I'm from. There wasn't much there. Mostly sand, and bushes, the odd tree here and there. There were no mountains like

you have here. Or fields, or big towns. I walked but I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. I walked because I didn't really have anything to look at. I walked, because I had to get home.

When I got home, there was no one there.

Everyone was gone. My mother, the baby, my father, my sisters, my brothers, the neighbours. They were all gone. Without a trace. The animals were gone too, apart from a few dogs. And they were dead. There was one white goat behind a wall. The place was eerily quiet. Even the goat, there wasn't a peep out of him. The sky was still blue over my head, but there wasn't a bird to be heard. The entire village was empty. You'd think some kind of wind had swept through the place taking everyone with it.

I put down the water and wanted nothing more than to run away. But where would I run? Three hours back to the well? Instead of that, I walked around all the houses. Every house was as usual. Everything the same as ever. Shoes piled neatly in some houses. Clay pots with food in them in other houses. But not a sinner in any of the houses. At first I whispered.

'Is there anyone here?'

But there was no answer.

'Is there anyone here?' I said more loudly.

A few minutes later I was shouting at the top of my voice: 'Is there anyone here? Where is everyone? Where are you?'

I called out to my father and my mother. I called Hansa, the village chief. I called and I called and I called until I was hoarse. But no answer came, not even a trace of an answer. Even the goat stood still as a stone.

3

'I'm Fatima', she said, 'I'm glad you survived.'

'Me too,' I said, but I didn't have much time to think about it.

'Where are you going?' she asked me.

'I'm told that I'm going to Europe,' I said.

'We're all going to Europe,' she said, with that same smile on her face, 'but where exactly?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'but Europe couldn't be that big.'

'Europe is huge, full of people.'

'Full of money too,' I said, thinking of all the stories I'd heard. 'I hear there's gold in the streets, and that everyone is rich.'

'I don't know about that,' said she quietly, 'but I don't care as long as there's no war.'

I said nothing, but I thought of the corpses in the village, the dogs licking them and the smoke rising from a pot with no food in it. She noticed the silence. She sifted the silence.

'You were in the war?' It was a question.

'I wasn't in the war,' I said, 'but the war came to me'.

'To me too,' she said, 'I didn't invite it. The war comes uninvited, unsought. Your parents?'

'I don't know'.

'They might as well be dead. Your brothers and sisters?'

'I don't know about them either'.

'They might as well be dead too.'

'And you?' I wanted to turn the question back on her. It was too painful.

'Same,' she said. 'The soldiers came'.

The phrase resounded in my ears. 'The soldiers came! The soldiers came! The soldiers came!'

'Some sort of gang came to my village too, and that was the end of the village. The soldiers came and the people disappeared. The people disappeared when the soldiers came.'

4

'That's where you're going!' he said, as he pulled a machine gun out of who knows where.

'Everyone into the water!' he ordered. 'The journey's over! Europe is over there! If you can swim, swim! If you can't tough!' And he smiled snidely.

He caught the person closest to him, and flung him into the sea. He lashed out at someone who was yelling at him, and hit someone else on the head with the butt of his gun. By this time, some of us were already jumping in the water. Others standing around looking wildly at the sky. A large black shadow rose up from the back of the boat, a man who could rip out the moon you'd think, and he lunged at the one-eyed man. A thud was immediately heard from the gun, a suffocating deadly thud, the shadow was wiped out immediately. That was the end of any fumbling about. Everyone began jumping into the sea.

'It will be cheaper if you come this way again!' said he laughing, watching the people disappearing one by one into the sea.

'Grab my arm!' said Fatima, since she was the closest to me.

'But I can't swim!' I said.

'Doesn't matter,' she said, 'I can swim well enough for us both.'

I thought I heard a shout of joy and a mocking laugh as I jumped from the boat. I thought I saw feathers in a man's mouth. I thought I saw a claw scraping across the sky. I thought I saw a dark eye socket following me down and down and down into the depths of the great ocean...

6

I followed the noise. There were cars and traffic going every which way. And I went where most people were going. I was still weak because I had fainted, because of the lack of air, because of the sea journey, and because of the confusion as to where I was.

Everyone here was wearing plenty of clothes, and I was quite bare. It's not that it was particularly cold, but the dampness was getting into me with every step. I had no idea where I was. There were letters on the roads, and on the signs, but because I could neither read nor write they were of little use. I was in Europe, that much is true, but a wet and damp Europe, and dreary too, Europe without colour.

Fatima was gone, my travelling companion was gone, I was alone. I had no money, I had no food, I had no words. But still, I was alive. I was alive because I had survived. I was alive, because I didn't see the terror in the eyes of those who travelled the same road as me. I was alive, because life is good, and I could sing or jump or dance or laugh. I could cry, but despite all that had happened, I didn't feel like crying.

That night I slept on a street corner.