



Prophet Song



Paul Lynch

*'The work of a
master novelist'*
Rob Doyle

'A monumental novel'
Samantha Harvey

PRAISE FOR
PROPHET SONG

‘I haven’t read a book that has shaken me so intensely in many years. The particular genius of this novel is that it makes the impossible possible: if it can happen in the most impossible place, it can happen everywhere. *Prophet Song* becomes a testament to a world unravelling. The comparisons are inevitable – Saramago, Orwell, McCarthy – but this novel will stand entirely on its own, not only as a beautifully written warning of how the human heart can get twisted, but also as a tribute to the power of love in the face of terrible reality.’

COLUM MCCANN, AUTHOR OF *APEIROGON*

‘A monumental novel, prose so flawless and flowing that reading it is akin to being taken up in a wave. You emerge dazed. You remember why fiction matters. It’s hard to recall a more powerful novel in recent years.’

SAMANTHA HARVEY, AUTHOR OF *THE WESTERN WIND*

‘A profoundly human story... Deft, subtle and written in strikingly beautiful prose, with this stunning novel Paul Lynch has joined the ranks of Atwood, Orwell and Burgess.’

CHRISTINE DWYER HICKEY, AUTHOR OF *THE NARROW LAND*

‘The work of a master novelist, *Prophet Song* is a stunning, midnight vision whose themes are at once ancient and all too timely: fear, complicity, resistance, and what becomes of us when hell rises to our homeland.’

ROB DOYLE, AUTHOR OF *THRESHOLD*

‘Paul Lynch is a superb stylist and his sentences spark with an energy equaled by the intensity of the narrative itself... To call his novel “dystopian” feels too safe. *Prophet Song* reveals how close we in seemingly stable countries are to the precipice. Surely one of the most important novels of this decade.’

RON RASH, AUTHOR OF *SERENA*

‘Part cautionary tale; part dystopian nightmare; part fever dream. This is at once fearless and affecting prose with a ticking clock inevitability and a clanging bell pay-off. Both urgent jolt and slow furnace, *Prophet Song* takes you to the edge of the chasm and insists that you look down. A masterclass in terror and dread.’

ALAN MCMONAGLE, AUTHOR OF *ITHACA*

‘Gripping and chilling and terribly prescient – a novel with a darkly important message about this particular moment in time.’

SARA BAUME, AUTHOR OF *SPILL SIMMER FALTER WITHER*

‘A mesmerising, shattering novel, *Prophet Song* lives and breathes on the page and lingers long after finishing it. A paean to maternal love amidst gathering forces of darkness, Paul Lynch has done something extraordinary. It is a work of wonder.’

LISA HARDING, AUTHOR OF *BRIGHT BURNING THINGS*

‘A modern great... Dublin’s Paul Lynch has been a lynchpin of the Republic’s internationally celebrated output for over ten years, his profound investigations of place, identity, religion and memory consistently compared to names as awesome as Dostoevsky, Heaney, Nabokov and Emily Dickinson. In his typically lyrical, lulling style, Lynch pulls off a masterstroke here, setting his futuristic story, of a nation made fearful and suspicious by

their tyrannical government's surveillance, in the most familiar of settings, his home country. The chill, so close to home, is blood curdling.'

THE BIG ISSUE, 'BEST SUMMER BOOKS'

'Paul Lynch is a writer of great vision and power and *Prophet Song* is his best novel yet.'

LAIRD HUNT, AUTHOR OF ZORRIE

Prophet
Song

Paul
Lynch



For Anna, Amelie and Elliot

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

*In the dark times
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.*

BERTOLT BRECHT

1

The night has come and she has not heard the knocking, standing at the window looking out onto the garden. How the dark gathers without sound the cherry trees. It gathers the last of the leaves and the leaves do not resist the dark but accept the dark in whisper. Tired now, the day almost behind her, all that still has to be done before bed and the children settled in the living room, this feeling of rest for a moment by the glass. Watching the darkening garden and the wish to be at one with this darkness, to step outside and lie down with it, to lie with the fallen leaves and let the night pass over, to wake then with the dawn and rise renewed with the morning come. But the knocking. She hears it pass into thought, the sharp, insistent rapping, each knock possessed so fully of the knocker she begins to frown. Then Bailey too is knocking on the glass door to the kitchen, he calls out to her, Mam, pointing to the hallway without lifting his eyes from the screen. Eilish finds her body moving towards the hall with the baby in her arms, she opens the front door and two men are standing before the porch glass almost faceless in the dark. She turns on the porch light and the men are known in an instant from how they are stood, the night-cold air suspiring it seems as she slides open the patio door, the suburban quiet, the rain falling almost unspoken onto St Laurence Street, upon the black car parked in front of the house. How the men seem to carry the feeling of the night. She watches them from within her own protective feeling, the young man on the left is asking if her husband is home and there is something in the way he looks at her, the remote yet scrutinising eyes that make it seem as though he is trying to seize

hold of something within her. In a blink she has sought up and down the street, seeing a lone walker with a dog under an umbrella, the willows nodding to the rain, the stroblings of a large TV screen in the Zajacs' house across the street. She checks herself then, almost laughing, this universal reflex of guilt when the police call to your door. Ben begins to squirm in her arms and the older plainclothesman to her right is watching the child, his face seems to soften and so she addresses herself to him. She knows he too is a father, such things are always known, that other fellow is much too young, too neat and hard-boned, she begins to speak aware of a sudden falter in her voice. He will be home soon, in an hour or so, would you like me to give him a ring? No, that will not be necessary, Mrs Stack, when he comes home could you tell him to call us at his earliest convenience, this is my card. Please call me Eilish, is it something I can help you with? No, I'm afraid not, Mrs Stack, this is a matter for your husband. The older plainclothesman is smiling fully at the child and she watches for a moment the wrinkles about the mouth, it is a face put out by solemnity, the wrong face for the job. It is nothing to worry about, Mrs Stack. Why should I be worried, Garda? Yes, indeed, Mrs Stack, we don't want to be taking up any more of your time and aren't we damp enough this evening making calls, it will be hard work getting ourselves dry by the heater in the car. She slides the patio door closed holding the card in her hand, watching the two men return to the car, watching the car move up the street, it brakes for the junction and its tail-lights intensify taking the look of two eyes agleam. She looks once more onto the street returned to an evening's quiet, the heat from the hall as she steps inside and shuts the front door and then she stands a moment examining the card and finds she has been holding her breath. This feeling now that something has come into the house, she wants to put the baby down, she wants to stand and think, seeing how it stood with the two men and came into the hallway of its own accord, something formless yet felt. She can sense it skulking alongside her as she steps through the living room past the children, Molly is holding the remote control over Bailey's head, his hands flapping in the air, he turns towards her

with a pleading look. Mam, tell her to put my show back on. Eilish closes the kitchen door and places the child in the rocker, begins to clear from the table her laptop and diary but stops and closes her eyes. This feeling that came into the house has followed. She looks to her phone and picks it up, her hand hesitating, she sends Larry a message, finds herself again by the window watching outside. The darkening garden not to be wished upon now, for something of that darkness has come into the house.

Larry Stack moves about the living room with the card in his hand. He stares at it frowning then places the card on the coffee table and shakes his head, falls back into the armchair, his hand taking grip of his beard while she watches him silently, judging him in that familiar way, after a certain age a man grows a beard not to enter manhood but to put a barrier to his youth, she can hardly recall him clean-shaven. Watching his feet seek about for his slippers, his face falling smooth as he rests in the chair, he is thinking about something else it seems until his brow grows taut and a frown creeps down his face. He leans forward and picks the card up again. It's probably nothing, he says. She bounces the child on her lap watching him closely. Tell me, Larry, how is it nothing? He sighs and drags the back of his hand across his mouth, moving out of the chair, he begins to search about the table. Where did you put the newspaper? He steps about the room looking though not seeing, the newspaper might be already forgotten, he is seeking something within the shade of his own thinking and cannot alight upon it. He turns then and studies his wife as she feeds the child on her breast and the sight of this comforts him, a sense of life contracted to an image so at odds with malice his mind begins to cool. He moves towards her and reaches out a hand but draws it back when her eyes sharpen towards him. The Garda National Services Bureau, she says, the GNSB, they are not the usual crowd, a detective inspector at our door, what do they want with you? He points to

the ceiling, would you ever keep your voice down? He steps into the kitchen chewing on his teeth, turns a glass upright from the draining board and lets the tap run, seeing out past his reflection to the dark, the cherry trees are old and will soon go to rot, they might have to come down in the spring. He takes a long drink then steps into the living room. Listen, he says, almost watching his voice as it falls to a whisper. It will turn out to be nothing, I'm pretty sure. As he speaks he finds his belief fall away as though he had poured the drink of water into his hands. She is watching how he gives himself again to the armchair, the body pliant, the automated hand flicking through the channels on the TV. He turns to find himself imprisoned with a look and then he leans forward and sighs, pulls on his beard as though seeking to lift it from his face. Look, Eilish, you know how they work, what it is they are after, they gather information, they do so discreetly and I suppose you have to give it to them one way or another, no doubt they are building a case against a teacher so it would make sense they would want to talk to me, give us a heads-up, perhaps before an arrest, look, I will ring them tomorrow or the day after and see what they want. She is watching his face aware of some nullity in the centre of her being, mind and body seek the supremacy of sleep, in a moment she will go upstairs and slip into her nightwear, counting the hours until the baby wakes for his feed. Larry, she says, watching him recoil as though she has passed electricity into his hand. They said to call at your earliest convenience, call them now on the phone, the number is on the card, show them you have nothing to hide. He is frowning and then he inhales slowly as though taking measure of something looming before him, he turns and looks her full in the face, his eyes narrowed with anger. What do you mean, show them I have nothing to hide? You know what I mean. No, I don't know what you mean. Look, it's just a figure of speech, Larry, please go and ring them now. Why are you always so bloody difficult, he says, look, I'm not going to ring them at this hour. Larry, do it now, please, I do not want the GNSB to darken our door again, you hear the talk, the kind of things that are said to be going on these past few months. Larry leans forward in the

armchair without it seems the ability to stand up, he frowns and then he is moving towards her, takes the baby from her arms. Eilish, please, just listen a moment, respect is something that runs both ways, they know I'm a busy man, I am the deputy general secretary of the Teachers' Union of Ireland, I do not hop, skip and jump to their every command. That is all well and good, Larry, but why did they call to the house at this hour and not to your office during the day, tell me that. Look, love, I'll ring them tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, now, can we let this rest for the night? His body remains standing before her though his eyes have turned to the TV. It's nine o'clock, he says, I want to hear what's on the news, why isn't Mark home by now? She is looking towards the door, the hand of sleep reaching around her waist, she steps towards Larry and slides the baby out of his arms. I don't know, she says, I've given up chasing after him, he had football practice this evening and probably had dinner at a friend's house, or maybe he's gone to Samantha's, they've become inseparable this last while, I just don't know what he sees in her.

Driving through the city he has grown vexed with himself, how the mind roams this way and that, pressing against something he seeks yet feels the need to draw back from. The voice on the phone was so matter of fact, polite almost, I apologise for the lateness of the hour, Mr Stack, we won't take up too much of your time. He parks on a lane around the corner from Kevin Street Garda Station, thinking how the main road used to be most nights, it was busier for sure, this city over the past while has grown much too quiet. He finds himself biting down on his teeth as he steps towards the reception and releases his mouth to smile, thinking of the children, Bailey no doubt will know he went out, that child is all ears. He watches the pale, freckled hand of a duty officer who speaks inaudibly into a phone. He is met by a young detective bony and brisk in shirt and tie, the face waxen and correct,

matching the voice to the speaker from earlier on. Thank you for coming, Mr Stack, if you will follow me, we will do our best not to take up too much of your time. He follows up a metal stairwell and then along a corridor of shut doors before he is shown into an interview room with grey chairs and grey panelled walls and everything looks new, the door is closed and he is left alone. He sits down and stares at his hands. He reads his phone and then he stands and walks about the room, thinking how he has been placed on the back foot, shown a lack of respect, it is well past 10pm. When they enter the room he unfolds his arms and slowly pulls a chair and sits down, watching the same narrow officer and another his own age growing stout, a mug in the man's hand filled with coffee spatter. The man eyes Larry Stack with the trace of a smile or perhaps it is just geniality resting in the wrinkles of his mouth. Good evening, Mr Stack, I am Detective Inspector Stamp and this is Detective Burke, can I offer you some tea or a coffee perhaps? Larry looks to the soiled cup and signals a no with his hand, finds himself studying the speaker's face, searching for an image he feels is known. I have met you before, he says, Dublin football wasn't it, you played midfield for UCD, you would have met me up against the Gaels, we were a powerhouse then, that was the year we put you into the ground. The detective inspector stares at his face, the wrinkles have collapsed around the mouth, the gaze grown opaque, an inscrutable silence fills the room. He speaks without shaking his head. I do not know what you are talking about. Larry is sensitive now to his own voice, he can hear it when he speaks as though he too were in the room watching the interview, can see himself from across the table, can see himself watching through the peephole in the door, there is no other way of looking in, not even the one-way mirror you would see on TV. He hears his voice grown false, a little too chatty, perhaps. It was you for sure, you played midfield for UCD, I never forget an opponent. The officer takes a drink from his mug and swills the coffee against his teeth, he stares at Larry until Larry finds himself looking down at the table, he runs a finger across the nicked varnish then lifts his eyes again to the detective inspector. The bones in the face have

thickened, for sure, the frame grown stout, but what is told by the eyes never changes. Look, he says, I want to get this over with, I should be home with my family getting ready for bed, tell me, how can I help you? Detective Burke motions with an open hand. Mr Stack, we know you are a busy man so we are pleased to have an opportunity to speak with you, an allegation has been received that is of the utmost importance, it is an allegation that concerns you directly. Larry Stack watches the gaze of the two men and feels his mouth go dry. Something is moving in the room, he can sense this now, for a moment he remains frozen and then he looks up and sees the domed ceiling light where a moth is trapped and beats berserkly against the glass, the amber cupola soiled and filled with the bodies of moths past. Detective Burke has opened a folder and Larry Stack sees before him the bloodless hands of a priest, sees placed onto the table between them a sheet of printed paper. Larry begins to read the sheet, he blinks slowly then bites down on his teeth. Footsteps pass down the long corridor and are absolved by a closing door. He hears the muffled beatings of the moth, grows aware for an instant of something inside him beginning to wither. He looks up and sees Detective Burke watching him from across the table, the eyes regarding him as though they have the power to roam freely inside his thoughts, seeking to free something within him that isn't there. Larry looks towards the detective inspector who reads him now with an open face and he clears his throat and tries to smile at the two men. Officers, surely you're having me on? He watches them feeling the smile slide from his mouth, finds himself lifting the sheet and waving it. But this is nothing but madness, he says, wait until the general secretary hears about this, she will be on to the minister directly, I can assure you of that. The young detective coughs smartly into his fist then looks to the detective inspector who smiles and begins to speak. As you will be aware, Mr Stack, this is a difficult time for the state, we are under instruction to take seriously all allegations that are put before us—— What the hell are you talking about? Larry says, this is not an allegation, it makes no sense, you're twisting something, taking one thing and turning it into

something else, it looks like you typed this up yourselves. Mr Stack, you will be aware no doubt of the Emergency Powers Act that came into effect this September in response to the ongoing crisis facing the state, an act that gives supplemental provision and power to the GNSB for the maintenance of public order, so you must understand how this appears to us, your behaviour looks like the conduct of someone inciting hatred against the state, someone sowing discord and unrest – when the consequences of an action affect stability at the level of the state there are two possibilities before us, one is that the actor is an agent working against the interests of the state, the other is that he is ignorant of his actions and acting without the intention of doing so, but either way, Mr Stack, the result in both cases is the same, the person will be serving enemies of the state, and so, Mr Stack, we exhort you to examine your conscience and make sure this is not the case. Larry Stack is silent a long time, he is watching the sheet without seeing it and then he clears his throat and squeezes his hands. Let me understand you correctly, he says, you're asking me to prove that my behaviour is not seditious? Yes, that is correct, Mr Stack. But how can I prove what I am doing is not seditious when I'm merely just doing my job as a trade unionist, exercising my right under the constitution? That is up to you, Mr Stack, unless we decide this warrants further investigation, in which case it will no longer be up to you and we will decide. Larry finds himself standing out of the chair with his knuckles pressing against the table. What he sees in the face is will and he can see how he was brought here to be broken against this will, this will but a sanction of some absolute that has the power to make a yes into a no and a no into a yes. I want to be very clear about this, he says, the minister is going to hear about this and there's going to be trouble, you cannot threaten a senior trade unionist out of doing his job, the teachers in this country have a right to negotiate for better conditions and to engage in peaceful industrial action which has nothing to do with this so-called crisis facing the state, now if you don't mind I'm going home. The second detective slowly opens his mouth and Larry is almost sure he sees it, he thinks about this as he walks

back to the car and sits inside for a long time watching his hands quake on his lap. How the moth seemed to fly free of the officer's mouth.

First Ben to crèche and then the children to school, Molly stepping from the passenger door of the Touran with headphones on while Bailey slams the back door, Eilish watching over her shoulder as he stands pointillist by the glass pulling at his Parka hood. She is moving out onto the road when a hand bangs on the window, Molly is shouting for her to stop, the door pulls open and Molly grabs her gym bag from the floor and is gone. This winter light, a cold November smear, she is moving through traffic sensing her own exhausted emotion, her motions automatic, resting at the red light she sees not the day ahead but how the day will pass without impression, another day forgotten and absorbed into the silent reckoning of days, seeing herself at work and how she no longer thinks of her work as a career – the real work of a microbiologist is standing at the bench for long hours seeking evidence, testing hypothesis against reality, against whatever an individual might seek to believe, the answer true or false is found in the result. Now she spends her days on email and phone, specialist become generalist without a white coat, managing personnel, adrift during meetings, asking the wrong questions. She sits to her desk and looks at her email and reschedules a call for 5.30pm. She picks up her phone and rings Larry. Did you fill out the passport forms like I asked? she says. Listen, love, I'm still a bit rattled, I cannot get it out of my head. He speaks as though the air had been released from him while he slept, waking to find himself deflated, how he sat on the side of the bed staring at the floor. Did you tell them at work? she says. She hears him speak to a colleague for a moment with his hand covering the phone. I left them on the desk upstairs. Left what on the desk upstairs? The passport forms. Larry, you should ring Sean Wallace and talk to him, emergency powers or not, there are still constitutional rights in this country. I want to take this directly to the

general secretary but she is out today with a virus. Tell me, is Sean still parading about with that young one? Sean Wallace is buried up to his balls in that Fitzgerald trial right now, I don't want to trouble him, tell me, who is cooking dinner tonight? I still think you should ring him, it's your turn to cook. Grand so, I have a meeting scheduled for 6.30pm but I'm going to cancel, I'm not in the mood. Larry. What love? Oh, nothing, I picked up some mince yesterday, you can make burgers, look I have to go. She ends the call but sits for a moment with the phone in her hand aware of some ill feeling. She looks at the phone and reaches back into the call, following her voice into Larry's phone, the signal has to be relayed to reach Larry's mobile, it is picked up and relayed through a network transmitter. Of a sudden she hears her own voice as though she were listening to herself in another room. Talk to him, emergency powers or not, there are still constitutional rights in this country. She is suddenly cold, stands abruptly out of her chair and moves towards the office kitchen, thinking, in other countries, yes, but we don't have that kind of carry-on here, the gardaí, the state, they are not allowed to listen in on calls, there would be outrage. She thinks about the car last night parked outside the house, she thinks about the GNSB and the whispers she has heard about what is said to be going on, stepping now towards the kitchen she feels for a moment as though she does not know the room. Paul Felsner, the new global account executive, is standing at the coffee machine pulling at the cuff of his shirt. The machine stops whirring with a soft smack and he turns around and smiles without the smile reaching his eyes. Oh, Eilish, I was hoping to see you, you didn't respond to my voice message, they had to reschedule that video call with Asakuki to 6pm. There is something false about his face, she thinks, his eyes should be dark but instead they are green and she finds her sight drawn to the hooped party pin of the National Alliance on his lapel, the NAP, this new emblem of state. She looks down again at his hands and sees they are a little too small. Oh, I didn't see, she says, I'm afraid I won't be able to make that call, but thanks for letting me know.

There is a blue horse on the shore and it comes to her, riding now beside the water and she is ageless, riding in light, the phone ringing downstairs in the hall, she rides up out of the dream into the room. Larry is sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes. For goodness' sake, she whispers, it is quarter past one, who is ringing at this hour? It better not be your sister, he says. He leans forward then steps towards the door reaching for a shadow that wings open into dressing gown. The padding of slippers down the stairs while she lies listening to Ben's breathing in the cot, a smothered cough from the boys' room next door. Larry's muffled words reach upstairs and come shapeless into the room and she wonders who the call might be from, thinking of her sister Áine in Toronto, it happened once years ago, oh my God, I'm so sorry, sis, I got the time zones in reverse, I've just had a few drinks. She closes her eyes and seeks the blue horse on the strand, seeking it in memory, what age were you? It is winter, the sky low over the sea, touching the flanks with her heels, the shuddering vitality beneath, Larry's weight pressing down on the mattress beside her. I was just falling back asleep, she says. He does not speak but stares at the wall and seems leaden, belaboured of breath, she reaches out and squeezes his arm. What is it, Larry? She turns on the lamp and sits up, seeing him by the light's caress made into a child, a frowning, quizzical look as he turns and clears his throat. That was Carole Sexton, Jim's wife, she was near hysterical on the phone, Jim left the office yesterday and didn't return home. Is that all, Larry, I was afraid for a moment you were going to say somebody is dead. Listen, Eilish, she said they took him in. Who took him in? Who do you think, the GNSB. The GNSB? Yes, that is what she said. But that doesn't make any sense, Larry, what does she mean, took him in? Arrested, I suppose, detained, turns out somebody saw him being put into the back of a car but didn't think to let anybody know, she found out later after she rang around. Jim Sexton, that big mouthpiece, what has he ever done? The thing is, Eilish, nobody has heard a word from him since. But did he call the union solicitor, whatshisname? Michael Given, no, nothing, he didn't even call his wife. But you can't just