Erinn-ys

poems by Tom McCarthy

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Annoying Yeats in His Grave

Laying beneath his mountain
in the boneyard of his grandpa's stone church
the poet worries still about some damned horseman.
How does the black Irish earth hold him fast
the lump of poet buried here?

I have confronted the green cloth book
battlecars and heroes, bees and beasts
in the fake twilight of my room
bent back its spine, glittering secrets
trailing across the dark wood table,
rattling away on the black floor.
Then stood at the grave, mist smearing eyes,
to throw the damn book down and demand:
"Rear up out of there, old man,
and sing me a rhyme of maids,
of mountains and old Irish kings."

A poet's bones in rainy Sligo
his books in sooty Dublin
not in his grandpa's grave garden
but on grassy mountain flanks
in children's names rudely etched
in warped window glass of a stone manor
where he'd once recited by a log fire.
    Small candles suffer to snap in stone cabins
    where land falls sharp to the northern sea,
    long walks in dreary rain people make to
    share a shred of news, greetings, smudgy fire.

So tell me, then, poet,
does your muttering ghost weary yet
roam the heather angry
climb the hills, run the fells,
searching bog and hollow for legends,
myths and other stray cows?
"Rear up out of there, old man,
and sing me a rhyme of maids,
of mountains and old Irish kings."

Driving Nails

It has nothing to do with the doing
nothing to do with what's done
has everything to do with the pay
ya collect at the end of the week
so ya try to do a good job
and they'll keep ya on another week.
    Read books until there ain't
    no more books to read
    and don't go to church too often,
    and don't you ever
    tell lies to your grandmother.
Doing is meaningless
what's done a customer buys
gotta drive nails all the way home.
Ya get up early and sometimes stay up late
and ya always get to work on time.
    Read aloud to little kids
    sing loud in the shower
    if ya swear, swear in Irish
    don't go to church too often
    don't ever tell lies to your grandmother
    that's my job.

Annahala

In a broken boat, only one oar,
a crushed old man pushed out onto
the lough. No more mumbling into
his glass pints bought by lads who
take a living from the sea for him
who gets his death from the water
flooded over his house, his farm,
his people buried in the dooryard,
the house where he'd been born now
forty feet below the surface, the
rag curtains blowing out glassless
windows in a wind made by water
but his body never quite made it home.
Found bobbing in the reeds his heavy
old shoes weighting him like a bottle
but he'd gone home himself, over the
side, and drowned because he couldn't
live inland. Couldn't live anywhere
but home. A man should die in the
house where he was born, and that
has been the trouble all along.

Babies born there, took himself a wife.
She left early, leaving black coats praying
and neighbor women keening, and the
babies grew up and left too, finally.
All but him, till the coast pulled itself
down and the sea hauled up, the seals
were witness to his drowning years
before the fact, as the villagers
stood off on a bluff and talked among
themselves. Some say blood is in wind.
For others it is the sea. Or a particular
square of land where brambles might
grow and grass and children. You could
take a man's hand, he's got another,
but not his home where he loved his wife
and his kids, and replaced the roof
six times himself — six bloody times.

A Wake

two world wars
87 years of working
laid out in a dark room
blankets across the windows
guarded by mad daughters
and drunken sons blubbering
murmuring complaints at
the box's gunwales,
door barred iron hard in a
smoky shed for years and years
rivers do flow away forever
quiet but not quieted
in the least.

Grandma

Gideon or King James?
I only knew it as Grandma's Bible.
Yellowed papers tucked between its pages
carefully inscribed with graceful letters,
birth dates, deaths and anniversaries
of friends and family, some in Ireland
whom she hadn't seen in decades.
Black, musty, leather-covered book
stuffed with news clippings and notes.
"Cory passed his exams, April 1953."
"Cousin Katherine wed to James Kiernan
on Sept. 23, 1939 in Bly, Kilkenny."

Eight years he was at sea
and five more he was at war, then
Grandma sailed with Grandpa to America.

A crown of ash-colored curls,
eyeglasses on silver wire frames.
Trudging down the beach
black rubber boots scuffing the grey sand,
yellow rain slicker bright in the fog,
a wide-brimmed blue canvas hat
walking alone by the sea.

The gentle way she walked
my brother Cal
across the gravel yard to the
front steps of our yellow house when he
had come home from Vietnam wearing
his uniform and a bandage across his eyes.

Two weeks after the old man was killed
in a wreck at 25th and Geary
she died of a broken heart, I think,
couldn't endure a world without him,
that big old Bible by her bed.
"Uncle Clarence slain in France, April 1942."
"A son James to Cousin Lily, March 2, 1951."
and a letter never mailed:
"Dear Momma,
My husband and I are well.
I miss you and Poppa and our home.
I dream of the fog and of the sea . . ."

Grandpa

His panel truck started up like a disaster
every morning
when he was still young enough
for union work
and I swore for sure
I'd spend my life doing
"The same damn thing everyday" as he
but there were no ships for me
to go aboard a steward at age 10
my father telling me it was
time to leave the farm
no one telling me to find my own way
I could afford to dream.

Swinging a hammer for a living
working in the yard and on the site
with other men
a paperback in his tool kit,
I knew the old man was right:
"Such work ain't fit for a dog"
but only for the lack myself.
Grandma made it possible for him.
She was he as much as he was she
maybe more so.
Sitting at the table, coffee and tea
on the porch September evenings
a man who came home
needful of washing up
was all she needed from him
and come home he did
soiled and bruised
her liniment on his cuts
her hands kneading his shoulders.

Their quiet jokes in the kitchen:
—"Go on, then, Tom."—
"I'm serious, lass, that is
exactly what the man said."
They'd sit together
to watch the nightly TV news
for the sons of their daughter
my mother
the older sons
the sons half a world away

getting themselves made dead
holding hands
his paper, her sewing,
“Bring 'em home, ya bastards.”
—“Sssh, Tom, the little ones.”—

I wished I could work like him
hands as calloused as the world,
strong, to break up kindling in my hands
and still walk as he
hand in hand with “me lass”
along the bluffs north of town
near the shore
to pick wild blackberries
for a pie she’ll bake.
I wanted nothing more
than to walk into the union hall
where the carpenters are hired
look the man in the eye and say:
“My name is Tom Galway
and I come for work.”

A Bit Too Long in Prison

Head the shape of mountains eroding
into a disappointed sea, screaming at
the candlelight march for the dead
— any dead, and a lot of them, for him.
Lost his teeth somewhere along the way.

"I don't drink with just anyone, ya
Catholic bastard. Fuck you and fuck
your friend there, too." A pub where
his kind grimly hung on to the bar
to prevent it from slithering away.

Sidewalk in front of another pub, eyes
bleary, coat closed with plastic tape
and bits of wire. "Ya got a cigarette,
there?" Busted hat, ragged shoes.
Things gone further wrong than ever.
He'd run dead against all we'd run
from, the hate and bile, uselessness and
the madness of the prophecy: The destiny
of the land is the destiny of the man.

In the dirty corners of New York City,
the filthiest alleys, we find him:
A severed leg, a few teeth,
busted bits of his head — same as
when the cops here beat the shit out
of a black man, it hardly matters why
— it's the same shit beat out of him
in an English-built prison and in the streets
of our hometown. His flesh erupts,
veins burst, bullet scars flow anew,
opened up the filth of his guts meets
the filth on the street as he seems
to erode down the gutter.

Before the Hearth

Ravens croak about lies in muddy skies. "Not yet,
you black-hearted scoundrels. Not yet!" Crooked
hands haul at unpainted oars, locks groan
miserably across empty lough water the color

of armored cars, moves sluggishly, churlishly
aside as the small boat pushes against itself
against the tide, time, below the green-sogged
hillside Lissadell stands on, looming grey stone

manor house, grumbling gravel drive, surrounded
by blue-green spruce planted for lumber
harvest, where that poet once read in the
great gray room before the hearth, spruce-
scented fire warming polite company above old

tenant cabins reduced to a bog, a thick hank
of weeds where they sank down, burned out
at the hearth of a memory, an old song of a
street battle: stones and petrol bombs versus

soldiers and saracens, muddy sky simply
rains on them all: past, passed and present,
pushing across the water, obscuring either
shore the clouds lean down hard, windy rain
sweeps it all away, all
and any promise it dares offer.

His Last Words

No room for him in any churchyard
so he's buried down by the garden gate
not 10 paces from the village road.
His last brother came from the next valley
over to stand by the grave, holding his hat.
All over and done after tea his last night.
Left him wrapped in the green wool blanket
he always wore draped across his shoulders.
For years he was only a shade sitting by
the hearth, day and night, night and day,
sleeping in his chair, taking his meals there.
Never talking but much, much to think on.
"Springtime, it's always pleasant," he announced
a decade ago, long before the youngest was born,
emerged for a moment from the tangle and
comfort of his old memories. His last words.
Of a life spent outdoors and a lot of hard work.
Then plunged right back into his dreams,
lucky old bastard, and said nothing more
anyone could ever understand after that.
When the wind bangs the garden gate
the children spook and refuse to sleep.
They insist it's their old grandpa coming home
then going out again along the village road.

Kilmainham Gaol

In a gravel sideyard
they were pushed
up against a stone wall
and shot with rifles
from 10 feet. The wounded
bound to litters, were
propped up against the
wall so they could be shot.
Such a narrow yard
if their hands were untied
the men could reach
out and touch the
ends of the barrels
just before the explosions.

O'Connell Street

Punks beat a tourist at the corner
laugh as boots make dead sounds on the ribs.

A postcard mailed at the GPO fails
again to get the message out on time.
Kids beg for change down at the

bridge over the filthy black river.
A bum once jumped in the Liffey,
fed up, but he couldn't sink. Even

the river refused him. The Garda
did something for once: Fished his rags
and bones out. Which was the wrong

thing entirely. Down at Trinity the
continuous fender benders hack off the
newly prosperous going somewhere

and amuse everyone else. Making
room enough to accommodate the
violence amid the banks, hotels, megastores
and the pubs stink down here, full of
Americans, but when the weather is

good we all feel a bit better
and the punks they beat up another
tourist just to keep the edge on.

When the Trucks Turn the Corner

The insistent beat of the waves
is a direct reprimand to the shifting
windy chaos of the dunes.

The scarved women in coats slip
indoors, row houses and shops, their
shoes clatter and skitter on the stones
when the trucks turn the corner, the
village shudders and shakes as they pass
sections of a snaking beast rolling
on black rubber thighs emitting waves
of warning to level the men and boys
the certainty of the shipyards clanging
tolling bells of the half-empty churches
blessed be the rifles the soldiers carry
but vile be their souls for the work of
nailing the chaos to the walls
what's the use unless a few extra die.

The rhythm of the water
is an old, very old song,
older than the people who sing it now.

Valley of the Boyne

wandering among cairns and empty
mossy towers piled here and there
chiseled stone slowly returning to barbarous
rock, a new coat of greenery shines wet
covers the dead the living walk on
rain dragging across treeless hills
unnumbered, now nameless, all past
curled into themselves, cupping their selves
under low mounds of dirt, cap stones
a tiny window of weak solstice light
hard to imagine their blood any redder
hard to concede their brows any harder
swords slash still against the endless tide
and rocks crack against armoured cars
armalite makes believers at the polls
yet peace can kill as quick, a spatter
of vitals on a wet sidewalk but
clover relentlessly turns up green
buses rumble, sneakers shuffle on gravel
Kodak steals antiquities, tumbled-down abbeys
a thousand years, one thousand years
it has all waited for us, us alone, today
such a hard knot of damn stubborn
the river here runs a rust color

Sing Me Away So Merry

Dig a grave along the road to Belfast
and build a pile of gray stones nearby.
Dig a grave along the road to Belfast
for soon one cold cold day I shall pass by.

So be midnight brave and dig me grave
as 'ever I'm tilting toward Belfast.

Dig it deep, lads, oh dig it down deep,
dig it at the crossroads for Derry.

For such's me don't keen at the grave
or my anxious ghost'll slip on past.

Dance dance instead upon my rocky sleep
and sing sing sing me away so merry.

Dig a grave along the road to Belfast
and build a pile of gray stones nearby.
Dig a grave along the road to Belfast
for soon one cold cold day I shall pass by.

The Drowned Father

The wind never changes, always carries
the storms ashore, swells claw at the
gunwales, the sea is thirsty for men.

If I know the old man — and I do —
he gulped and drowned mad as burning
hell at it all, everything, spitting his last

breath with the same crude oath as
his own drowned father, a blasphemy
to alert Brother Satan, and a sigh as he

took in a great mean mouthful of seawater
before his lungs burst. Although he sure
suffered hard, it was a fitting way for

him suspicious always of damp black
holes, mumbling priests could never hold
him back or down, better the sea, his

blood as cold as the catch he worried
about losing in his final moment, himself
surprised he was the catch after all.

No one needed drowning more than that
shameless buggering bastard. None meaner
or harder on the living, dogs kicked

children and woman beaten, raped
everything and anything, his animal rutting
stupid, dead to it. The cold filth of

his hands and the dank stench of him.
His blood and mine, black as the ocean
on the darkest meanest night it ever had.

Soft as Snow

in the crook of his right arm he carried
an M-1 Garand rifle gas-operated
30.06 caliber five-round magazine
nine pounds with bayonet affixed
walking walking in soft sloppy snow
breaths rumbing in his chest walking
down into darkening northern woods
the crook of his right arm he carried
his squealing grandson up the stairs
at 8 p.m. his wife of 53 years saying
Don't you dare drop that child Tom
I got 'im Ain't dropped 'im as yet
legs not as strong as they once were
but gawd it's good to climb the stairs
billeted in a shattered house in Cologne
he climbed the stairs to sleep on the floor
setting all the town's bricks back one by one
in his neverending dreams
to tuck in the boy who'll see the heather
before he'll ever see it again a soldier
he'll die far far from his own mother's grave
but not this boy by gawd he'll pick
flowers in a sunny Clare glen for a
fair red-blond girl and carry his
own babies up the stairs to tuck them in
sit and rock and sing them a lullaby
soft as snow on a sweet gentle night.

A Pail of Milk, Donegal

A pail of milk pulled from the
steaming haunches of a half-mad cow
dung-smeared greasy hide
stinking in a low-roofed barn
a few kernels of grain scattered
over rotted weeds in the hopper
and carried across the dooryard
black muck sucking at leaky boots
filth rainbows arc across mud pools
holding the coat open over the glowing pail
to keep the rain off but everything
finally tastes of the dull grey rain
careful not to slosh the bucket
splash yellow cream over the muck.
A sad agreement brings an old man
out mornings such as this most days
to hunch over and hobble to the sodden
back door the woman yanks open to
cry "Wot, then?" the rude and bitter
response over years and years of mornings
only to offer up the pail of milk anew
his bargain renewed each dawn,
hot from the cow's guts, musky as
sweat wrapped in old woolens
brought to this his only agreement his
soul his sleep traded for eggs and dry bread
and something more he cannot quite see.
Toothless, fat and squinty
her arms thick as clubs
counts out sums on beefy fingers
stands solid on big flat feet
heart a sad shriveled thing,
Wot, then? when hope bleeds its certainty
if only the clouds themselves agreed
to lift from the treeless hills to offer up
a simple blue sky not constantly at war
with the land and its few people scattered
over the moldering green and the
sun's heat raising steam from his shoulders
to glow about his head and crushed cap
then his eyes could aim upward at last
to see what the peace looks like after all.

What the Mother Remembers

Only one, but maybe all of them by now
a droopy-eyed child with snot-smeared
sleeves who took his beatings like a good
boy but always seemed to need more
and more, enough to bust his father's
best cane across his backside and
shreds of little songs he'd sung in the
dooryard playing with bits of turf and
a few sticks when the sun shone out a
moment and he thought no one was watching
hard to find the sin in that but it was there
and what is so grand about living in
America — Sweet Mary, you love 'em as
best they'll ever get in this world and
you're left alone to sit before the window
a sight gone more than grey out there
without a word to say and no one to
say it to, nothing much I care to explain
anyway it's the same view as ever, the
same thing always looking across the
tangled garden and down to the quiet
road which finds its way down to the
village where the sodden doors always stick.

The King of Ireland

Over a low stone wall, ivy and down
into a pasture green a young boy played
with a wooden sword and a dream.

A story of a hero read, a tide, a stream
treeless hillside above a windy lough
when from the barn stone and slate

leaned the farmer to the bent steel gate.
Here now, what's the meaning of all this?
The father stood calmly under the rare sun

a Connemara sun where his memories begun
and inherited, shoes sunk in roadside mud
leaning on a slumped rental, sleepy smile

Pacific coast rains also drift off a mile
so he'd never been very far away at all.
The king of Ireland is taking the air, sir,

among your cows in your fair pasture.
Long chin under an old gray wool cap.
Your kind pardon, sir I am a-begging,

for I did not recognize his majesty the king.
The farmer angled to a low house buried
in brambles across the rough gravel road.

a smokeless chimney, how slow he strode
said what the small dark window
and the unpainted door hinted at.

Down on the icy lough
swells spit and spray
three white triangles aimed
from the quay away
to the open sea, new land
late in the day.

The Birds and Moon

in the garden she was
standing quite still
as if she could not move
she hadn't the will
    aye, for the silent
    babes motherless in cill
    move whom the birds and
    moon no longer will
a high-walled garden, leafy
treed, not far from a high hill
she was frozen watching the blue