

THE GREEN FIELDS
OF ROMANCE

Well how do you do, your Willie
McBride?
Do you mind if I sit you down by
your graveside,
And rest for a while neath the warm
summer sun?
I been walking all day and I'm
nearly done.
I see by your gravestone you were
once only nineteen
When you joined the great fallen
in 1916.
I hope you died well and I hope you
died clean:
Or young Willie McBride, was it
slow and obscene?

Chorus

Did they beat the drum slowly, did
they play the fife lowly?
Did they sound the Dead March as
they lowered you down?
Did the band play the Last Post and
chorus?
And did the pipes play the flowers of
the forest?

Davey Arthur

SIXTEEN DEAD MEN

O But we talked at large before
The sixteen men were shot,
But who can talk of give and take,
What should be and what not
While those dead men are loitering
there

To stir the boiling pot?

You say that we should still the land
Till Germany's overcome;
But who is there to argue that
Now Pearse is deaf and dumb?
And is their logic to outweigh
MacDonagh's bony thumb?

How could you dream they'd listen
That have an ear alone
For those new comrades they have
found,

Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone,
Or meddle with our give and take
That converse bone to bone?

W.B. Yeats

ACT OF UNION

I

To-night, a first movement, a pulse,
As if the rain in bogland gathered
head

To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny bed.
Your back is a firm line of eastern
coast

And your arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills. I caress
The heaving province where our
past has grown.

I am the tall kingdom over your
shoulder

That you would neither cajole nor
ignore.

Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-independent
shore

Within whose borders now my
legitimacy

Culminates inexorably.

II

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with the pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst
from within.

The act sprouted an obstinate fifth
column

Whose stance is growing unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart is a
wardrum

Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know
they're cocked

At me across the water. No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your
tracked

And stretchmarked body, the big
pain

That leaves you raw, like opened
ground, again.

Seamus Heaney

Nostalgia and Terror

The Fureys and David Arthur:
When You Were Sweet Sixteen
Avalon Records, 1982

Molly Bloom (in Joyce's *Ulysses*) had an excess of love which spilled out beyond her affirmation of herself to Leopold, that half-jew, no-man, every-man. These songs should be heard in that context, but also another context, one within which love is not possible, where gratitude is frozen by bombs, and where fatherhood is negotiated through death. Where are we now, after W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett? The gun firing is meaningless, preserved only by the old photograph which reminds us of the past. The songs evoke lost love, lost fathers, lost jobs, lost wars, a lost Ireland: Yesterday's Wars haunt us.

"The Green Fields of France" is probably the most startling and shocking satire Irish (and Scottish) lyrical bombast, set not in Ireland, but in the trenches of France at the end of the first World War, turning itself into a pastiche of Irish Rebel Songs (Enoch Kent and that ilk). How does one cut through a continuity of belligerent nostalgia? "The Irish remember every moment of their history: the English none of theirs, except as artifact," as someone said or should have said. But how do we remember? The English sanctify the monuments of imperialism, the Irish remember the English sanctifications of colonialism. The 'generals' of the first and second world war were largely Irish; over one third of the Other Ranks were. And the rest? Largely Welsh, Scottish, Nepalese (the Gurkhas) and other 'Commonwealth'.

Fighting for what? The war to end war, while Roger Casement was negotiating guns with the Germans on behalf of Irish independence. There are memories and memories. The English remember their part in creating 'civilization', the Irish the continuity of duplicity and contempt.

Part of Irish culture has always been dedicated to talking about the unsayable. The pain of knowing that we are all double-agents, Kim Philby's of the imagination. Whose side are you on? POW! Protestant Bastard! Papist! But these voices have largely been literary, or revealed in drunk conversations in pubs in Wexford St. Dublin or immigrant retreats in North America. (Carmel, California—don't you remember well the deconstruction of selective amnesia? No? Then you haven't read Brian Moore).

It is easy to appropriate the nostalgia from here and to take the tourist version of bombs and Joyce's map of Dublin. But what actually happens in Dublin? Does anyone sing any more? What do they sing about? If you have a long memory Nostalgia is the bombs, round the Post Office in 1916. But Ireland is free of bombs, except in Belfast where they crackle off like the dull rumour of another war. The Furey's songs come alive in the context of the dull rumour of the imaginary ("What are you carrying in your pocket? A grenade? But it might go off. Boom!") and the mundane reality of getting by, being made redundant at 20. Yesterday's people, fighting Yesterday's wars, but obviously today's.

The Furey's cut nostalgia down to the present. That war that you thought you were fighting then is *our* war, here, now. We inherit your mistakes, your photographs. When the drums played the Last Post and chorus it was not only for you, but for us. We drum that retreat from your battles.

And "When you were sweet sixteen," and our "Anniversary song," and "Oh Babushka" and meeting and not meeting you at the railway station, all the other nostalgias cut through me like a knife. I am back with Beckett and Joyce and the whole raggle-taggle bunch who will tell me that the Irish are the Jews, that Palestine and Belfast are one and the same thing. And of course it's a lie. "My love is like a Red, Red Rose that's newly sprung in June," but meanwhile my son lies in a green field of France, and "although you died back in 1916, in that fateful heart you are forever 19." I am breeding sons who will be strangers "without even a name, enclosed there forever behind a glass frame."

The Fureys shock us out of our romanticism. War is not nice; sex is war; nostalgia is both a sense of our own histories and violation of our own privileged space; the past lives in our presence. The guns that you hold against my groin exactly replicate the guns that I hold against yours. But yet I worry why neither of us pull the trigger: obviously because "I will love you when you are gone."

The Fureys are about that knife blade that would slit you apart but knowing that other knives have slit other necks like yours. I like your neck. I wouldn't have anyone touch it.

I? You? History? Violence? These poems/songs discourses, are about living on the borderline of experience. Not that romantic fad nonsense of D.H. Lawrence, nor even the equally romantic Sartre/Fanon conception that violence is necessary to our well being. But that absolutely mundane sense that violence strokes our sensuality. That the time of the horror is the time of our present, negotiated now in this love-tryst that flows with your menstrual blood. *Les Sang Des Autres*, as Simone de Beauvoir said in another context. My blood, your blood.

Ioan Davies

the day I got him to propose to me yes first
I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my
mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16
years ago my God after that long kiss I near
lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of
the mountain yes so we are flowers all a
womans body yes that was one true thing he
said in his life and the sun shines for you to-
day yes that was why I liked him because I
saw he understood or felt what a woman is
and I knew I could always get round him
and I gave him all the pleasure I could lead-
ing him on till he asked me to say yes and I
wouldnt answer first only looked over the
sea and the sky I was thinking of so many
things he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr
Stanhope and Hester and father and old
captain Groves and the sailors washing up
dishes they called it on the pier and the sen-
try in front of the governors house with the
thing round his white helmet poor devil half
roasted and the Spanish girls laughing in
their shawls and their tall combs and the
auctions in the morning the Greeks and the
jews and the Arabs and the devil knows
who else from all the ends of Europe and
Duke street and the fowl market all cluck-
ing outside Larby Sharons and the poor
donkeys slipping half asleep and the vague
fellows in the cloaks asleep in the shade on
the steps and the old wheels of the carts of
the bulls and the big castle thousands of
years old yes and those handsome Moors all
in white and turbans like kings asking you
to sit down in their little bit of a shop and
Ronda with the old windows of the posadas
glancing eyes a lattice hid for her lover to
kiss the iron and the wineshops night open at
night and the castanets and the night we
missed the boat at Algeciras the watchman
going about serene with his lamp and O that
awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the
sea crimson sometimes like fire and the
glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the
Alameda gardens yes all the queer little
streets and pink and blue and yellow houses
and the rosegardens and the jessamine and
geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a
girl where I was a Flower of the mountain
yes when I put the rose in my hair like the
Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red
yes and how he kissed me under the
Moorish wall and I thought well as well him
as another and then I asked him with my
eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me
would I yes to say yes my mountain flower
and first I put my arms around him yes and
drew him down to me so he could feel my
breasts all perfumed yes and his heart was
going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

James Joyce

SHALL MY SOUL PASS THRO'
OLD IRELAND

In the lonely Brixton prison where a
dying rebel lay,

By his side a priest was standing ere
his soul should pass away

And he faintly murmured, 'father,'
as he clasped him by the hand,

Tell me this before you leave me,
shall my soul pass through

Ireland?

Shall my soul pass through Old Ire-
land, pass through Cork's Old

City grand?

Shall I see the old cathedral where
St. Patrick took his stand?

Shall I see the little chapel where I
pledged my heart and hand?

Tell me father, ere you leave me,
shall my soul pass through

Ireland?

EXPOSURE

Our brains ache, in the merciless
iced winds that knife us . . .

Wearied we keep awake because
the night is silent . . .

Low, drooping flares confuse our
memory of the salient . . .

Worried by silence, nervous
whisper, curious, servious,

But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts
tugging on the wire,

Like twitching agonies of men
among its brambles.

Northward, incessantly, the
flickering gunnery rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some
other war.

What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins
to grow . . .

We only know war lasts, rain soaks,
and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her
melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on
shivering ranks of gray,

But nothing happens.

Wilfred Owen