

Singing School  
Patrick Reardon

## i. Opened Ground

For a month now Nerrie and I had been borrowing cigarettes from Pap, only one or two at a time and only when there were a few already gone or a few still left, so Pap wouldn't ever notice there was any missing. The first time we got our hands on one it had slipped out of the carton and was on the floor. Mam mustn't have seen it, because Nerrie said when she first went in the kitchen she saw it there, sitting in the center of a faint footprint on the flour-dusted cobblestone, as inviting as a new penny resting in the snow. When she snatched it up Mam didn't even turn round, just continued rinsing her hands in the sink, not even realizing she had ever been in the kitchen at all, maybe. Right away she brought it to me in the bedroom, and when I asked her where she found it she said "Right there on the floor, ye got a match have ya?" Well of course I didn't have no match and I told her so, but she told me to get on and fetch one, since she'd gotten the cigarette for us, so I said okay and told Nerrie to wait while I went back to the kitchen to get one off the stove. There was a small pack of them on the counter and Mam was nowhere to be seen so I went and took us a whole box of them, stuffing them into the pockets of my corduroys. When I turned to run back upstairs I ran right into Mam instead, and startled her so that you'd think I were Satan his own self.

"Hail Mary!" she cried, slapping a hand over her heart. "Christ save ye, Sean, ye scared me well. How'd ye get in here so quiet like?" I lied to her and said I'd just come for a bottle of milk. Mam gave me two floury kisses on my face, clouds of white powder puffing off her apron and handprints staining my hair from where she'd held it. I didn't have a fit none, and waited on the stool while she sloppily corked a bottle with brown paper and handed it to me, warning me to stay out of the kitchen while she was setting dinner and not to be scaring her anymore. I told her I would, then hurried upstairs with the matches and the milk where I found Nerrie.

We went to the backyard, over on the far side of the garden shed. There, Mam and Pap couldn't see us from the house, but Nerrie and I could sit on the stack of rotted planks and survey the wet green stretches of Co. Derry, distanced and grounded enough that we could see the broad River Foyle which moated Derry itself, the light-bespectacled city raised above the earth and fructified like a "phony Protestant cathedral" as Pap once called it. On our side of the Foyle and outside the city walls was Bogside, which Pap described as a putrefied slum for Catholics, Derry's prison where nationalist aspirations were confined by brooding gabled walls, whitewashed with masculine stone on the Derry side, and graffitied with propaganda by the angry Bogside folk on the other. Pap always said that one day he would drive down there himself and chalk up MY PASSPORT'S GREEN, but it was June and we had already gone to Bogside a handful of times that year and I never once saw nothing like that, much less anything that even looked anything like Pap's handwriting. There were plenty of paintings sure enough while we were there but in the recent months it were mostly barricades that were going up to keep out the guards. During the day we could see Bogside from our planks, and at night the old flats on Rossville Street were silhouetted by gallons of Derry streetlamps, morphing the Bogside buildings to the Irish landscape, as though they had been there for so long that they had spread roots into the bogs themselves. It took us a few tries to get one of the matches burning, and Nerrie held it up to the cigarette in my mouth, her pale hand shielding the red flame from the cold summer wind. I was accidentally inhaling when the tobacco lit up, so I started hacking up spurts of gray smoke and called her a cow from behind my coughs. We took turns taking drags on the cigarette until we finally got it right (it was me that first inhaled properly), then we shared the rest of it until our tongues were so dry and voices were so hoarse that we tossed the butt over the fence and drank up the milk that Mam had given us, surveying again that Derry twinkling a far few miles from the garden shed.

## ii. Death of a Naturalist

It was July and the day before Nerrie's birthday. She would be thirteen, only ten months younger than me. I had just walked out onto the porch: Mam was pinning up our shirts on a string in the front yard of the house while Pap was leaning on the fence and talking to our neighbor Barney Devlin who stood on the other side. The top of Barney's head was so bald that you'd think he was wearing a skin-color swimmer's cap, but he might have taken all that hair and had it sewn right into his eyebrows, because they protruded a full meter past those bottle-bottom glasses, his eyes so tiny behind them that they only looked like pores on his face. The two were smoking together, Barney talking with a loud country accent so dense that it was divine intervention that let Pap ever understand a word of it.

"That dawm Casey hundert writ dem words oer'on Columb's back in Janry wed not be haffin dis troubles, no aye."

"It woulda happened eventually," Pap said. I couldn't see his face from the porch, but a halo of silver smoke hung like mist around his head and shoulders. "John Casey weren't the first Irishman to badmouth Derry."

On the porch was a small round metal table with three legs as long as mine, caked with years of rust. One leg was noticeably longer than the others which set the whole thing arseways. A pack of cigarettes with red foil lay on the table, opened to reveal two long butts that had slipped almost half out.

"One wek ago Dungiven 'ad a riot," Barney said, pinching his cigarette tightly between his gnarled fingers and shaking it at Pap as though it were one of his actual fingers. "De gards alr'dy bet a Catlick lad to death last wek, n'den tree days layter de Devenny boy doyd from the betting dat *he* got *last manth*."

"Sam Devenny? Aye so I heard that, too."

I went inside and found Nerrie in the kitchen crimping the edges of a pie crust, her small fingers pressing the sandy dough between them to make perfect flutes in its perimeter. She looked up at me. There was flour on her cheeks, hardly even noticeable against her pale skin.

"What's in ye'r hand there?" she said suspiciously, her eyelids taut.

"Happy birthday," I said, and showed her two crumpled cigarettes in my palm, and her eyes expanded and glowed like phosphorous.

"Where'd ye get 'em?" She was untying her apron.

"Took 'em."

"Nice one, Sean!" she exclaimed, pulling the apron over her head, white powder dancing about the kitchen like spores. She took the cigarettes from my hand and I followed her trail of flour outside. The soil was damp, our shoes disturbing small flecks of pollen that were tossed from the dirt and glazed the July sunbeams. The yard smelled like the earth, sods of flax festering in the far corners by the fence. Further down the hill bubbles gargled in the small tadpole pond, above which dragon-flies perched in bluebottles. The air was sharp, fertile, flushing our cheeks like any goddess of spring, but this was summer in Co. Derry.

Nerrie handed me a cigarette that was dusted lightly with flour. We lighted them behind the shed, our feet propped up on Pap's spade. In the distance we saw Derry and Bogside and the great rumbling River Foyle that loomed behind them, north by south. The sun had already begun to set behind us, the Bogside buildings fading into the shadow of nature while Derry illuminated itself artificially.

"I didn't know ye smoked."

My heart stopped for a moment as I turned and saw Pap standing just behind us. His gaunt face was stretched tight around his cheekbones and although his gray hair had been thinning for ages it looked remarkably sparse from where I sat on the planks. I don't think I've seen him look older than he did right then and there, even when I look at him today.

We stared at each other in silence for a while, his tired gaze shifting only slightly, as though the exhausted passions of the world had been collected inside the bags of his eyes and never unloaded at any depot. "Come on," he said, turning and walking back towards the house. I dropped my cigarette onto the ground behind the shed, but it had long burned down to an ashy simmer. It landed in the trampled grass. I followed him without even looking at Nerrie. We went inside, through the kitchen and foyer and to the front porch. The red foil cigarettes were still on the metal table.

"Seamus, dear," Mam said, her face contorted with concern.

"Smoke the rest of 'em, then," Pap said to me, and with the intentionality of a policeman he slid the cigarettes across the top of the precarious table toward me.

"I don't want to," I said.

"Ye don't have to want to."

By the time I'd finished smoking the other eighteen cigarettes the sun was down and I'd wretched twice, but I never smoked again, honest.

### iii. The Tollund Man

Pap took me with him to the auto down near Bogside in August when the Volkswagen needed a new brake light. It was only meant to be a thirty or forty minute task but the simple journey to the foot of Derry's walls seemed a missionary pilgrimage to me. My nose left small clear blebs of grease on the car window as I watched the old Irish hills roll by and beneath Pap's spitting blue Volkswagen, clods of turf churned up and discarded on the side of the path by the skinny rubber tires until we reached the paved road, William Street, which the auto was just another mile down off of. We were blocked from turning off the dirt road by a large wooden plank that had scrawled on it:

CLOSED.  
(on account of parade)

We sat looking at the sign for a good minute, the only sound was the guttural breathing of the engine and the minute cricks of Pap's jaw as though he were chewing his tongue like it were tobacco. Of course the parade was an annual Protestant celebration, they called it the Apprentice Boys March, which was started after King James II was defeated some three hundred years ago and was only continued today as a convenient and calculated insult to the grizzled Derry Catholics like Pap who were forced to listen to English pipes and Protestant anthems from their rancid Bogside cells.

"It's the twelfth," Pap said. "Today's the twelfth."

I didn't want to be sent home because of the parade, not when I was so near to seeing Derry again, so I said, "What about the light?"

"We'll go get it," Pap answered after another brief moment of waiting. The car coughed gently as Pap switched off the engine. It was warm, William Street smelled like cement and oil, and smoke-snakes still lingered around the car. "Let's get on quick, hey?" Pap said, and I followed him down the street, Derry already visible at the end of it.

As we walked down the street there were no American prairies or English coal mines, just crusted Irish soil, a deep bog melting under August's sun like black butter speckled with insects and fir branches. I watched the soggy peat frozen in immobility, the wet lid covering a bottomless cask of preservations. Once we'd passed the mysterious bog caked in mist we were standing at William Street and Waterloo Place and found a myriad of people inhabiting the streets. Pap tensed up like a coiling spring, his hand clutching my shoulder.

On the great vandalized walls of Derry a large number of loyalists held the flags of Great Britain flapping red white and blue in the breeze, laughing and jeering at the people of Bogside, who had crossed their barricades and were hurling profanities in return. Pap kept his hand on me, directing me through the mass with nervous objective. From the top of the gabled wall a group of youths were chucking pennies into the crowd. "Give these to yer church's collection basket!" one of them said, and all of Derry laughed. A copper coin bounced off my jumper and clinked onto the street. Then a boy I recognized from my school, Dan Taggart, a thick lad with tabby hair took a marble of his pocket and shouted, "Scraggy wee shits!" and with the slingshot he was holding he launched it at the antagonists. It struck a Derry lass in the chin.

I hadn't noticed but the parade was already passing by quickly, trying to reach the safety of Derry. The tin whistles and drums were drowned by Irish fury, the gentle English tune as provocative as war trumpets. Some folks were throwing stones and even nails at the marchers and police who were escorting them. One of the guards struck Dan Taggart in the chest with a baton, growling, "Go home, pup."

Pap wasn't holding my shoulder anymore. The floor of my stomach dropped out, the turbulent crowd couldn't let me see him anywhere. I heard the words "petrol bomb" and "IRA." I tripped over an old man who was lying on the street and covering his eyes with a rosary, a bright red gash on his skull. I saw a policeman on the wall flashing his arms and pointing at the Catholics below him, and a barrage of stones were shot down from the loyalist civilians.

I scrambled upright to avoid being trampled. The guards were pushing us back towards Bogside with riot shields, helmeted and masked like armored soldiers. I pushed my way through the populated street, ducking past a man wrestling a guard and started running back up William Street. My lungs were throbbing and my face sweating as I ran up the street towards the ancient bog.

"Hey you, boy!"

I stopped running and turned around. A policeman was lumbering swiftly towards me like black cattle do, snuffing and shaking a gauntleted hand at my face. "What's your name, boy?"

"Sean..."

"Sean?"

He laid his hand on my chest but before he could grab it my elbow struck him in the jaw. I wheeled backwards a few paces and turned to run but his baton found the nape of my neck. My eyesight flashed with colors for a moment and I sprawled off the street, rolling down the steep cliff of hard sod and landed right in the dank soil of the bog. I was paralyzed as it clutched me, dipping me into its wet center. Everything was dark, the mud caking the skin of my eyes, anxious bits of spawn spreading across my back and through my hair. The burning flames in my lungs were extinguished as I breathed in the bog.

*Then I saw him lying in it. The stained, shallow, perfectly preserved face. His eyelids were shut loosely over his eyes, orange stubble still growing on his lips. He was naked except for the noose around his neck, tightened there by any Scandinavian or Roman. The bog-soil acted as his mummifying bandages.*

*He was as incorrupt as many saints, the dark juices of goddess Ireland restoring and re-restoring him beneath the earth. His lips were drawn peacefully and mildly into a smile.*

*He was not the only one. For leagues they were there, beneath my home, beneath the continent in Denmark and Iceland, all cradled by the same bog. The astounding bronzed skeleton of a Great Irish Elk stood intact, filled with air as though breathing. A Cherokee spoke to me, held my hand. Behind gates of horn and ivory the Trojan fleet was sleeping. Severed Viking heads, two berserks greaved in bog during the holmgang, clubbing one another for honor's sake. They were perfect roots, unifying each other in the darkness between the English Channel, the Norwegian Sea, and the entire Atlantic in the single bog. The wet center was bottomless.*

My ribs nearly shattered under the force of Pap's hands. Lumps of earth pulsed up my throat and into the air as I hacked the bog out of my lungs. I couldn't feel my body, and Pap's face looked as though it were on the other side of a foggy rain-streaked window. His hands kept thumping my chest.

"Not our son too," I heard Mam saying. "Not Sean too."

"It's not like Nerrie, then," Pap's voice said a bit unsurely, "I can save him this time."

My head lolled compulsorily as my whole body was pumped with shockwaves of air. Afterwards, I liked to think I saw Nerrie standing behind Mam, peacefully watching me, her lips smiling mildly and kindly at me as Mam cried, but she had drowned four years ago.

The last clod of mud spat from my mouth and I sat upright, tasting clean August air. Pap took my face in his cold hands and looked at me, tossing my head a bit. "Ye're okay, boy," he said. "Ye're okay." I still like to think I saw Nerrie, though, hugging me along with Mam and Pap. Mam smelled of flour and Pap of cigarettes, but the smell of the bog was of Nerrie.