

# PITY THE BASTARDS



*Tom French*

*“... thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father’s brethren; and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them”*

—NUMBERS 28: 7

*for Billy and Tadhg*

who lived in the eternal bastard present all their lives,  
knew bulldozed boundaries and ancient names for fields  
by heart and had no names themselves apart from Christian  
names, who cycled miles to mass in market towns the livestock  
saw more often than themselves, and swayed up boreens, pristine  
in their Sunday best and pissed when the God of churches  
refused to let them do the hard work they were born to do;

Pity the bastards, who clamped buck rabbits’ heads  
between their legs and funnelled poitin into them  
until they bucked, the blue sky shrivelling in their  
pissed eyes, who swore blind that spirits sweetened  
the meat, bled them through their scraped-out holes  
for eyes and tugged the fur off over skulls like pulling  
crew-necked knitted jumpers over children’s heads;

Pity the bastards, who hunted free-range eggs in sheds  
and bore them back like promises or secrets in their flat  
caps, who worked for fags and died of lung complaints,  
cows withholding milk for days because they missed the rough,  
familiar touch and singing in their flanks. Pity the bastards,  
who tested suspect hay in sheds with bare arms slipped  
between the haunches of the bales and feeling, like a vet

buried to the armpit in a heifer, who grabbed at sops  
like the wet heels of a runt calf and pulled, and felt the crop  
contract against the strain, clench against them, scald  
them, and relax; who did not need to be told twice

if a scum had built that the crop would light if it wasn't  
dumped and torched that night, the way you dumped  
the runt to save the heifer, who satisfied themselves

with saving sheds some summers instead of hay;  
Pity the bastards who loved to leave their yard  
boots on the loft stairs and stand to their ankles  
in the deep grain, taking to turning it and falling for  
the rhythm of the chore, the wheat trench dug and borne  
across the boards to break against one gable end and  
double back, *ad infinitum*, the glint and dust and brunt

of indoor work, when called for tea was to be called  
back from the brink, the trance of being knee-deep  
in it and rowing for their lives, of wheat waves  
breaking on the upstairs walls, who turned an  
ancient jumper inside out to break the trance  
and went down for their tea, who put on boots and  
felt like they had took off wings. Pity the bastards,

who loved to stand out in a fine mist, to touch the damp  
warmth stored on the undersides of stones; Masters  
of the punchline and the sound-bite—*What would you do  
with the jawbone of an ass?*, the answer roared to scan-  
dalize the woman of the house—*Kill thousands!*;  
who kept the bill-hook shone to keep the wound  
it made from going septic, who hot-wired Zetors,

tampered with the diaphragms of chainsaws and  
spent so long on all fours snagging swedes and turnips  
it often slipped their minds that they were men;  
who owned no clothes except the clothes they wore,  
were known for not being able to harm a fly and meant  
no harm when they grabbed the hand of a married  
brother's girl and rammed it down inside the waist-

band of a working pants where nature hardened  
like a pickaxe handle; Pity the bastards, and the  
youngster sprinting from an outhouse in the dark,  
her hand aloft like a torch to light the way, whose  
nipples pinched by an uncle stung for days  
under a blue school blouse, who knew to say  
nothing. Pity the bastards, landlocked all their

lives, who took a row boat out on a calm lake  
once and felt brute power flow into the oars,  
lungs igniting with a cold lake air, once or  
twice who caught the drift of it and got it right,  
whose bulk became all cut and thrust and heave,  
on whom the dip and drip of blades conferred  
a sense of having slipped into the stream of things,

who strained and stroked and rowed till  
they were flat out, limbered up and numbed,  
who came around and scrambled for the bank  
and learned the farther inland they could see  
the farther out from land they went, who aband-  
oned oars at the boathouse door, stowed the craft  
on her stanchions and felt it as a kind of grace

when the hoisted shell assumed its given mass.  
Pity the bastards, who perfected the dead-butt  
from the back wall, predicted the foul-hop, kept  
a clear eye on the dropping ball, a cool head  
in defence, who swore by pesticides, believed in land,  
supported Man United all their lives and suffered  
Munich as a personal disaster, who took off

Elvis in the local after closing and cried like  
children when he died, whose shit-caked boots  
were as close as they ever came to blue suede shoes.  
Pity the bastards, who voted for Europe in the local  
national schools where masters hammered *Seven-  
teen different colours of shit* out of them on a  
regular basis and in the process educated

them, who never got to grips with “quotas”  
because they loved churns, who understood  
instinctively that milk likes peace and curdles  
if disturbed, and so left it in the draught between  
two doors, who dipped their fingers in it to the wrist  
to coax an ailing weanling into drinking.  
Pity the bastards, whose winters made them

good at lighting fires, who kicked Moroccan  
orange crates to bits for tinder, whose mothers  
were their sisters and their fathers rogues, who

lived in dread of County Homes and dreamed  
of dying in their own beds, who loved the epic  
feat of memory and recollected all the Presidents  
of the United States in order of incumbency,

dates of the battles of Clontarf and Hastings,  
who treated cows at milking time to every line  
of *A bunch of the boys were whooping it up*  
*at the Malamute Saloon*, emasculated cattle  
with a steel Burdizzo and took malicious pleasure  
in fingering their testicles expertly, like devotees  
with shrivelled leather purses for their beads,

who remembered the headland of the field  
they were working in precisely when Kennedy  
got that high velocity bullet in the head and  
fantasized about what they'd like to do to Oswald.  
Pity the bastards, who knew the knack with  
landing a good punch was to time it right,

who karate-chopped rabbits to put them out  
of their misery, who smeared Swarfega into  
injured skins and loved the stink of it, who  
were anti-Christ butchers when it came to roses  
but thought a law protecting gentians sound.  
Pity the bastards, who were stuck to the ground  
by a hard frost once like Gullivers, who spent

their lifetimes travelling sixteen acres extensively,  
who spoke no language only English and thought  
it lovely when the young ones picked up German.  
Pity the bastards, who cut crops from the centre  
out to give the corncrakes time to make a break,  
who dandled concertinas on their knees like babies  
and loved the only note the wind could play

on the top of a gate because it had no fingers,  
who loved to sing *Put another nickel in*  
*in the nickelodeon* and did not know what  
the words they were singing meant, and cared  
less. Pity the bastards, who slept in extra rooms  
they helped build, beds that smelled of fields  
and sheds, who vividly recalled the automatic

Telecom exchange when it was Carey's forge,  
who sacrificed one lung to TB or the god  
of nicotine, who coughed until they coughed  
blood, who thought themselves lucky. Pity  
the bastards, who held an old bull's blood-  
pumped head hard into their own chests  
for a whole day once and lived to tell the tale,

like lovers locked in a lovers' long embrace,  
bull face to man face, the thick chain wound  
around their wrists, fed twice around their big  
man's bleeding fists like the shiny bright  
umbilicus of some strange child they both delivered  
there, who wore the gouged-out hollows of the bull's  
front legs like negatives of breasts and never

claimed they'd got the better of the beast, but  
missed him when the Sergeant stopped out  
with a captive bolt in a cardboard box to drop  
the old stud at his manger on the spot, who  
prayed for the creature that had wanted them  
dead because it knew no better, and only said  
they'd smelled the breath of death that reeked,

they said, of meadowsweet, wild flowers, ramson,  
half-digested grass. Pity the bastards, whose requiem  
masses were long, convoluted, concelebrated  
affairs attended by kin who went into the Church  
and wound up on the missions in Brazil.  
And pity them, because they left behind them  
nothing, and took their names, and if they played

could imitate a hurt plover or a baby wailing  
by pressing a rusty latch key against the strings,  
who heard the waves at evening breaking in the key  
of E, who went into the lakes, the earth, the sea,  
holding stones inside their clothes like infants  
to their chests, whistling into sheds with home-made ropes,  
who took more jigs and reels and slow airs with them

than a human could play in a lifetime to their graves.

Belfield, May 1998