

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 Tadbg

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