

Ballad of Ballymote (Tess Gallagher)

We stopped at her hut on the road to Ballymote
But she did not look up, and her head was on her knees.

“What is it?” we asked.
As from the dreams of the dead, her voice came up:

“My father, they shot him as he looked up from his plate
and again as he stood, and again as he fell against the stove
and like a thrush his breath bruised the room and was gone.”

A traveler would have asked directions but saw she would not lift her face.
“What is it,” he asked.

“My husband sits in the pub all day and all night
and I may as well be a widow for the way he beats me, to prove he’s alive.”

“What is it,” said the traveler’s wife, just come up to look.

“My son’s lost both eyes in a fight to keep himself a man
And there he sits behind the door, where there is no door
And he sees by the stumps of his hands.”

“And have you no daughters for comfort?”

“Two there are, and gone to nuns,
and a third to the north, with the fishermen.”

“What are you cooking?”

“Cabbage and bones,” she said. “Cabbage and bones.”