

## For My Irish Grandfather

I am stung now with a different shame than then,  
That day in front of Kresge's five-and-ten  
When my urchin friends and I ran into you,  
Staggering, unshaven, your crushed felt hat askew.  
You swooped down with unbounded love to hug me,  
Then stopped and rocked in grieved uncertainty.  
You must have sensed my recoil, my debate,  
Young as I was. (Was it seven or eight?)  
Lips tobacco flecked, blue eyes clouded and remote,  
You fished in the baggy pockets of your coat  
(That coat so oversized  
The sleeves fell past your fingertips.) Your eyes  
Found sunlight. You held up a dime,  
(One you had just bummed, maybe) black with grime  
And chew tobacco, and tendered it to me.  
I ran and left you gesturing helplessly.

They say the whole town knew about you, Tommy Dwyer,  
That you had a voice like one of heaven's choir,  
That silver voice my mother used to call  
Your "sad and tragic downfall."  
In those depression years, in the saloons,  
They plied your weakness. One would importune,  
"Have another drink, Tommy. This one's on me."  
And another, "Sing us your beautiful 'Mother Machree'."  
Whole seasons you would disappear.  
When I'd ask mother why, she would look severe.  
"He's riding the rails," she'd whisper. "Who knows where?  
Let's pray God's mother keeps him in her care."

In laurel time I think of you the more.  
That's when you'd show up at the door.  
Mother would argue you into a hot tub.  
My father, when you were sobered up and scrubbed,  
Would cut your hair and shave you, find you shoes,  
And one of his old suits. For a month or two  
You'd be a different man. Then you'd be gone  
As suddenly as summer moving on.

I wish I could have known you in your heyday,  
When your eyes were like the May and every payday  
You courted pretty Bridget Rooney  
With ballads of the times, all Juney-moony;  
Before the years of drudging in the coal mines,

Her early death, the booze, the brooding bread-lines.

I keep a priceless memory  
Of an hour or two you spent with me  
When mother left me in your care one day.  
You made up games in a grandfather's way.  
I'd run and hide behind the chair.  
You'd pretend to look for me everywhere  
Till you suddenly spied me. Then you sang,  
(How tenderly your tenor rang)  
"Peek-a-boo,  
I see you  
Hiding behind the chair.  
Peek-a-boo,  
I love you  
Hiding behind the chair."  
Did you remember, hopping a freight in the bitter midnight air?

The last time I saw you alive we cried.  
It was when mother died.  
We never knew how you heard the news.  
You appeared out of nowhere, like sorrow's muse.  
I sat in the living room, all alone  
With mother. (She lay as if carved in stone.)  
The front door opened slowly, slowly.  
You stood there, bowed and bald and holy,  
Your felt hat crumpled in your hands,  
Your too-big overcoat strangely grand.  
You ignored me and moved to the coffin and stood  
A long time looking, still as the wood  
Of the crucifix above her head,  
One with the silence of the dead.  
Down our cheeks ran the drops of our shared loss.  
You made a gigantic sign of the cross.  
Shouting, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph have mercy  
On my darling, my girl, my little girl . . .  
She forgave me all my sins.  
She took me in  
When I had nowhere to lay my head.  
She's with Christ and his angels and saints." You spread  
A kerchief over your nose and blew it.  
Then (young as I was, I knew you'd do it)  
You started to sing.  
Your voice had the lilt of an angel's wing.  
"My wild Irish rose . . .  
Sweetest flower that grows . . ."

From dining room, kitchen, from the street outside,  
Family and neighbors gathered, wet-eyed.  
“You may go everywhere,  
But none can compare . . . “  
My memory fails here, and my art,  
With you singing her beauty, your hand on your heart.

-- Joseph Awad, in *The Next Parish Over: a Collection of Irish-American Writing*, ed. Patricia Monaghan