

The Nod

Tonight the lights of new bungalows dance in the level water of the lake, and shadows
from Jimmy the Hay's
shack and your grandparents' derelict house squat behind the wall of shoreline trees
where Mick Casserly's boat
has collapsed in the bones of its timbers. For years now the fishing has been poor -
the brown trout almost gone,
driven out, your cousin says, by pike introduced by Englishmen with no patience for
fly-fishing and famine days
when every fly is the wrong fly and teasing rudd jump clear of the water, throwing sprays
of diamonds off their backs.

The lake water is ice cold, the shock of it enough to stall the heart of a sick man, though
when I was younger
I often swam in it, catching crayfish in a clear jar for our children, or wading out to watch
voracious shrimp
feed among the reeds, and afterwards, drying off in minutes in the windless heat
of an August afternoon.
I'll never swim again, never run as I once did at full tilt across an open field, unafraid
of the limits
of my endurance, and I'll never again stand for profligate hours, mindless in the heaven
of the passing world around me.

What was that world? A dust-lit kitchen twenty five years ago with a range and a wooden
table on which
two pears touch, end to end, in a semblance of homely infinity; a bakelite telephone
encrusted with peat
motes from the range where each night your grandmother heats iron blocks and wraps
them in a blanket
to warm the bed we sleep in; a two-station TV to watch news and weather bulletins
twice a day;
and the only comfortable chairs in the house, each side of the range: one for your grandfather,
the other for guests.

A few months before he dies in his chair, Mick scrapes out his pipe and fills it – there is
little or no talk
while the women are abroad in the town. Outside the window the lake is frosted silver
by multitudes of small,
pointed waves; a crow on the roof coughs a raucous vowel. We settle down and for two hours
no car passes;
the only sound is our breathing and a popping noise when Mick draws on his pipe.
Are you shaving yet? is the sum of his talk.
I am twenty-six years old, a father myself, though to your grandfather I am still a child.
I am, I answer, the remainder unsaid.

A postoffice van glides by on the road, breaching the air as if its engine were dead;
the wireless,
turned low all morning, crackles a line from a sean-nós song; the fridge shivers in a vain
attempt to keep
week old milk from taint; tappets yammer in the back field where a tractor idles in neutral;
the clock in the hall
ticks and chirps like a broken banjo; steps on the gravel; voices at the door; coming and going,
a notion to go up
to the bedroom and look out at the lake field where the malt bull sleeps— five full minutes pass
before he gives me the nod.