

No Writers Were Harmed in the Making of This Whiskey

I.

“Now here’s a fine, square-shouldered whiskey for you.
You’ll like this one.”

Giving Art a nod, Jack twists the bottle cap slowly
and with exaggerated care,
like a sapper extracting a fuse cylinder
from an unexploded artillery shell.
Reading from the label at close range,
his eyes crossing with concentration,
Jack permits his voice to fall to a rough whisper,
signalling a reverence for the precious golden liquid within:
“Writers’ Tears. Pure pot still.”
He at last frees the bottle cap and
fills two small glasses to the brim.

It is eleven-thirty in the morning,
or so says the quartz clock that hangs crooked on the wall
in Jack and Kathleen’s small kitchen, next to the Sacred Heart
and the framed picture of Fionnuala—their only—
photographed at birth, thirty years ago.

The brothers toss back two whiskeys in quick succession.
They bang their glasses back down hard onto the table.
“The advertising says ‘No writers were harmed
in the making of this whiskey,’” Jack adds.
Art nods, slowly. “Aye, Jack. That’s a brave one. Clever.”

It’s a merciful release to have the women out of the house,
getting their hair done in the next town.
“It would be no trouble for us to keep an eye on the wee ’un,”
Jack had said to Kathleen and Fionnuala. “No trouble at all.”
“Are you sure?”
“Yes, I’m sure.”

Art picks the bottle up from the table,
squinting at it, *his* eyes now crossing as he
struggles to read over the top of his glasses:
“Distilled and b-b-bottled in bond,” he says,
a stammer restored to his thickened tongue,
a tragic echo of a tragic boyhood. “Good stuff.”
“Right, yeah,” Jack says. “Made in a
copper pot still. None better.”

A minute passes. After swallowing more whiskey,
Art tries to say something but most of his vowels
and consonants slither back down his throat.
Giving up on trying to read the finer print on the label,
he shifts his gaze back to Jack’s crimson face.

Television sounds filter into the kitchen from the parlour—
poppuns and unruly trombones and cartoon voices
in a high register—punctuated here and there
by the laughter of 20-month-old Téadóir,
son to Fionnuala, grandson to Jack and Kathleen
and grandnephew to Art and Valeria.

“Will y-y-you allow us another?” Art asks,
gesturing toward the bottle with his hand
before reaching into a shirt pocket
for his packet of Viceroy Lights.
“Of course, yes, but there’ll be no smoking,”
Jack replies, an almost-forgotten tone betokening an
elder brother’s authority creeping into his voice.
He unscrews the bottle cap again,
his fingers now less nimble.
“But the w-w-women are gone,” Art protests.
“True enough, but the boy’s not.”
“He’s in the next room, Jack.

No harm will c-c-come to him. We'll clear
the smoke away with a b-b-bacon fry
long before they're back."
"All right then, Art," Jack says after a pause.
"A little whiff now and again won't kill him."
Blue plumes soon enwreathe their nodding heads
as glasses are refilled again. And again.

Pure pot still.

II.

Losing interest in his cartoon,
Téadóir sets off for a wander,
a red plastic ball clutched in his hand.
The telephone rings.
Looking up, startled by the sound,
he remembers what must be done.
The boy runs unsteadily to the kitchen,
points to the telephone on the wall
and pulls on Granda Jack's shirtsleeve:
"Ello! Ello! Ello!"
Pointing earnestly at the "ello"—his word—
he keeps on, more loudly: "Ello! Ello!"
But there is no waking Granda Jack—
or Uncle Art, whose cigarette has burned
a glowing red hollow into the kitchen table.
The smoke from it joins the greasy fug
that is beginning to rise up from the blackening bacon
in the pan on the cooker.

The ringing finally stops, as does Téadóir
in his effort to wake Granda Jack.
He looks up at the smoke furls beginning to
obscure the ceiling, then back at Granda Jack,
and points again: “Uh-oh? Uh-oh?”
Unheeded, his little brow knit with worry
and incomprehension, the boy resumes his travels.

“Uh-oh!”
This time it’s his red ball.
Having slipped his grasp, it now
bobs on the surface of the water in the toilet,
just out of reach.
Téadóir leans in and thrusts his hand forward.
He strains and stretches.
“Uh-oh!”—his singsong universal
for all wrongs and troubles—
echoes sweetly within the small hard cavity
of the bowl as he leans in, straining
to recapture the floating red toy.

With a mighty effort he reaches gamely again for it—
his little diapered waist teetering unsteadily
on the fulcrum of the toilet’s white rim—
until gravity and laws of physics that
he hasn’t yet learned to obey quickly combine
to pass judgment on his strategy and condemn him.
The boy overbalances, tips forward and tumbles in,
face first, the full and unforgiving weight of his body forcing
his head beneath the surface of the water
and holding it fast there,
a nautilus in a porcelain shell.

Jack and Art continue to doze in the kitchen
in an unknowing stupor. They hear neither the splash
nor the frightened shout that precedes it.
Art's cigarette, cradled in the burnt hollow it
has formed in the kitchen table, has expired,
its red ember gone dark. The smoke from the cooker,
too, subsides as the bacon is reduced to pure carbon
by the gas ring's low flame, leaving nothing more to burn
but the slowly buckling metal of the pan.

III.

Kathleen, Fionnuala and Valeria revel in their
unknowing freedom. Glad and carefree, they
periodically check their new highlights and twilights
in the Vauxhall's rear-view mirror. They laugh
and chatter while, as the afternoon fades,
Kathleen drives them all home from the hairdresser's
in Magherafelt back to Knockcloghrim—
to Knockcloghrim where a cheap quartz clock
ticks bravely on and where, like an unexploded artillery shell,
the end of the world awaits their return.