

part I:
... imaginative beginnings ...



I am not, technically a Dubliner, despite being born and reared in Inchicore. I am told that for the full qualification three generations born in the city are needed. My children would qualify, if they wished; my parents were born in Dublin.

Their own parents were all born in the country. My mother's parents, the Casserlys, came from Ballinafid in County Westmeath; the Kinsellas from Tinahely in County Wicklow. Grandfather Casserly, 'the Boss', was employed by an insurance company as a collector; he was a man about town, unreliable on his bicycle. Grandfather Kinsella was a quieter person, long retired from Guinness's when I knew him: deaf and gentle and bald, a repairer of shoes.

The wives of these men were formidable women. They both managed small shops in their houses: one in Basin Lane, off James's Street, near the Canal, not far from the Brewery; the other in Bow Lane, on the other side of James's Street, close to the end wall of Swift's hospital, and at the start of the road leading toward Kilmainham, out of Dublin.

It was in a world dominated by these people that I remember many things of importance happening to me for the first time. And it is in their world that I came to terms with these things as best I could, and later set my attempts at understanding.

In the Casserly home, in a room behind the shop, the family would gather at weekends, playing cards. Some of my first awarenesses are placed in the dark of that room, taking in the textures of life in their random detail: the firelight on the shelves of the dresser and on the card table; the voices of the players familiar and mysterious:



A Hand of Solo

Lips and tongue
wrestle the delicious
 life out of you.

A last drop.
Wonderful.
 A moment's rest.

In the firelight glow
the flickering
 shadows softly

come and go up on the shelf:
red heart and black spade
 hid in the kitchen dark.

Woman throat song
help my head
 back to you sweet.

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Hushed, buried green baize.
Slide and stop. Black spades. Tray. Still.
Red deuce. Two hearts. Blood-clean. Still.

Black flash. Jack Rat grins.
She drops down. Silent. Face disk blank. Queen.

The Boss spat in the kitchen fire.
His head shook.

Angus's fat hand brushed in all the pennies.
His waistcoat pressed the table.

Uncle Matty slithered the cards together
and knocked them. Their edges melted. Soft gold.

Angus picked up a bright penny and put it
in my hand: satiny, dream-new disk of light...

'Go on out in the shop and get yourself something.'
'Now Angus...'

'Now, now, Jack. He's my luck.'

'Tell your grandmother we're waiting for her.'

She was settling the lamp.
Two yellow tongues rose and brightened.
The shop brightened.

Her eyes glittered.
A tin ghost beamed, Mick McQuaid
nailed across the fireplace.

'Shut the kitchen door, child of grace.
Come here to me.
Come here to your old grandmother.'

Strings of jet beads wreathed her neck
and hissed on the black taffeta
and crept on my hair.

My eyes were squeezed shut against the key
in the pocket of her apron. Her stale abyss...
'...You'd think I had three heads!'

Old knuckles pressed on the counter,
then were snatched away. She sat down at the till
on her high stool, chewing nothing.

The box of Indian apples
was over in the corner
by the can of oil.

I picked out one of the fruit,
a rose-red hard wax
turning toward gold, light like wood,

and went at it with little bites,
peeling off bits of skin
and tasting the first traces of the blood.

When it was half peeled,
with the glassy pulp exposed like cells,
I sank my teeth in it

loosening the packed mass of dryish beads
from their indigo darkness.

I drove my tongue among them

and took a mouthful, and slowly
bolted them. My throat filled
with a rank, Arab bloodstain.