

First generation

Night after night  
A dim lit kitchen  
A vigilant tumbler  
I often wonder if he measured  
Himself against his old man,  
As I do.

Rowing his body - to and fro  
From cabinet to wooden chair,  
Which seemed to catch him falling back  
Into another drink, another page of  
The Boston Globe that challenged him  
As the night waned.  
Sporadically, from night to night,  
Holding court before the frightened  
Could he even read the homework he checked?

Compared to a man who was here today  
Gone tomorrow - he was stable.  
The chair itself the deciding factor,  
The newspaper the jailor and the tumbler full of  
Some blend, the reassurance - you knew where Jim was.

Stepping up the rung on the ladder  
A far cry from the 3 room flat somewhere in  
Mattapan, Roxbury or was it Dorchester that year.  
The now surviving siblings were suburban mostly  
And he could smell the smell of the suburbs  
when the winds would change out  
In the late dusks of dying summers and early falls  
He was a far cry from John.

I heard him mention him once as "Simple John."  
A heavy drinker with fits of rage and periods  
Of absence - he could have used a chair.  
John the laborer, the modern indentured,  
Came to the new world before the revolution.  
He came from the rural-ness of Mayo  
To the crowded city in 1909.  
The hell of home was re-introduced,  
Even in Boston, his gaelic was not welcome.

In Ireland he was one of the starving poor.

In America he was one of the starving poor Irish.  
Dead by the mid Fifties his bride would see 1960  
And a son born of a 43 year old woman in 1931  
The baby, landed a job with the city.

## II

Married, with a son in 61  
In an apartment that in his youth  
Would have held his entire family,  
The pride he must have felt,  
And the whiskey cabinet that must  
Have looked like a wedding every day.

The family grew and church on Sundays,  
And a voice like the sweetest Irish spring,  
He could sing like a bard and  
Dance like Fred Estaire - fuckin' brilliant.  
A champion compared to John!  
And every two years a new child -  
I arrived in 67.

I came into this world, and the stories  
Are still untold and unknown,  
But rumors speak of problems and additional  
Weeks in the hospital.  
By summer 68 she was gone and with her a baby girl.  
All hell came knocking with the voice of John,  
"Look at yourself?"

The champion crumbled.  
Alone with four and pain and anger  
Filling up the rooms of the house.  
He had been so much better than John  
- So much fuckin' better.

## III

My middle name is John  
I suppose a tribute to him.  
I was one of the frightened, forgotten  
Members of the first family  
Whose dead mother's name was not be spoken  
For fear of an ass whipping.  
Now scattered across the country - barely speaking.

I survived, I'm here and I measure myself  
Against a man I no longer speak to.  
I embrace my heritage.  
I sing, but never as nice as Jim.  
Out of Boston, to warmer climes,  
But I can still smell the cold of winter.  
A slamming door still makes me look behind.  
Disappearing still holds a warm place in my heart,  
Maybe I am more like John.

BJFR

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