**Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger* (1942)**

|  |
| --- |
|  |
| I | |
| Clay is the word and clay is the flesh  Where the potato gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move  Along the side-fall of the hill - Maguire and his men.  If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book Of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and frogs And the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the hedges, luckily. Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?  Or why do we stand here shivering?                                    Which of these men Loved the light and the queen Too long virgin? Yesterday was summer. Who was it promised marriage to       himself  Before apples were hung from the ceilings for Hallowe’en?  We will wait and watch the tragedy to the last curtain,  Till the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay Rolls down the side of the hill, diverted by the angles Where the plough missed or a spade stands, straightening his way.  A dog lying on a torn jacket under a heeled-up cart,  A horse nosing along the posied headland, trailing  A rusty plough. Three heads hanging between wide-apart  Legs. October playing a symphony on a slack wire paling.  Maguire watches the drills flattened out  And the flints that lit a candle for him on a June altar  Flameless. The drills slipped by and the days slipped by  And he trembled his head away and ran free from the world’s halter,  And thought himself wiser than any man in the townland  When he laughed over pints of porter  Of how he came free from every net spread  In the gaps of experience. He shook a knowing head  And pretended to his soul  That children are tedious in hurrying fields of April  Where men are spanging across wide furrows.  Lost in the passion that never needs a wife -  The pricks that pricked were the pointed pins of harrows. Children scream so loud that the crows could bring  The seed of an acre away with crow-rude jeers.  Patrick Maguire, he called his dog and he flung a stone in the air  And hallooed the birds away that were the birds of the years.  Turn over the weedy clods and tease out the tangled skeins.  What is he looking for there?  He thinks it is a potato, but we know better  Than his mud-gloved fingers probe in this insensitive hair.  ‘Move forward the basket and balance it steady  In this hollow. Pull down the shafts of that cart, Joe,  And straddle the horse,’ Maguire calls.  ‘The wind’s over Brannagan’s, now that means rain.  Graip up some withered stalks and see that no potato falls  Over the tail-board going down the ruckety pass  And that’s a job we’ll have to do in December,  Gravel it and build a kerb on the bog-side. Is that Cassidy’s ass  Out in my clover? Curse o’ God -  Where is that dog? Never where he’s wanted.’ Maguire grunts and spits  Through a clay-wattled moustache and stares about him from the height.  His dream changes again like the cloud-swung wind  And he is not so sure now if his mother was right  When she praised the man who made a field his bride.  Watch him, watch him, that man on a hill whose spirit  Is a wet sack flapping about the knees of time.  He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body  Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulters crossed in Christ’s      Name.  He was suspicious in his youth as a rat near strange bread,  When girls laughed; when they screamed he knew that meant  The cry of fillies in season. He could not walk  The easy road to destiny. He dreamt  The innocence of young brambles to hooked treachery.  O the grip, O the grip of irregular fields! No man escapes.  It could not be that back of the hills love was free [35] And ditches straight.  No monster hand lifted up children and put down apes  As here.                                              ‘O God if I had been wiser!’ That was his sigh like the brown breeze in the thistles.  He looks towards his house and haggard. ‘0 God if I had been wiser!’ But now a crumpled leaf from the whitethorn bushes  Dart like a frightened robin, and the fence  Shows the green of after-grass through a little window,  And he knows that his own heart is calling his mother a liar  God’s truth is life - even the grotesque shapes of its foulest fire.  The horse lifts its head and cranes  Through the whins and stones  To lip late passion in the crawling clover.  In the gap there’s a bush weighted with boulders like morality,  The fools of life bleed if they climb over.  The wind leans from Brady’s, and the coltsfoot leaves are holed with rust,  Rain fills the cart-tracks and the sole-plate grooves;  A yellow sun reflects in Donaghmoyne  The poignant light in puddles shaped by hooves.  Come with me, Imagination, into this iron house  And we will watch from the doorway the years run back,  And we will know what a peasant’s left hand wrote on the page.  Be easy, October. No cackle hen, horse neigh, tree sough, duck quack. | |
|  | |
| II | |
| Maguire was faithful to death:  He stayed with his mother till she died  At the age of ninety-one.  She stayed too long,  Wife and mother in one.  When she died  The knuckle-bones were cutting the skin of her son’s backside  And he was sixty-five. [36]  O he loved his mother  Above all others.  O0 he loved his ploughs  And he loved his cows  And his happiest dream  Was to clean his arse  With perennial grass  On the bank of some summer stream;  To smoke his pipe  In a sheltered gripe  In the middle of July His face in a mist  And two stones in his fist  And an impotent worm on his thigh.  But his passion became a plague  For he grew feeble bringing the vague  Women of his mind to lust nearness,  Once a week at least flesh must make an appearance.  So Maguire got tired  Of the no-target gun fired  And returned to his headland of carrots and cabbage  To the fields once again  Where eunuchs can be men  And life is more lousy than savage. | |

# Epic

I have lived in important places, times

When great events were decided, who owned

That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land

Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.

I heard the Duffys shouting "Damn your soul"

And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen

Step the plot defying blue cast-steel --

"Here is the march along these iron stones".

That was the year of the Munich bother. Which

Was more important? I inclined

To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin

Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind.

He said: I made the Iliad from such

A local row. Gods make their own importance.

**Who Killed James Joyce?**

Who killed James Joyce?

I, said the commentator,

I killed James Joyce

For my graduation.

What weapon was used

To slay mighty Ulysses?

The weapon that was used

Was a Harvard thesis.

How did you bury Joyce?

In a broadcast Symposium,

That's how we buried Joyce

To a tuneful encomium.

Who carried the coffin out?

Six Dublin codgers

Led into Langham Place

By W. R. Rodgers.

Who said the burial prayers? Please

do not hurt me Joyce

was no Protestant,

Surely not Bertie?

Who killed Finnegan?

I, said a Yale-man,

I was the man who made

The corpse for the wake man.

And did you get high marks,

The Ph.D.?

I got the B.Litt.

And my master's degree.

Did you get money

For your Joycean knowledge?

I got a scholarship

To Trinity College.

I made the pilgrimage

In the Bloomsday swelter

From the Martello Tower

To the cabby's shelter.