"Lie still, difficult old man" – John Montague's Father(-)land

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"My father, the least happy / man I have known" is the low-key beginning of one of John Montague's poems about his father. The title of the poem is "The Cage" and it gives an account of the father's life as a worker in the New York underground. The title immediately evokes various possible associations and the opening of the poem equally emblematically separates happy and man into different lines; with this move the poet indicates that a tentative redemption is to be expected – the troubled life of the father will serve as an explanation and perhaps as an excuse too for all that has, or more significantly, has not been said or done in their relationship.

Montague's oeuvre includes several poems dealing with the figure of his father. The poems are organised into groups in various collections and they allow for the reconstruction of a relationship most readily characterised at the outset by the word uneasy. The poems enact the forming of the relationship as the grown poet reconsiders the phases of their common story – from inherited blood ties through acquaintance to some sort of intimacy. This process is all the more remarkable if one considers Montague's general practice as a poet employing a technique of depersonalising his own experience, as Richard Allen Cave argues (cf. "John Montague: Poetry of the Depersonalised Self").

The father of John Montague, as much as it is possible to reconstruct from the poems, was an exile, a not uncommon position for an Irishman of Republican affiliations, and the story is further complicated by the fact the family is a Northern one, based in County Tyrone. The father chose to leave his native place as the only option available to a person betrayed by both North and South, yet the movement was perhaps not the best calculated one as the time was not long before that of the Great Depression. The chosen destination, New York, however, became the home of the man for about two decades – and the birthplace of the poet too. In the wake of the difficulties of the Depression, the children were sent back to Ireland and the mother also returned, with the father deciding to stay in the United States and to join the

family only after a long time. The children were already adults by that time and that renders the family reunion a different kind of experience than would be implied by the motif itself. The family reunion lasted for a short time only as after a few years the father's death removed him from the family circle, and this separation was final and unalterable.

The interest of John Montague in the figure of his father is motivated on a number of levels. The missing father, not dead but left behind in some distant and perhaps mysterious land is a strange enough figure to explore. The picture is further coloured by the case of maternal rejection – the four-year-old boy was separated from the other brothers and sent to the old home of the father, to be reared by aunts. This painful experience of rejection turns the mother into an equally unknown figure and she becomes perhaps even more of a mystery (and more of a hurt too) as the seven miles separating the place of the poet's upbringing from the rest of the family are certainly a more manageable distance than the ocean between Ireland and the North American continent. This complex and in many ways confused background renders the search for the father (and the mother too) a part of Montague's quest, "the self-conscious search for a real (emotional) and imagined (cultural) home" (Dawe 7). The father's figure is even more of a haunting one as Montague's placing of himself as the "missing link of Ulster poetry" (quoted by Dawe 8) capitalises on the absence of poetic fathers – and the physical absence of his father is a fitting (albeit painful) complement to this situation.

By having been sent to the old family home of the father, the young John Montague shares with his father the place of upbringing. This motif certainly lends some sort of intimacy to the two persons – despite obvious personal differences the place shaping their natural sensibilities is the same. In addition to this father and son also share a physical feature: a scar on the forehead, the memorial of an old car accident. Strangely enough, both of them are marked by a scar of the same origin in the same place, which is seen by the poet as their common "fault" (cf. "The Same Fault", CP 42), the physical manifestation of their shared unfavourable features.

Montague's seminal collection, *The Rough Field*, begins with the section entitled "Home Again". On the title page of this section a short poem introduces the reader to the initial stance between father and son:

Lost in our separate work
We meet at dusk in a narrow lane.
I press back against a tree
To let him pass, but he brakes
Against our double loneliness
With: 'So you're home again.' (CP7)

The short poem sets the scene in a tight-lipped but at once revealing manner. The time and the place, the dusk setting in a narrow lane provides more than a background to the experience of the meeting of two adults related to each other by family ties yet not really knowing what to say to or expect from the other – the setting *is* the relationship between them: little light and necessary physical proximity lock them into an inescapable encounter. The speaker intends to remain subdued, pressing against a tree but the father slows down to address him: this happens "against" their "double loneliness', just as the speaker's action of pressing back is "against a tree" – violence is done and violence is the answer. The cunning choice of the father on bicycle allows a comment on their loneliness as well: "braking" can be replaced by 'breaking' to offer a chance for a closer relation, and emblematically it is the father who breaks the silence and thus takes the first step forward, since the speaker/son's step was "back against a tree'. The conclusion, "So you're home again" is an ambivalent closing point for the short passage since much depends on the meaning of "home" in the context of such a scattered family as that of the poet – the father's long absence and the child 'farmed out' to aunts away from the mother and the brothers set up a problematic context for the idea of home and the picture is further coloured by the 'background' of the North of Ireland.

The section entitled "The Fault" opens with the poem "Stele for a Northern Republican'. As the title indicates, the poem is intended as a memorial to the father; though not carved into stone as a stele is supposed to be, the words stand perhaps even stronger in the face of passing time due to their nature as words. The poem recounts the story of the father or, more precisely, what is familiar of that story to the speaker, and the account is framed by the recurring motif of the visits of the ghost of the father, lending a Hamlet-like air to the scene. The speaker admits the limitations of his knowledge of the father's "struggle" (CP 40) but the repeated visits of the father's ghost, "free of that heavy body armour / you [the father] tried to dissolve with alcohol" (ibid), make him do the mental reconstruction of the old man's part played in history, his part "in / the holy war to restore our country" (ibid).

The reconstruction, however, is done "hesitantly" (ibid) and the Republican rhetoric is overwritten by a more balanced point of view as the "holy war" consists of missions "to smoke / an absentee's mansion, concoct / ambushes" (ibid). The actual weight of such a war becomes tangible when a wounded policeman ends up in the kitchen of the house – it is a bleeding human body in the family home and not simply a shady item of gossip heard in the street. The general comment on the strangeness of this guerrilla warfare is followed by a reference to the father's being away on the

particular occasion when the policeman was shot – providing an alibi for the father and saving him from the charge of murder. The words of the father, perhaps remembered, perhaps uttered by the ghost, offer yet another comment on the irrationality of the war:

> Locals were rarely used for jobs:
> orders of the Dublin organizer,
> shot afterwards, by his own side. (ibid)

The fierce 'logic' of the War of Independence disappears in a relatively short time but the implications are somewhat ambivalent:

> A generation later, the only sign
> Of your parochial struggle was
> When the plough rooted rusty guns,
> Dull bayonets, in some rushy glen
> For us to play with. (ibid)

The seemingly peaceful situation resonates with embarrassing overtones: the "rusty guns" are juxtaposed with the peace-evoking "glen", and the guns are unearthed by the peaceful yearly routine of agriculture, though often a struggle against nature in the North, to become 'toys' for the children – and from the perspective of the time of the writing of the poem in the early 1970s, the children certainly appear to have learnt from their games. The poem marks this inherence of violence in the Northern context; and though it is never embraced, it is accepted as an explanation for the father's decision to leave for another life in another land:

> […] But what if
> you have no country to set before Christ,
> only a broken province? No parades,
> fierce medals, will mark Tyrone's re-birth,
> betrayed by both South and North;
> so lie still, difficult old man,
> you were right to choose a Brooklyn slum
> rather than a half-life in this
> by-passed and dying place. (CP 41)

The "Brooklyn slum" suggests an economically desperate livelihood yet the state of being a stranger in a foreign land preserves something of the

dignity of the Northern Republican – at least he is not compelled to bear the shame of being a stranger in a country that is his home only in its name.

The short poem "The Same Fault" dismisses the historical perspective to descend on the plane of family relations: the scar on the temple of both father and son becomes a more than emblematic tie between the two people. The scar becomes visible when the speaker is "angry, sick or tired" (CP 42), to provide a set of common features with the father – "anger, impatience, / A stress born of violence'(ibid). The shared motif of the scar is the symbol of "the same fault" (ibid) running through the family – and the association with the geological meaning of "fault" is not far from the context: a fault is "a fracture in rock along which there has been an observable amount of displacement" (Dictionary pp 166-7) – the tough Republican exile with his dispersed family neatly fits the situation.

The next poem of the section, "The Sound of a Wound" enlarges the wound of the previous piece into an image of the history of the North as seen from one particular perspective – the literal gives way to the figurative as the scar of the car accident becomes the apropos of a deeper and perhaps never healing wound of historical circumstance. The persona's return to his childhood home in County Tyrone is an occasion for the old wounds to tear open as the healing distance of space and time is reduced to nil by the actual location and the power of memory, and the poem evokes this "music", at once brutal and deeply humane.

The enquiry of the opening stanza is disturbing in its phrasing as the question "Who knows / the sound a wound makes?" (CP 42) can produce a variety of answers from the scale of possible characters ranging from no one to everyone. The tearing open of wounds is accompanied by imaginary music played on broken instruments, "the torso of the fiddle / groans to / carry the tune" (ibid) to a "pastoral rhythm" (ibid) that is lost, similarly to the world which it once evoked, and the account of that world is provided in brackets to suggest that it has passed. The poem turns more self-consciously rhetorical as the speaker weighs his fatherly inheritance of a divided world of Celt and Saxon with a more than 'troubled' past. "I assert / a civilization died here" (ibid) is an *actual* experience for the persona:

> it trembles
> underfoot where I walk these
> small, sad hills:
> it rears in my blood stream
> when I hear
> a bleat of Saxon condescension,
> Westminster

to hell, it is less than these
  strangely carved
five-thousand-year resisting stones,
  that lonely cross. (CP 42-43)

The father's figure appears as the source and origin of this feeling – the general Irish inheritance of cultural dispossession is complemented by the father's 'gift' of the reaction to it, the more particular Northern Republican stance with its acute memories of colonial exploitation and the subsequent view of the province as a perpetual battlefield:

This bitterness
I inherit from my father, the
 swarm of blood
to the brain, the vomit surge
 of race hatred,
the victim seeing the oppressor,
 bold Jacobean
planter, or gadget-laden marine,
 who has scattered
his household gods, used
 his people
as servants, flushed his women
 like game. (CP 43)

The particular context of Jacobean planters is widened into a general description of the colonial divide and the present perfect form in the account of the wrongs implies at once an emphasis on the unalterable present outcome of past events as well as the fact that the period is not yet closed down.

The father's presence in this poem is brief and tentative, he is only mentioned as the immediate origin of the general Northern Catholic feelings of dispossession and disinheritance. As if to balance the account, the next poem entitled "The Cage" is a return to personal history but in another form than in the first poem of the section. This time the scale is purely that of the family and the individual, the historical dimension is evoked only by oblique references to the father's being a "traditional Irishman" (CP 43). The opening of the poem, with its structural wedge between "happy" and "man', situates the father's figure in his underground work, this time purely literal, in Brooklyn, and the second stanza supplies the other regular element of the life of the man, that of drinking – with its destination in a kind of second

home, "the only element / he felt at home in / any longer: brute oblivion" (ibid). The lost Brooklyn alcoholic, however, is quickly restored in his forgotten nobility and dignity as work compels him to enact a daily resurrection:

> And yet picked himself
> up, most mornings,
> to march down the street
> extending his smile
> to all sides of the good,
> (all-white) neighbourhood
> belled by St Teresa's church. (CP 43-44)

The fourth stanza opens a new perspective as the setting is changed – the return of the father to Ireland finally allows for a 'normal' family relation:

> When he came back
> we walked together
> across fields of Garvaghey
> to see hawthorn on the summer
> hedges, as though
> he had never left; (CP 44)

The intimacy of country walks by father and son is suggested just to be refuted shortly after as the account continues into the next stanza and the "as though" intrudes between the two men as an archetypal necessity in the wake of long-lasting absences:

> But we
> did not smile in
> the shared complicity
> of a dream, for when
> weary Odysseus returns
> Telemachus should leave. (ibid)

The concluding stanza of the poem is an abrupt jump into the present, and the section is closed by a return to the ghost of the father:

> Often as I descend
> into subway or underground
> I see his bald head behind

the bars of the small booth;
the mark of an old car
accident beating on his
ghostly forehead. (ibid)

The descent into the modern Hades recruits the ghost of the father and the occasion offers a complementary type of meeting between the father's ghost and the son – in the first poem of the section it is the ghost visiting the son, at the close it is the son searching out the father, which implies a wish for making up for the lost time between them. This marks a shift in their relation from the mutual early shyness of meeting again of the untitled short poem through the benevolent ignorance of "Stele" to the loving and understanding stance of "The Cage'.

The volume *The Dead Kingdom* is a collection of poems written on the occasion of the death of the mother of the poet, partly with the intention of forging a more intimate relation with the mother to replace the painful actual one of early rejection. Though the focus of the collection is on the mother, there inevitably are instances of treating the figure of the father as well, as part of the imaginative, and in many ways imaginary, reconstruction of the family circle, or perhaps, of *making* it finally a circle.

'Intimacy" is a tracing of the formation of a close relation between mother and son, with the son acting as a kind of husband-substitute, taking the mother to the cinema to romances as "films about real life" (CP 163) are not encouraged by the mother. The unspecified "some sad story of Brooklyn" (ibid) as a choice for a film quickly recalls a specific Brooklyn story of "Young love, then long separation" (CP 164). The picture of family reunion is provided by the speaker:

After our drive across Ireland,
my father stood in the kitchen,
surrounded by his grown sons
and the wife he had not seen
for almost two decades, spirit
glass in hand, singing "Slievenamon'
or *Molly Bawn, why leave me pining*,
his eyes straying in strangeness
to where she sat, with folded
hands, grey hair, aged face,
Alone, all alone by the wave
washed strand, still his Molly Bawn,
wrought by time to a mournful crone. (ibid)

The family 'idyll' of both parents present in the company of grown children, the father with glass in hand singing for the family could look happy if it were not for those "almost two decades" intruding between them. The time spent away from the wife recalls the Odysseus-father figure of "The Cage" and the homecoming evokes the Tennysonian "aged wife" image of Penelope – yet the persona goes even further by declaring the mother not only a figure of "grey hair, aged face" but a "mournful crone" as well. The implication of these lines could normally be blame for the father yet the subtle manipulation of tone makes it difficult to assess the exact relation of the speaker to the father – the words do not radiate anything else but the observation of the inevitable and unalterable fact of spent time.

The family (re)union does not last long: "Six years later, he was gone, / *to a fairer world than this*" (ibid) and the relation of mother and son returns to that later formed intimacy. The scale, however, changes from cinema outings to television evenings at home, which calls for a number of possible explanations for the situation: those "six years" make the mother more reluctant to go out both for her years and for, perhaps, the memory of the husband. Despite the long absence, she is "still his Molly Bawn'. The poem immediately following "Intimacy" is "Molly Bawn', the story of the mother up to the moment of emigration to Brooklyn. The father is evoked in the context of their courtship and wedding, and the Republican destiny of "Emigrating anywhere" building a "real lost generation', with the mother following him "making sure to land in / good time for the Depression!" (CP 165) The story thus is one of the tragicomic kind though in the reverse order – the happy beginning is followed by more sober events to culminate in the anticlimactic move of emigration to New York just before the economic collapse of the world.

Some of the events of the years in America are recounted in the poem "A Muddy Cup" – the most important events perhaps from the point of view of the poet, as this poem tells the story of his begetting. The muddy cup of the title becomes emblematic of the situation itself – the mother's refusal to drink from it is at once a literal action and a metaphorical one of the rejection of the reduced life of the emigrant treated as not even existing. Her arrival in the New World is a surprise to everyone – the woman with two "grown sons" (CP 166) is a riddle to the landlady of the father as he 'forgot' to let her know the fact that he was married, and as the "Father staggers back" (ibid) her presence is an unexpected situation. The event escalates to a fight between them and the reconciliation brings forth a palpable result: they "made another child, // a third son who / beats out this song" (CP 167). The last three stanzas of the poem turn on the mother's return to Ireland with the children and the refusal of the smallest child, the poet, to be reared in the

family home – and this last "episode" is mentioned in brackets to suggest the feeling of being a later and negligible addition to the family.

Even such unusual families have their own memories of holidays and feasts. "A Christmas Card" is not a traditional and common place greeting to an acquaintance but a tableau of one of the few Christmases spent together by the whole family. The initial scene of "Christmas in Brooklyn" is peaceful as "A man plods along pulling / his three sons on a sleigh" (CP 168). The closing semicolon, however, indicates the temporary illusion of the situation – the later perspective on the scene provides the context for the experience and the context is that of a disappearing family: "soon his whole family / will vanish away" (ibid). The simple inevitability of "will" would be enough to set this stanza apart from the rest of the poem and make for a separate and self-contained image, yet the speaker has other aims beside simple illustration. The next image is that of the father alone, "trudging home through / this strange, cold city', without work, "living off charity" (ibid). The only home of the man is "brother John's speakeasy" (ibid) yet the family does not suffer neglect as he "found time / to croon to your last son" (ibid).

That Christmas remains a special one as the father found a job to end the miserable life on charity yet the shadow of drinking remains with the figure. "Not a model father" (ibid) is the verdict but the father's words to the son, "I was only happy / when I was drunk" (ibid), reflect an awareness of this on part of the man himself. The son-speaker, however, finds a note to express his admiration of his father – though certainly not for this but the strength of the man to struggle on without his family:

> Still, you soldiered on
> all those years alon in
> a Brooklyn boarding house
> without your family
> until the job was done;
> and then limped home. (ibid)

The poem offers an instance of communication between father and son yet the distance is not reduced easily. Proper intimacy is reached only after an experience in which the son uncovers himself in the context of a broadcast. "At Last" is the breakthrough, the stepping over into a world where the dreamed-of intimacy is no longer a dream but something possessed and tangible. The story is that of the homecoming of the father yet this time there are no epic overtones, the returning figure is a "small sad man with a hat" "carrying a roped suitcase" (CP 169). The persona's reaction is

ambivalent: "something in me began to contract // but also to expand" (ibid). The situation is one with no easy way out, the embarrassment of meeting a figure supposedly intimately familiar yet in reality as strange as anyone else leaves little space for manoeuvring and there is actually little of a family meeting in the scene:

> We stood,
> his grown sons, seeking for words
> which under the clouding mist
> turn to clumsy, laughing gestures. (ibid)

The journey of the "small sad man" is not over with the meeting, they are to move on to the North. The crossing of Ireland functions as a prelude to the crossing over between father and son as there is a stop on their way "to hear a broadcast" of the poet (ibid). The really important event of the day is what comes after the recital as the initial strangeness of the experience gives way to something long hoped for:

> Slowly our eyes managed recognition.
> 'Not bad," he said, and raised his glass:
> Father and son at ease, at last. (ibid)

"The Silver Flask" recounts an emblematic family moment, that of reunion at Christmas time after almost two decades. The poem is composed of images which appear static as most of the stanzas lack proper syntactic structures – instead of finite verb phrases non-finite forms dominate, lending a notebook-like appearance to the text. The occasion is a symbolic one, the family circle is restored in the context of a particular holiday suggesting a new beginning and, perhaps, the promise of salvation after such a long time of painful endurance.

The opening two lines, "Sweet, though short, our / hours as a family together" (CP 169), make no room for illusions, the speaker is fully aware of the preciousness of the experience which lies principally in its shortness. The family members travel by car to Midnight Mass and the intimacy of the occasion, both of the mass and of the physical proximity in the car, creates a warm atmosphere. The father's singing allows a reference to the emigration years as a former legend of a tenor in "dim bars of Brooklyn" (CP 170) but the time scale is expanded even longer back to locate the father in "the valleys he had sprung from" (ibid), to indicate the moment of homecoming. In the church the unusual presence of the *whole* family extracts a rare

reaction from the mother as she is sitting beside her husband "sad but proud, an unaccustomed / blush mantling her wan countenance" (ibid).

The return journey is silent under the weight of the experience and it is in the family kitchen that the initial atmosphere is restored, and that atmosphere is an all but usual one:

> The family circle briefly restored
> nearly twenty lonely years after
> that last Christmas in Brooklyn,
> under the same tinsel of decorations
> so carefully hoarded by our mother
> in the cabin trunk of a Cunard liner. (ibid)

The mother's gesture of carefully saving the decorations of the last Christmas together finds its fulfilment in the recorded moment when the family is finally reunited. The past participle indicates the deficiency of this reunion, however, as the exact time reference is not included in its structure, as if the 'was', 'is' or 'will be' has been lost together with those missing years of potential family happiness.

"Last Journey" is an enigmatic account of a train ride of father and son yet neither the time nor the destination is mentioned by the speaker. The two figures are first seen "on the windy platform" (CP 171), before they get aboard the train. Then the train arrives, they take their seats and the journey begins. The only reference to the itinerary is a number of place names "across this forgotten / Northern landscape" (ibid). The implication of the title and the subsequent 'story' is a journey in which the notion of destination is either too obvious or totally irrelevant. As a "last journey" the emphasis is on the shared moment of the two characters and from this point of view the silence about the destination is an assertion of the wish to have no such point. The subtitle "*I. M. James Montague"* suggests a journey with no end – perhaps in the context of *this* existence it has one but the father lives on in the poems and in that "same fault" inherited by the son.

A much later poem in another collection approaches the father from another perspective. "Sunny Jim" is a poem in invocation to the father, across that final divide between life and death, to evoke his spirit again in the hope of help for the poet's work. The distance in time is greater, the perspective is that of more profound reconciliation as the earlier poems have reconstructed the father's figure and reclaimed him for the son, and now the father is called upon as a long-time intimate relation. The wish of the poet is not simply a need for assistance but for another time together marked by that intimacy which is normally associated with the relation of father and son.

The apostrophe to the father, "Sweet Drunken father" (STP 77), reflects a loving relationship and he is called on to supply his energies for a constructive purpose: "guide my pen finger; / forget your anger!" (ibid) The invocation is immediately followed by a memory of the aftermath of a "double hangover" (ibid) and the father's words about the legend of the meeting between Simon of Cyrene and Christ on the Via Dolorosa, with the burden of Christ becoming an analogy for the father's sufferings. The image of the father on his "second last bed" (STP 78) becomes one of a near miracle as a magic transformation, though not unlikely in the closeness of the final moment, reshapes the face of the old man:

All the ravages
of those Brooklyn years –
old nickel pusher,
rough bar hunter –
smoothed suddenly away
to Dante's bony visage. (ibid)

The fairly disillusioned phrases of "nickel pusher" and "bar hunter" suddenly give way to the noble comparison with Dante, in many ways an equally bitter man and a fit analogy for politically induced exile. The moment is the right one for the wish to be formulated even if there is no full harmony between the worlds of the two men:

Your faith I envy,

Your fierce politics I decry.
May we sing together
someday, Sunny Jim,
over what you might
still call the final shoot-out:
for me, saving your absence,
a healing agreement. (ibid)

Reconciliation is finally completed, the father has fully been received into the son's imaginative world of the family, and has reached that position of which a father is certainly proud – he is called for singing together, a leisurely situation to share with carefully chosen companions.

John Montague's attempt to reconstruct his father's figure in his poetry is not an unusual choice for a poet. The complicated family background, however, makes the job a more than usually difficult one. Prejudices and

stereotypes easily threaten the enterprise yet the honesty of the poet's persona remains unchallenged in the final analysis. The troubled situation of a Northern Republican choosing to emigrate to the United States shortly before the Great Depression is further complicated by the arrival of a third child – the poet himself. The return to Ireland of the family without the father, the maternal rejection and the nearly two-decade-long absence of the father have left their marks on the poet, yet the rejected youngest son struggles on to reclaim his father – in many ways it is the demonstration of the strength inherited from the father, an inheritance found more than worthy of enquiry.

Curiosity is a motivation but there is more at work in these poems than potentially effective poetic raw material. The distant memory of the father's crooning to the infant son is a proof for the grown poet of the love of the father, and almost against all odds he leads a journey of discovery into the field of intertwined family and communal history and into that incomparably more dangerous world of the psyche of the old man. The unbearable pain of the lost years, the eternal mystery of the what-could-have-happened-if situation lead to an often disillusioned but never disheartened stance – the hurt of absence is a wound that never heals but there is a determination to make a fresh start, to build a relationship while it is still possible. The position of the poet's persona is a deeply humane one – it is characterised by the ability to forgive and love in spite of all those circumstances crowding between them, working for an intimacy as if to prove that this is something he has a right to possess – and by this move he turns his father finally into a father, restoring to him what history denied through impersonal circumstance. The son redeems the father and what was a dream only in life becomes some sort of a reality afterwards: "lie still, difficult old man", your son has made you a place to call home.

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