

THOMAS F. SHEEHAN

Ah, Devon Unbowed

THE GOLDEN QUILL PRESS

*Publishers*

Francestown

New Hampshire

**AH, DEVON UNBOWED**

*A GROUP OF POEMS  
IMPELLED BY THE TOUCH  
OF MAN*

*Grandfather*

*Father*

*Brother*

*Sons*

*Devon, my Irish Muse*

*whose voice hangs*

*in the night with hard handles*

*for my grasping.*

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FOR MY FATHER  
JAMES FRANCIS SHEEHAN  
APRIL 1903 – DECEMBER 1978  
*There is no silence in my darkness.*

## FOREWORD

This is an interesting and extraordinary book! I don't know when I've read a book which has so much of family drama in it — it has some of the qualities of a fine novel or book of short stories, but it is a lot more than that — the poems are always powerful, and have passages of great beauty, and the autobiographical element holds them all together, so that this book is like a single poem, rather than a collection of discrete lyrics.

Thomas McGrath  
January 1979

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## INTRODUCTION

Knowing Tom Sheehan is an elemental experience. Since 1959 I have had Tom as magnetic north, a lodestone of experience of his family, their encounters with each other, with war, birth, and death. If it were possible to re-dig the Saugus Iron Works (as Tom did) and find both the Cardiff Giant and Ossian's tomb, this time genuine heroic artifacts, only Tom could describe them briefly or bardically. His is the bardic voice of his town, by virtue of his intense immigrated Irishness.

"Gramp," written in 1955 for a Boston College Writers' Workshop at which the Tufts poet John Holmes appeared, had waited fifteen years to be distilled after the death of Tom's grandfather at age 98. John Holmes' succinct, "Gentlemen, *this is a poem!*" rang true for Boston College undergraduates as they read it in the *Stylus* Spring 1955 issue, and for all of us as it appeared in *The Small Pond*, edited by Robert M. Chute in Auburn, Maine.

"I Who Lost a Brother," written in 1969, during the years of fierce anti-Vietnam War activity, together with other poems of that period, reflects Tom's legacy of the losses war inflicts on a family.

"Thomas, Thomas," written in 1972, appeared in the Boston College *Bridge* magazine that year. It is a meditation on childhood, youth, and parenthood spanning the growth of the mind from peopled with nameless to peopled with named shadows and demons. This is Tom's answer to Longfellow and Frost's "A Boy's Will."

“A Spirit Not Yet Home (Being the Thrust of an Irish Muse)” written between 1973 and 1977 is a bardic spirit’s evocation. Part I began as a letter to Daniel Shanahan in Anchorage, Alaska; Parts II to V, on Tom’s honeymoon in Eire in 1973. It collects all that Tom heard in childhood, and lived or wrote as an adult in a continuing open poem, comparable to Thomas McGrath’s *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.

William Costley  
January 1979

**AH, DEVON UNBOWED**



## GRAMP

As far back as I go he is there  
With great white beard and cane of holly  
That swung in circles at slim ankles,  
And the reaching hands of sisters and of brothers.  
Perhaps he wrote *The Roscommon Emigrant*  
That he read to us in the quiet kitchen at night  
In winter. I am not sure,  
But he wound the isle about us, and he teased  
With fairies and the names like Ross, Culleen  
And Clooniquin.

*Though adopted by Columbia  
I am Erin's faithful child.*

He had bent his back in Pennsylvania's mines  
And Illinois' and swung a hammer north  
Of Boston, poled his star-lit way  
From Erie by canal, and died in bed.

His years are still with me in the wind he breathed  
And storms he stood against and earth he pounded with  
his fist  
To fill the mouths of his children and my mother.

When he was lonely he was hurt and sometimes feared  
the pain he could not feel  
Because he knew it and knew how it came;  
And said man had to think to be wise and nothing was  
useless to man:

Not a sliver of wood because it makes a toothpick;  
Not a piece of glass broken from a wine-red bottle  
Because it catches sun and makes wonder;  
Not a stray stone because it is a wedge or wall-part or  
corner  
Like one, the first or the last, put to the foundation  
Of the old grey house that clung to the light  
And had wide windows and doors that were never locked.

He laughed with us on snow-bound mornings when  
daylight sought us eagerly  
And in cricket nights of softness that spoiled kneeling  
prayers.  
Sometimes his soft eyes were sad while we laughed,  
And didn't know about the man down the street  
Or the boy who died racing the black-horse train against  
young odds.

His prayers were not an interlude with God:  
They were as sacred as breathing, as vital as the word.  
And the politicians never got his vote because he knew  
The pain they intended and he hated hurt. Hated hurt.

The floor boards creaked beneath him in the mornings  
And he brought warmth into chilled rooms and coffee  
Slipped its aroma between secret walls to waken us.  
The oats were heavy and creamed in large white bowls,  
And "go easy on the sugar," was the bugle call of dawn.

His books had a message that he heard, alone, quiet,  
Singing with the life he knew was near past and yet  
beginning.

He pampered and petted them like he did grandma,  
And spent secret hours with them and lived them with us  
Rehearsing our life to come, and teaching us.

He poled his star-lit way down the Erie Canal.  
Swung a sledge in Illinois. A hammer north of Boston.  
Died in bed.  
But the tobacco smell still lives in his room.  
His books still live, his chair, his cane, the misery he knew,  
the pain,  
And somewhere he is.



## FATHER

His face  
is made of music,  
notes of an order  
I have yet to know.

The mystics  
of his hands,  
engraved with the timeless,  
bear strange anointments.

The salt  
of his touch, once known,  
leaps up past  
all of pain.

After God  
and my father there are  
no divinities.

## SIGHTLESS IN A ROOM

I have stood beside his bed  
in the clutter of the morning  
sun and felt it shatter  
behind my eyes

leveling mountains,  
spilling ingots and crescents  
of blades worth stabbing with  
while he slept.

I have measured his face up  
for a shave, toured the lines  
years deep with something  
he wore and won,

tracked out from his dark eyes  
the spokes of years of laughter  
and wondered how many tears  
turned and fell

since I was.  
On shaving mornings  
I pray for the sun  
to explode once more for him,

but the shot is buried deeply  
and he tells me how it was with him  
before I was.  
I look for him and then I listen.

Let's be happy for another day  
Let's be happy for another day  
Let's be happy for another day  
Let's be happy for another day

## LOST

### I

Midnight of the second day  
now sneaks through diamond  
flakes building castles  
and graves

and snow always was  
and cold

somewhere in this quick  
wilderness my father's  
dog has lost his eyes  
to become frozen garnet

now two pairs of garnet eyes  
stare lonely within darkness

all the life in my father's  
eyes are tears  
and prism's gone  
and his dog

of countless years of keeping  
as much a son as I

and better lately

## II

I feel that thud of ice  
upward in both  
ricocheting selves

falling to bed in bed  
and snow

and touchless  
perhaps but feet  
apart

One heart beats double  
time and night is a  
hunter of hearts

## III

Father's room is diabetically  
cold, the air is thin  
on him, the blankets heap  
like snow

insensitive fingers, old  
with tobacco, lay yellow

as wax on the contradictory  
comforter

remembering chevron stripping  
soon after Atlanta

was roused one night  
Nicaraguan tics

sabre and lance  
Springfields  
and his dog

#### IV

Once I had a dog  
gone three days  
in a storm

came home with a note  
in a Bull Durham sack  
on his collar

“Harry slept these three  
nights with us  
Ate well

“Is he for sale?”

## SOON FOR MY FATHER

Father, I am coming near you  
your catcher's mitt of a hand has held me  
reached out its rough way and touched  
this sea-filled membrane

I will know this earliest of touch always  
your thinking spins its tumult through fingers  
that have forgotten that other touch

Even now you are so sure of me  
your hands remember the hockey stick  
hanging in the cellar, cracked, taped, warped  
by your years of thrust

Old skates you laced with cold burning  
fingers to know the pain of tautness

here by this warmth your teeth remember air  
so frigid they might crack into stars

touch me again, Father, in my house of a house  
of skin, my very last retreat

I am such a short time from this house, Father

but what if I am not like you  
how will love spend itself.

## IN SOUNDLESS DEFENSE

Tonight the stars  
are like nails  
hammered home  
on black gauze.

Eyeless, my father  
rocks upon the porch  
with the music of leather  
against a softer wood.

Now and then a creak  
as apt as punctuation  
as he turns seeking far sound  
to identify.

I know there is no sound  
from stars hammered home,  
no sound at all  
even in sharp listening for,

And yet he hears  
the sanctuary of stars.



## MY FATHER IS ALL ATOMS OF IMPACT

My father is all atoms of impact:  
He wears scars of wars I have not known,  
whose cannon rumble roars down his memory  
and long past one silent scream at night  
still tears ears apart and eyes.

Now darkness descends and, converging,  
outlines go miraging beyond known silhouettes.  
He frequents my room on feeble excuse,  
gossiping, a game's score, but his hand  
always at my shoulder, the touching goes on,  
the lost rushing years cramped into minutes.  
What a thunder in him, this hunger and love,  
this knowing.

**FROM VINEGAR HILL**  
*(for Saugus and my father)*

High above me on a ledge  
some grand glacier gored out  
like a pebble and hurried it  
upward higher than any treeline  
would ever reach

the sun strikes a sword  
breaking in the day

the ledge was meant for fire  
for burning  
and excitement

has shoulders you wouldn't believe  
until you straddle one  
looking down on Saugus  
the river  
steeple standing straight as spears  
what used to be a pond  
I've seen a hundred hockey games on  
old schools with floors streaked  
with varnish inches of years thick  
new schools gleaming buffed with wax  
with alleys of aluminum  
and sidings of glass  
and girls prettier  
and boys stronger

the ledge is a vantage  
I've never shared  
except with my children  
after blueberries  
sticks and rabbit tracks  
in a commotion of circles  
halfway up or halfway down

you can tell by how heavy  
you're breathing

I've been there on the cold  
edge of a ledge at night  
trying to remember the heat  
and the fire that tore it out  
and up  
and placed my hands on its sides  
palms down doctoring for a heartbeat  
and just felt Saugus  
and the cold of history

One December night without a spark  
of snow in the sky  
just stars' leaping  
I climbed up enjoying the work  
feeling muscles bunch and move  
in convulsive protest  
and began to measure all the time  
I shared the top with stars  
and lungs lined with fire  
and sought out one light  
down below in the pit of people

touching under darkness  
or being lonely and turning  
endlessly

One light  
just one light  
in the wall of the town

and found it!

Square more red than yellow  
the prison of a prism  
my father's room

Strange the light was on  
he has no light but memory of it  
left in the core of his brain  
like a daylight or a dawn or an  
evening sun all of us can remember  
once

I spoke to him from half a mile  
away and up  
and looked for him at the stars  
and looked for him at the town  
and felt for him at the wind  
burning and cold on my face

and felt the ledge shudder  
and knew the heartbeat of time  
and a town

and he put the light out  
as I called his name

## I WHO LOST A BROTHER

and nearly lost another  
remember the headlines, newsreels,  
songs of bond-selling, gas-gripings,  
and movies too true to hate.  
The whole earth bent inwards,  
an implosion of bombs, bullets and blood,  
shrieking some terrible bird-cry  
in my tender ears only sleep could lose.

Near sleep I could only remember  
the nifty blue bellbottoms he wore  
in the picture my mother cleaned  
and cleaned and cleaned on the altar  
of her bureau as if he were the Christ  
or the Buddha.

But he was out there  
in the sun and the sand and the rain  
of shells and sounds I came to know  
years later moving up from Pusan.

I never really knew about him  
until he came home and I saw his sea bag  
decorated with his wife's picture  
and a map  
and the names  
Saipan Iwo Jima Kwajalein  
the war.

## OLD MYSTIC BRIDGE, CHELSEA, 1936

Day after day  
the Japanese ships  
left with scrap metal  
bulging like frog's eyes  
over the gunnels.

My brother Jim  
came to know  
their tanks  
on Kwajalein-----

like old Fords  
or Chevies  
or Frigidaires.

What if one man  
took better care of his car-----

perhaps a marine  
or a sailor.

## I CLOSE MY HAND AN EMPTY FIST

His words are at my heart,  
Brother's voice down and up the rock,  
Running with ever. At dusk once  
Near home it was some island —  
Tossed to me on homeward trek;  
Clean, across the pond, handscupped  
It came, a vibrant calling of our names,  
Our love, a voice with hands taking hold.  
Then water waited at his mouth,  
Still waits, holding him and voice to  
Magic ear no other hears at dawn.  
Who was as strong as him?  
Not Achilles who had his heel,  
But someone near, walking streets  
When dark comes softly down  
And sifts into the mind like  
Snowfall through the taller pines.  
A tree we knew holds his grasp,  
The pond his voice, the cliff,  
Elmed trail to our hidden cave,  
The silence in the hall at night  
When I slowly climb to sleep,  
Afraid the dream is hard again.  
In the dark, in the growing time,  
I have reached the room for him  
And closed my hand an empty fist.



## OH GOD, IS HE WARM

oh, God, I miss my brother James.

Is he warm?

The ice of his death was so cold.

Is he warm?

Is there some cosmic travel he has to endure?

oh, God, I miss him.

You have taken from us, You have taken.

Why must we become so splendid if only to be taken?

Is he warm?

Does he have mantles to cloak him?

Have You given him tools?

Does he work his way

as he did here?

Is he warm?

Why did You give us so much love?

Why the pain?

Is life's lesson only loss?

Is he warm?

You are so near,

But You have taken him.

Is he warm?

## THOMAS, THOMAS

Through the long slanting of the gray day  
I, mute and immobile, watched my son through  
The window, saw him use hands as tools, arms  
Working hard as crowbars, an energy split of  
The sun, my atom building a fort housed of dreams.  
Oh, years close such ugly jaws between father  
And son, between the old and the dreaming,  
Between the looking back and the looking forward,  
So I cheat sometimes and think the looking back  
Has more magic, the greater reserves of splendor.  
It happens when I stop at task to breathe against  
The hot sun or feel the night with a caress  
Faint but daring as a girl once known near darkness.  
Looking back is more than perfume time; it's past  
Perfume, past touch, past the wonder of guessing.  
It's back in the prehistory of dreams and daring  
When I was him and building a fort to house dreams  
And perhaps my father loved me from a window.  
It's touching on the magic of Roland and Arthur,  
On Charlemagne, Richard who roared, and red-crossed  
Phalanxes moving as a wedge at a word or cry.  
It's where Beowulf has gone, to a land and time  
Not to be known by me again, to a place called  
Childhood, the true democracy of imagination.

Looking, I was delirious for him, felt the happy  
Stones banging the barrel of my chest for him;  
He was knowing what I had known and lost along  
The way like a red-lit caboose cutting a curve  
In the dimness that was my little years.

I filled knowing that I had come of age, of importance,  
That my little dreams are cries for peace  
And sweat is sold for food to fill his mouth.  
The world had fallen in my path and I had scaled  
A mountain away from him. I wanted to leap  
Chuteless from its peak into his time, to know  
Once more the sense of glory and romance  
In all things the mind has fingers for.

In the evening, pink threatening red on the horizon,  
He finally came to me, the seven years of him  
And a day of his days enfolding more mystery than fog.  
“Come with me,” he said, eyes of miners lamps,  
A face blacker than coal is black, where dirt  
Had so much freedom you would think he had never  
Been clean, had never been discomforted by soap.  
“My fort, it’s over here. It’s secret and mine.  
I’ll show it to you. Only once, though. Big people  
Aren’t supposed to be here.”

## II

Quiet, motionless as a beached ship, the fort  
Was built against a single tree;  
Limbs bare and black hung over a pit nearer  
Darkness than all the caves I had known;  
Canopied arms rigid over a small darkness  
Huddling like a rabbit down the barrel of a rifle.  
I turned back on myself, into dreams, onto pages  
Long since read. Ah, how high and strong its walls,  
Built of stones I dared not move, set magically

With a mortar I could not mix. Passageways  
And tunnels with dumb mouths stared back,  
Mysteries leaped, dangers crept, silent as  
Sicilian Vespers. Hamlet's father would walk  
Such walls. Quasimoto lurked quietly overhead.  
Laffitte, Long John Silver, Grendel, shared the dark.

On my spine ice began to flow. I was knowing again  
The lost land, the lost time, the lost dreaming.  
He crept along the wall, motioned for me to follow,  
Whispered a sound I'm helpless to repeat and can't forget,  
As if a ghost of me were calling on a cold gray moor.  
Back, still back, I went, spinning, in a machine  
Tumbling off my hard edges, knowing the deliciousness  
Of fright, savoring one grand moment in a life  
So old to magic. And he huddled, my son, my coming  
man,  
For a moment, for a split second of forever, against  
The high walls of his childhood. I dared not move  
For fear I'd break them down.

## THE RECALL

We passed over the rusted barbs  
of a sick farmer's field,  
the clutter of nature stealing  
back from him bed-ridden  
all to the scythe once yield.

Tossed through landmark pines  
I caught engines turning a road  
more than a century in making,  
and bent quicker to the retreat  
deeper in where the stream flowed.

A line of four of us, eldest son  
smelling his way toward speckled trout  
hugging banks, turns, falls, for worms  
we had stolen from the lawn at dark:  
he would not hurry as fast on the way out.

Youngest son stumbling at brother's heels  
like a pup we had once before taxis came,  
not quite sure of the land, the trees,  
the endless brush, what had killed a farm,  
not old enough to think of going lame.

Daughter, third to the line of us,  
urging them on with calliope cries,  
clanking tackle box, rod, worm can,  
in a merry-go-round of tinny sounds  
like wedding car cans: I saw it with my eyes.

Longer of leg, stronger, served by porters,  
I came last, tasting the failure of him  
back at the farmhouse who waved to us  
behind his warm window, blessed the trespass,  
wishing us luck on his stream.

I wondered, with a shovel how much  
of him could I find in the field.

## UPSTAIRS

where bones of my sons lengthen  
and i walk a shadow between doors  
of a corridor often as long as the night  
with its wondering.

curved like two turkish blades beneath  
the thinning quilt they fall into my shadow  
and merge with it as i merged with my father's  
growing this way.

even when the moon reaches and steals  
with silver hands through the panes the shadow  
i float down upon their mystically clean faces  
i talk to them.

the younger cradles his head in hands  
clasped in a token of self-agreement  
and in the furious sound and stillness of night  
sleeps easiest.

if he hears the deep drum of my thinking  
i wonder on what inner ear the words are carved  
and if later in the laughter of his days he feels  
the sound of them.

the other turns and talks as if running  
in the sun is some night duty he must complete  
before that brilliant eye becomes brazen and haughty  
waking him.

once in the silvery throb of the moon  
rising like an equatorial heat from the snarl  
of their limbs i in turn became my father and became  
my sleeping sons

**MATTHEW THOMAS**

You move now, my son,  
Past the first joy of life,  
And in some recess of time,  
When you have one noble thought,  
It shall touch at me.



## TIMOTHY, MY SON

I have seen that deep concentration  
of a stare, before the smile breaks,  
when a son is knowing the love  
going out of him like an energy  
back toward the mystics of the sun.  
It speaks, that serious mark,  
that serious facial tension of a scar,  
like a broken weather-worn weathervane  
having just a north for its arrow.  
Eyes, once blue-diamonded, quickly melt  
and pour with the powers of love  
through the secret channels of my heart,  
Oh just as the boyish smile breaks,  
just as his hand reaches to help.  
to give, to touch who wants to touch.

I know that deep concentration of a stare  
because I have built my mirror there.

## A FLASHING OF MIRRORS

### I

I leaned against the largest maple tree,  
Planted hungry years before upon a leech trench,  
Watching my going out of me at play  
And shining the souls of mirrors back  
Telling each other what we knew.

### II

I loved him from the tree, later a window  
Dark-squared above the wide grass,  
As I leaned toward his hands  
Moving out of himself, making;  
And the corners of the house,  
The inners and outers  
Hammered upwards from my hand.

### III

What I had made smiled,  
The son, the house, our piece  
Of the morning sky, a whole particle  
Of one man and all the gear he needs  
To spread himself without torture  
Past himself, loving downhill.

### IV

Framed in sunlight, booted, buckled,  
Hand-knit into his clothes,  
Jacket thrust into pants

Into belt into wind searching him  
For a post of entry,  
He flashed my love on the air.

## V

The semaphore in sunlight flew  
Past me at the cold glass,  
A hot javelin breaking  
At the crystal brow I wore  
Filling the house behind me.  
In the wide fields of its rooms  
Filled with shadows of other times  
Sounds frightened the walls  
As if they could not contain  
Another cry.

## VI

Others here.  
One smaller than the yard-boy,  
Lighter in the face, athletic so young,  
A stair-leaper, floor-bender,  
Such even the sills on granite  
Know each pounce of his weight.  
(Often I pray the wood coming back  
to him in the recoil of life  
is not carved into a rifle butt.)

## VII

He flashes through plaster, lathes,  
The skin preserving my heart,

Through eyes, miles on miles of nerves,  
Into my knowing.

### VIII

And her of October's cheeks,  
Arms spider-webbing, silken clutches  
Of a mastery I dare not understand.  
In the high walls of my heart  
She hides, a game's chase,  
A seeking sons do not employ,  
Pushing a love up at me  
The passing of blood has given her.

### IX

Her mirror changes, opaques, becomes neon,  
Shows me, wide-eyed, wondering,  
A quiet man not quite ready  
For her smile.

### X

On talking boards,  
Nails slipped from silence by weights  
Of my loves, I step across graves  
Of other houses here, where a father  
Stood loving at a window, died,  
And left his words hanging,  
Hard handles on them, for my grasping:

## XI

“Look now. Listen.  
I was never lonely here.  
I gave voices to these rooms,  
Left visions of touch for your skin.  
We promise always to sound again,  
Spilling years, loves, leaves of days,  
A cry now and then between darkneses  
Punching out the daylight  
To let you know we passed through  
Minutes ago one year.”

## XII

I reach.  
Say into darkneses of years,  
“This time is mine.  
I will come again and stand here by the window,  
Letting the mirrors talk. Oh, pray for  
The listening.”

SON,

I remember  
most of all  
your laughter,

when you were young  
and owned the earth.

## A SOUND IN THE EYE

Heart-heated, my Father  
Holds my son to him,  
Eyes weigh words  
He cannot voice.  
I say, yes, now I know,  
He grows too fast  
And I am you  
Without a choice.

## ON MY FATHER'S BLINDNESS

Time whispered when he had eyes,  
a deliberation of things,  
songs, stories, a string of beads  
some islander made in his equatorial days;

leaves, loaves, salad-making,  
great roasts' sizzling songs,

an unhurrying, yieldless time  
of games, ghosts, gobs of things.

How when sentences finally came to be  
he read Cappy Ricks and the Green Pea Pirates,  
his eye on the page, my ear on his tongue,  
caesura was a bite of beer, a cut of cheese,  
turning words like the roasts he made,  
savory succulent tongue,  
but page wordless now.

now! now!

Now time strikes!  
hurricanes, lightning, days are crunching,  
night is no more a pail of stars  
flung as sand on dark skies,  
the eyes are closed, the mouth;  
when do songs cease to sound?

Sprung from his loins wanting to be,  
self-torn from his arms



at some piece of boyhood,  
I now remember earless, wordless,  
the touch when I was lovely young.

And I know I roam forever  
in the darkness of his eyes.

## WHAT IF I KNEW THE BROTHER I NEVER KNEW

Lester,  
how do I miss you so much,  
but not as much as mother  
who knew the double pain  
of your to and fro?

You would have been like Jim  
who lies under the ice of Lake Erie.

I tell you,  
Oh Christ, I tell you, Lester,  
that stagnant pool  
of man's making  
was never so blessed  
by man.

## PRAYER FOR A DAUGHTER

Face of mine not nearly mine,  
Mirrored me in flower cup  
Whose petal arms reach my way  
For sun food, hope is  
Not the least of this, but fear.

Younger of years, but not of thought,  
Your sprig of a question mark  
Of a brother leads the way.  
The stars wake him in the night,  
Moon talks, clouds have cymbals,  
Crickets tease him when you  
Fast fall asleep at your day's end,  
But not for him, having the night  
Ear. He knows quickly the tree  
Beside your window is washed by wind,  
A pastel thing of moonlife crowded  
So close the leaf breathes him talk,  
Talk, talk, a million-worded one-sided  
Endless night after night after play talk.

Breath of a tulip, have his ear, listen,  
For he would share his cache with you.  
Watch his hands that lean out from heart,  
That know the grain of grass, smooth  
Of stone and shell, the many feet  
Of small black bugs; hands that worry  
The callus of my hand and scar on face  
Like beautiful imperfections. Was not  
Broken-winged bird winner of his hand

And better for it? Is not any bruise  
We wear tender-touched because he  
Holds half magic in heart and head?

Oh, tulip love, hider of things  
I hope for, seek and share the secret  
He and I have locked from you.  
Cry in the night at dry time  
When earth pains in rock and stone  
And dead rivulet for rain; sigh  
The winds from throat when still  
Is night and far loneliness comes home  
To haunt dark of night rooms and  
Sky kills the quiet moon with cloud.

Sweet fact of morning's blush, never be  
Complete, not having the end of things,  
Where dream is gone, as I wish  
Not the end of this poem, or the one  
That follows, or the next, for the  
End of all dream is fire and ash.  
Ashes cannot light the spectrum days,  
Only sparks can magnify, oh infernos.

## JAMES RICHARD SHEEHAN

I stand here, in the shadows of my time,  
A ghost of all the cold dreams,  
Gazing down cribward to James,  
My final son, my last act,  
Sleeping on his 151st day.

I will leave my listening here,  
Here in this room I carved by hand,  
By this crib I tooled with love  
For his brother Matthew  
Scimitar-slim in the next room,  
Snores telling of his tonsil plight,  
To wait James Richard calling  
Back to me from the shadows of his time.

I will leave my listening here,  
Here in this room, this prison of hearts,  
Where James, possessed of permanent smile,  
Who wears laughter in his eyes,  
Brightest now of all my memories,  
Fills me with a power that frightens.

I will leave my listening here,  
Here where his dreams can beat on me,  
Where I can hear his visions resound,  
Perhaps oil-skin clad, pen  
Or hammer wielding, star-bound  
In all the grace of travel,  
(I wish all things golden for him,

But it never happens that way,  
Not to those we love with madness).

I will leave my listening here.  
Oh, James, talk back to me some day.

## EPA NO. 1

October is but  
a shadow now,  
dim past of leaf's  
flame's flame.

I loved the  
double fire of leaf  
on tree then raked to smoke,  
filling October air  
with October.

Now I rake leaves  
like Confederate dollar bills,  
bag, box and bring them  
to depository,  
but never burn;

Nevermore wonder  
what neighbor's burning  
before my match is struck.  
Does he miss the  
odoring?

Does foliage suffice  
for fire,  
will his son  
grow fireless,  
will mine?

Can we give  
our autos up one day  
next October and burn,  
just once more  
burn?



## DELICATESSEN 1762

I am barned  
in this house  
rooms like lofts  
has the mind of meadows  
I swear bats sing in corners  
and crickets calling code  
the click-clack of mysteries

And winter logs breathe  
crack at sparks  
sizzle chimneyways  
smell of them climbs stairs  
just hairs of smoke  
moving up the risers  
seeking corners I have not found

Ham and jelly stand in the air  
you can chew the smell of them  
bacon thick as laths  
turning up like old shoes' toes  
I swear the skillet  
spans two feet

Stairs speak out  
like incorrigible child  
without a step on them  
nails moving out  
two centuries worth  
(last night  
I heard

one snap  
tired of  
the holding on)

Neighbor comes  
to read my poems  
I swear he listens  
to my house instead  
he hears the sills  
the trembles up the walls  
he smells the smells  
that corners give

He feasts on my house  
forgets my poems  
his appetite is mine

**A SPIRIT NOT YET HOME  
(BEING THE THRUST OF AN IRISH MUSE)**

Devon whispers to me again tonight  
out of the Bulliwicks and Doneraile and Elfin-Mere.

Devon whispers in the clutters of an alley  
where Jamey Igo ran as a boy.

Devon whispers through the amber of glass  
and the dark dark of my beer suds.

Devon whispers.

If I told my father he'd be angry  
because he knows not Devon but another.

And yet Devon comes in the long dark alleys  
and sidestreets of my nights  
and in the neon of shouting at my own silhouette on  
the moon.

Devon whispers.

I have heard him in the cratered hell of Korea  
and the dark of Cleveland

and in Providence falling down a hill

and in the big railyards of Chicago

as I swept away from a troop train  
looking for a Budweiser

and sober as hell on a March morning

knowing the mists and hill greenness of Frisco

as she popped out of the purple.

And Devon whispers tonight sort of faded

and distant as a thin star voice

calling down the crook of years.

Devon says words to me.

“Ye byrde is led a wilde goose chace adown ye river.”

And I hear him move, furtive and quick as winks,  
his shoulders hung in tight to hold off the cold  
moving on skin even beneath his heavy cardigan,  
through Clanricard's alley and past Lyman's place,  
to find himself beside the door he long sought.  
He touched the door as he might have touched the  
    hawthorne once  
that stood in the small green yard in front of the  
    brick house  
back in the Bulliwicks.  
Back in the Bulliwicks.  
Back in the hundred years of time.  
He touched the door expecting it to sound  
as a stone on his fingers,  
a hard solid experience of touch,  
not really a touch of a hundred years of a tree,  
but it opened, the door.  
It opened  
and Devon saw the light beneath a further door,  
a crescent burst in the pit of the room,  
a sky of night of a room.  
Devon moved inside the sky  
and closed the door behind him,  
hinges rolling smooth as leathers,  
the only sound his own breathing,  
the quiet burst of his chest  
only now finding painless expansion,  
just now finding relief from the sharp bang  
and pierce at his right breast.  
He enjoyed for a moment that knowledge of relief,  
that uninterrupted heavy breathing,

and moved, more carefully than he had moved  
all the long evening from the river,  
toward the crescent of light  
in the deep space of a new place.

Devon was silent.

Even his knees did not creak out  
their hyperbolic drummings and snappings  
that had once betrayed him.

He moved out into that space  
of darkness and moon silence and treachery of  
sudden stars,

in a stealth both grotesque and yet stolen  
from Ledwidge's ballet, until he seized up in  
mid-flight.

The room, the space, the utter darkness,  
had matter.

Matter shared the air with him,  
shared the darkness,  
shared the faintest odor of burlap  
in the air as thin as old gunpowder.

Matter, with him, was soaking up  
the few calories of heat held inside the walls.

Matter, he suddenly knew,  
shared knowledge with him.

He let the one last hard breath go  
as if a sign were needed, or indeed,  
was being sought after.

Then the bully whistles blew.  
All around the bully whistles blew  
and they split the darkness,  
they split the room,

they split the outer space of the room  
and Devon whispered to me and said,  
Tommy, Tommy, me culprit, I've lost it.  
But keep listening.  
The world is calling, I must go.

How can I know he does not pass  
barefoot in the shining grass.

## II

Moved one night just past into the Bulliwicks  
and hid hard against a stone wall  
and Devon whispered through grass  
as fine as velvet threads,  
a hoarse whisper, a ragged edged whisper,  
much as liquid steel scratching in the Borgmal mill  
against the bucket edge,  
a medicinal whisper with thick dark dosages,  
a whisper full of tombs and brasses,  
a whisper Devon knows I feel  
even before I hear it coming  
hard through the soft grass.  
Ah, Tommy, Tommy, I'm out on it!

Grass moved on his face  
catching as webs not quite there  
and shoved up into his nostrils  
hard as bamboo sticks,  
all the while a half moon  
poked neon shots at him,  
at the sad, dark, long, cold,  
hungry, passionless, painless body of a man  
moving through grass as if Eden lay ahead  
with all its promise.

He remembered a game they all played  
back of the other wall a mile back,  
smelling leaves, eyes bound, hands tucked away,  
trying not to smell even one scent of the odor  
coming up from their armpits ripe as dropped melons,

saving odor-telling acumen for one quick breath of a  
leaf  
and to spit out the name of the tree.  
Oh, Hawthorne, he thought.  
Oh, tree. Oh, leaf. Oh, veined figment of a full life.

He swore the moon was cold.  
He swore the rock wall  
coming hard up against him was cold.  
He knew the stone of every wall  
and this was much like them all.  
He knew the grey slam of it,  
the flint, the fire thrust.  
Then the marble pits buried in other rocks  
older than the earth itself,  
pulled out of the universe by a power  
stronger than the one  
that would take it again.

He measured, with his hand, a cold calloused hand,  
a hand this night had closed on life,  
the almost bottle-green bulb on a rock  
and swore he knew the fire that sent it.

There was but the wall.  
There was no other wall.  
There was no other wall to climb over,  
slide down, scurry behind, squint over at the unknown.  
This was his last wall.  
This was his last field,  
last meadow, last pasture, last fling far from little stone  
house.



Devon told me in that deep hurting whisper,  
it was his last field.  
He thrust one shoulder under himself  
and the jacket bound tightly at his armpit  
and he measured the slowing blood touching at his  
fingertips,  
a tide withdrawing from the very edges of the world.  
Tommy, Tommy, I'm out on it!

And he sucked in the night  
and the stars and the half death moon  
and the bamboo-threatening grass  
and the bottle green of rock bulb  
and the heavy-necked taste of his sweater  
and the air leaping in cold pieces  
and the abject, miserable silence  
strutting proud as death  
and the odor of a Hawthorne leaf  
moving its anesthesia deeper into his mind  
than he cared.  
His fingertips took the silence first.

He lay on his side, but his head back  
and eyes looking up into the near cream moonlight  
and thought of looking up  
at Rhoda MacGawran standing above him  
on a staging back in Schlah Cruach  
and how the white of her never seemed to end,  
and how his fingers ceased a grasp  
with cold coming through them slower than suds.

There was something else.  
He had forgotten something else.  
How had it been so important once  
and now to be forgotten?  
He was sure it had not gone away.  
Things don't disappear without reason.  
There was something.  
But what?  
What besides the cold?  
The cold now in his fingers  
was more reality than the whiteness above him.  
What else?  
What took him to this?  
There was something besides the whiteness.  
There was something besides Rhoda MacGawran's  
crotch  
staring back down at him  
heavy as an August garden.

There was something.  
It was alien to him.  
It did not belong.  
It had not meant to be.  
That was the real matter.  
It had not meant to belong.

And then the insidious heat of that alien thing  
became known to him again,  
the sly, subtle, beguiling, heat,  
the white heat, the pained heat;  
somewhere, down where his hand could not reach,

where his cold fingers could no longer feel,  
the heat of the alien thing grew.

And the total night leaped in flames.  
It raced through him.  
The Hawthorne leaf faded,  
its odor lost in the smell coming up under his sweater  
strong as a stable sweep,  
sharp as Friday stable in Schlah Cruach.  
He strained to bring back the Hawthorne leaf,  
strained to bring back the blessed Bulliwicks  
full of sun and bright air searching out all things,  
strained to race a million years back  
to his first fish, stone, ride, seed,  
chocolate bite from Newby Gantt,  
to the previous of forever,  
and he suddenly knew the alien.

It was lodged there somewhere off the hip,  
deep in, hot, burning,  
feeling as if it would again explode on him,  
in him,  
as it had.

The Corporal had taken one shot.  
It was growing now.  
It would always grow,  
it would never stop growing.  
It would explode again.  
It would careen in him like a mad shell  
of a car in wild ride.  
It would hurt again.

Oh, Grampy, he cried.  
Oh, Tommy. Oh, Grampy. I'm out on it!  
Oh, God, I'm out on it!

Devon cries when he whispers.  
It is the hoarseness in his voice.  
It is the dosage.  
It is the liquid of steel.  
It is his own shell.  
Ah, Devon, is your peace in me?

### III

Ah, Thomas,  
You've been wondering where I'm at  
and all the time I've been burning the mountains  
    behind me  
and burning the rivers behind me  
and burning circles in this old land behind me  
and the bloody bastards keep coming!  
Oh, lad, they keep coming  
like the angel's breath was on them.  
I tell you, it's a great thing to see perseverance  
like they have,  
not letting air out of sail,  
or steam out of gut,  
just coming on in one command,  
and if they become notorious or famous  
for these goddam deeds,  
well, lad, they've earned them.

They've seen more of this land,  
more of her real bush and stream  
and strange tree lines,  
than many mouthy bastards I've met  
in my great circle of home.  
One of them's a savage bastard  
and near caught me in Ballinascarthy  
and if he isn't my brother  
he near is for the damned way he has about him,  
like part skye terrier.

I swore once I would kill him  
next time meeting

and then that night,  
safe in a dark room with a real lass of the land  
and one without upstart ideas,  
I could have loved him like the brother I never had.  
It would be such finery  
to have a brother now.  
This one has a way of dog about him  
and I hate him, the bastard he really is,  
and I love him because he's me  
coming after me  
and there is no power so great in the world, lad,  
as one chasing one's self  
in merry circle of life and death around the amoeba  
of the Irish Ocean/Atlantic Sea.

I was settled in a sure place  
at Ballinascorthy,  
warm and good tea near  
and some muffins I haven't had for twenty years,  
sitting in a pan so close it was  
like stealing each time I ate one.  
And my Uncle Tim from Rathkeale  
sitting, reading, in the half light  
of the fire and pretending all the time  
he was hero and his heart pumping  
so loud you could hear it across the room  
and the sweat pouring off his brow  
and the tip of his nose regular as rainfall.

It's something, Tommy, Tommy,  
to sit in the presence of a coward

and feel all your heart go out to him  
to make the one move that will bring it all back  
and you know it just can't happen,  
because one is made the way he's made,  
and wishing don't change a thing.  
A coward has a special way of covering.  
It's a way he has learned in  
many places and many scenes and many situations.  
He's excellent at protecting himself  
most of the time  
and horribly bad at protecting others  
and smart as I am, I'm as dumb as I am,  
and should have smelled the rat moving  
in the guise of himself.

And I sat there, Tommy, oh Tommy,  
I sat there trying to renew myself  
and trying to speak at him the words  
I wanted to say  
and I was as much coward as him  
and held my tongue.  
And all the time this near-brother  
is using my uncle to get at me  
and I should have known.  
Oh, lad, I should have known.  
The fox has all that's left over of cunning.

I moved with a slight word of goodnight  
into the deep silence of my room  
and closed the door behind me softly  
and with a prayer for Tim.

My mother is crying yet over him  
and I could not pass on without giving a word  
she would have given regardless of the situation.  
Mother, your brother sits like a savant,  
the book open to a good word,  
his glasses tipped at a professorial angel,  
his pipe giving off a comfortable smoke.  
But I don't believe the body of his eyes.  
He was born in one with the fox  
and I could feel the fox near.

You might think for one moment  
your Devon is gifted,  
but not so, Tommy, not so.  
More coward than gifted  
that moment in Ballinascarthy  
as I lifted the window as sure as the devil himself  
coming in from the Easter sunrise  
and slipped away.  
I heard the strange edge of voices  
and that of the near-brother  
coming from the full darkness.

Oh, there's no heart so loud as one's own  
in the dead of night,  
no heart so drumming,  
no heart so full of a nearness to pain  
that you want to reach out  
and pull it in to get rid of  
the suspense and anxiety.  
There's no heart so brave in its beating



and so fragile in its pounding  
as one in flight.

I wondered, even as I moved  
as sly as I thought the fox of him could move,  
how my Uncle Tim's heart really sounded  
in his own head, in his own mind,  
in his own conscience.

And suddenly I was told by all the grains  
of my own thought and own being  
that the heart my Uncle Tim heard  
was indeed one of fright, always of fright;  
from dawn to dusk,  
at all hours of the night,  
he would not know anything more than he would  
know fright.

And I could have cried then.

I could have spilled the waters  
of heaven and hell for him then  
as I moved, even greater than the fox could move,  
through the crowding night  
and out toward Carrigaline  
and the place where Jack Templemore sat  
night after night,  
his heart echoing in the far recesses of his mind  
a sound of love,  
waiting for one or another or another  
of the small committee in its flight  
to touch at his door,  
to take of his bread,  
to sip of his tea,  
to pass on to what lay in the politics  
of the land and perhaps,

and more than likely,  
never to be seen again.  
And he asked nothing,  
not thanks, nor gift of any measure,  
but shook a man's hand  
and looked into a man's eye  
as no man shall ever be accosted  
and we who moved away from Jack Templemore  
remember that eye upon our eye  
and that hand upon our hand  
and we had found the power of the people.

And some nights I sleep like this,  
Tommy, Tommy,  
such nights as tonight,  
with the sky as big as bells  
peeling out freedom in great waves  
and clouds breaking up at dawn  
to run off in strange elopements,  
and all turns well for me,  
though my flight is yet one not done.

When my flight is done, you shall hear my cry.

#### IV

This night is frogged down,  
there is a gulp in its air.  
The night moves without the blessings  
of moon or stars,  
but the voice moves over the land.  
It comes out of icebergs  
and across floes of the north  
and full of steam up out of  
the equatorial limbs of one man.  
Devon has my ear this night.  
He will not let me be still as dead leaves  
or snow banks at midnight,  
but wants me to know.  
And so I listen as Devon speaks to me,  
his voice a shadow of his other voice,  
the laughter gone from it,  
the gaiety gone from it,  
the mystery of love gone from it,  
the panic of chase gone from it,  
as a voice one cannot remember of oneself.

Tommy, Tommy, he said to me.  
Listen this night.  
Oh listen, me culprit,  
the word is now.

And Devon slunked in his hospital bed  
as a piece of uninvited vermin  
and gave me his terror of white,  
his mind shrieking into my mind,

his heart bursting into my heart,  
his breath bursting in my breath,  
his loneliness and fears  
finding their way into my self.  
Ah, Tommy, Tommy, there's no right.

Can one feel the beauty of a man dying?  
Can one man in this bloodthirsty world  
feel the dying of one man  
and his dreams going like crap  
up the air of our lives.  
I fear Devon is going this way  
and I listen to hear his dream  
buried in white,  
buried in the solvents of a strange world.

There is no tuning but Devon  
as he calls out from his lonely place.  
He shares his sudden stars  
and sudden darkness with me.  
He has his way over the air  
full of white linens and anesthesia.

Devon cries in this world,  
in this jungle of corridors and white walls.  
He abhors the odors  
in the middle of the air.  
He cannot stand the artificial smell of things.  
The sterility in the rooms  
gathers about him strong as lysol.  
The walls of a tomb  
begin their smothering

and lids close down and he refuses  
the belief of cherrywood's closing  
of final doors over his eyes.  
But his voice does not say the same thing.  
It is filled with the real belief.  
Ah, Tommy, Tommy, not now, not now!  
We've not done yet.  
We've not done yet!

He has been a hundred roads  
and a hundred caves and dark alleys  
and secret rooms in all the time I've known him.  
He has lived more life than I have  
and he touches out at me in strange ways  
but the word carries and I listen.  
Ah, Tommy, they must get me from here.  
And if they don't  
get me to the Bulliwicks, Tommy!  
Only you can get me to the Bulliwicks!  
After all the times, Tommy,  
only you can get me home again!

And I know on certain nights  
I can never take him home.  
He must move on to a new task,  
the real assignment he calls it,  
of one man's life and destiny.  
Tommy, I shall not go easy to the clay.  
And suddenly that terror is mine.  
I cannot take him home!

I cannot let him rest in the Bulliwicks  
until his job is done.

## V

Ah, Devon,  
the bullet of my spirit  
hits the runway at Shannon  
after the Dingle leaped out.  
You crowd me with misery  
and the pestilence of long hope.  
I have brought all my nights with me,  
our silent screamings back and forth,  
the kaleidoscopic stars and moons  
serving as soul transmitters,  
the brittle, unremembered pain  
numbing my bony joints  
forever scarred with your injection,  
the well of tears I've spent  
and hold collected in the explosive bag  
that veins and aorta serve,  
and the talkless times  
when my son was born  
and my nights were cries for him  
grasping for the edge of life.

Oh, Christ, Devon,  
you smother me, the highs and lows  
of such long pursuit,  
the sands shifting over the spectrum  
of lore binding our ends,  
as I move the English Ford  
between obstacle barrels  
like crude orange chess pieces  
on a Limerick Bridge,

guarded by a new army,  
their automatics hung bore down,  
their faces stiff as clock faces,  
lips set at nine and quarter past the hour,  
an army you never knew  
and yet began.

I impelled myself out of the city  
ganging at me harsh as Lowell  
or Lawrence or Worcester  
with the ghosts of their mills  
forcing thousands of aimless steps  
on every corner, every street,  
their red bricks inanimate,  
bearing the wrong breathlessness,  
usurpers, idle squatters;  
then only to find that new army  
in wayside patrol, slow meandering,  
a bore-down search for time,  
and I know you are near.

Will I find you waiting in Elfin-Mere,  
by the crude hut of Jamey Igo,  
blue and thatched on the far turn,  
or out from town, toward Cassidy's,  
where that lone statue stands,  
the Gaelic names burning stars?  
Your army, Devon, your army  
imprisons me at Elfin-Mere!



I struggle for the Bulliwicks,  
moving nowhere in the tide  
rushing through my limbs,  
helpless as my son crib-bound  
looking up to me, only eyes reaching,  
and I am my son!  
I am that babe beneath the power.

Oh Christ, Devon,  
I am you! I am you!  
And the Bulliwicks fade,  
the Hawthorne fades, sweet smell  
lost in the granite pull,  
strong stable smell up in smoke,  
the Easter names popping bullets  
of letters in my eyes,  
and I am caught, we are caught,  
in a freeze of time.

Ah, Devon, will we never go home again?