

Classic Poetry Series

Patrick Kavanagh
- poems -

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Patrick Kavanagh(1904 - 1967)

Kavanagh was born on the 21st of October 1904, in the village of Inniskeen, Co. Monaghan, Ireland. His father was a shoemaker and had a small farm of land. At the age of thirteen Kavanagh became an apprentice shoemaker. He gave it up 15 months later, admitting that he didn't make one wearable pair of boots. For the next 20 years, Kavanagh would work on the family farm before moving to Dublin in 1939.

Kavanagh's writing resulted in the publication of some poems in a local newspaper in the early 1930's. In 1939, his brother Peter, who was a Dublin based teacher, urged him to move to the city to establish himself as a writer. The Dublin Literary Society saw Kavanagh as a country farmer and referred to him as "That Monaghan Boy".

Kavanagh spent the lean years of the war in Dublin, where his epic poem *The Great Hunger* was published in 1942, presenting the Irish farmer's grinding poverty and sexual inhibition. This found him in trouble with his publishers. In 1947, his first major collection *A Soul for Sale*, was published. These poems were the product of his Monaghan youth. After the war he published the novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948) which is about a small time farmer who dreams of a different life as a writer and a poet. In the early 1950's, Kavanagh and his brother Peter, published a weekly newspaper called *Kavanagh's Weekly*, it failed because the editorial viewpoint was too narrow. In 1954, Kavanagh became embroiled in an infamous court case. He accused *The Leader* newspaper of slander. The newspaper decided to contest the case and hired John A. Costello, as their defense council. Kavanagh decided to prosecute the case himself and Costello destroyed him. The court case dragged on for over a year and Kavanagh's health began to fail. In 1955, he was diagnosed as having lung cancer and had a lung removed, Kavanagh survived and the event was a major turning point in his life and career. In 1958, he published *Come Dancing with Kitty Stobling*. In 1959, he was appointed to the faculty of English in UCD. His lectures were popular, but often irrelevant to the course. In the early 1960's, he visited Britain and USA. In 1965, he married Katherine Malony. He died in 1967 from an attack of bronchitis. Kavanagh's reputation as a poet is based on the lyrical quality of his work, his mastery of language and form and his ability to transform the ordinary into something of significance

Patrick Kavanagh died in Dublin on 30th November 1967, bringing to a close the life of one of Ireland's most controversial and colorful literary figures.

A Christmas Childhood

One side of the potato-pits was white with frost -
How wonderful that was, how wonderful!
And when we put our ears to the paling-post
The music that came out was magical.

The light between the ricks of hay and straw
Was a hole in Heaven's gable. An apple tree
With its December-glinting fruit we saw -
O you, Eve, were the world that tempted me.

To eat the knowledge that grew in clay
And death the germ within it! Now and then
I can remember something of the gay
Garden that was childhood's. Again.

The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place,
A green stone lying sideways in a ditch,
Or any common sight, the transfigured face
Of a beauty that the world did not touch.

My father played the melodion
Outside at our gate;
There were stars in the morning east
And they danced to his music.

Across the wild bogs his melodion called
To Lennons and Callans.
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry
I knew some strange thing had happened.

Outside in the cow-house my mother
Made the music of milking;
The light of her stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

A water-hen screeched in the bog,
Mass-going feet
Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes,
Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel.

My child poet picked out the letters
On the grey stone,
In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopeia was over
Cassidy's hanging hill,
I looked and three whin bushes rode across
The horizon — the Three Wise Kings.

And old man passing said:
'Can't he make it talk -
The melodion.' I hid in the doorway
And tightened the belt of my box-pleated coat.

I nicked six nicks on the door-post
With my penknife's big blade -
there was a little one for cutting tobacco.
And I was six Christmases of age.

My father played the melodion,
My mother milked the cows,
And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned
On the Virgin Mary's blouse.

Patrick Kavanagh

A Star

Beauty was that
Far vanished flame,
Call it a star
Wanting better name.

And gaze and gaze
Vaguely until
Nothing is left
Save a grey ghost-hill.

Here wait I
On the world's rim
Stretching out hands
To Seraphim.

Patrick Kavanagh

Advent

We have tested and tasted too much, lover-
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning-
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.
Won't we be rich, my love and I, and
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour-
And Christ comes with a January flower.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Patrick Kavanagh

April Dusk

April dusk

It is tragic to be a poet now
And not a lover
Paradised under the mutest bough.

I look through my window and see
The ghost of life flitting bat-winged.
O I am as old as a sage can even be,
O I am as lonely as the first fool kinged.

The horse in his stall turns away
From the hay-filled manger, dreaming of grass
Soft and cool in hollows. Does he neigh
Jealousy-words for John MacGuigan's ass
That never was civilised in stall or trace.

An unmusical ploughboy whistles down the lane
Not worried at all about the fate of Europe.
While I sit here feeling the subtle pain
Of one whose Tree of God has been uprooted.

Patrick Kavanagh

Canal Bank Walk

Leafy-with-love banks and the green waters of the canal
Pouring redemption for me, that I do
The will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal,
Grow with nature again as before I grew.
The bright stick trapped, the breeze adding a third
Party to the couple kissing on an old seat,
And a bird gathering materials for the nest for the Word
Eloquently new and abandoned to its delirious beat.
O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Patrick Kavanagh

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.

Patrick Kavanagh

Gospel

We are the children of light,
Wise, not companioned
By goats
In a condemned graveyard.

Backward blowing
Blizzards of memory
Flatten out
The genealogies.

But here a point,
The objective essence
We work in.
We shall not drink from the stink-pots.

Propaganda,
Gospel spread
With tin shovels,
We are this generation.

Patrick Kavanagh

Having To Live In The Country

Back once again in wild, wet Monaghan
Exiled from thought and feeling,
A mean brutality reigns:
It is really a horrible position to be in
And I equate myself with Dante
And all who have lived outside civilization.
It isn't a question of place but of people;
Wordsworth and Coleridge lived apart from the common man,
Their friends called on them regularly.
Swift is in a somewhat different category
He was a genuine exile and his heavy heart
Weighed him down in Dublin.
Yet even he had compensations for in the Deanery
He received many interesting friends
And it was the eighteenth century.

I suppose that having to live
Among men whose rages
Are for small wet hills full of stones
When one man buys a patch and pays a high price for it
That is not the end of his paying.
"Go home and have another bastard" shout the children,
Cousin of the underbidder, to the young wife of the purchaser.
The first child was born after six months of marriage,
Desperate people, desperate animals.
What must happen the poor priest
Somewhat educated who has to believe that these people have souls
As bright as a poet's - though I don't, mind, speak for myself.

Patrick Kavanagh

In Memory Of My Mother

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday -
You meet me and you say:
'Don't forget to see about the cattle - '
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life -
And I see us meeting at the end of a town

On a fair day by accident, after
The bargains are all made and we can walk
Together through the shops and stalls and markets
Free in the oriental streets of thought.

O you are not lying in the wet clay,
For it is a harvest evening now and we
Are piling up the ricks against the moonlight
And you smile up at us - eternally.

Patrick Kavanagh

Inniskeen Road: July Evening

The bicycles go by in twos and threes -
There's a dance in Billy Brennan's barn to-night,
And there's the half-talk code of mysteries
And the wink-and-elbow language of delight.
Half-past eight and there is not a spot
Upon a mile of road, no shadow thrown
That might turn out a man or woman, not
A footfall tapping secrecies of stone.
I have what every poet hates in spite
Of all the solemn talk of contemplation.
Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight
Of being king and government and nation.
A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.

Patrick Kavanagh

Innocence

They laughed at one I loved-
The triangular hill that hung
Under the Big Forth. They said
That I was bounded by the whitethorn hedges
Of the little farm and did not know the world.
But I knew that love's doorway to life
Is the same doorway everywhere.
Ashamed of what I loved
I flung her from me and called her a ditch
Although she was smiling at me with violets.

But now I am back in her briary arms
The dew of an Indian Summer lies
On bleached potato-stalks
What age am I?

I do not know what age I am,
I am no mortal age;
I know nothing of women,
Nothing of cities,
I cannot die
Unless I walk outside these whitethorn hedges.

Patrick Kavanagh

Kerr's Ass

We borrowed the loan of Kerr's ass
To go to Dundalk with butter,
Brought him home the evening before the market
And exile that night in Mucker.

We heeled up the cart before the door,
We took the harness inside -
The straw-stuffed straddle, the broken breeching
With bits of bull-wire tied;

The winkers that had no choke-band,
The collar and the reins . . .
In Ealing Broadway, London Town
I name their several names

Until a world comes to life -
Morning, the silent bog,
And the God of imagination waking
In a Mucker fog.

Patrick Kavanagh

March

There's a wind blowing
Cold through the corridors,
A ghost-wind,
The flapping of defeated wings,
A hell-fantasy
From meadows damned
To eternal April

And listening, listening
To the wind
I hear
The throat-rattle of dying men,
From whose ears oozes
Foamy blood,
Throttled in a brothel.

I see brightly
In the wind vacancies
Saint Thomas Aquinas
And
Poetry blossoms
Excitingly
As the first flower of truth.

Patrick Kavanagh

Memory Of My Father

Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered.

That man I saw in Gardner Street
Stumbled on the kerb was one,
He stared at me half-eyed,
I might have been his son.

And I remember the musician
Faltering over his fiddle
In Bayswater, London,
He too set me the riddle.

Every old man I see
In October-coloured weather
Seems to say to me:
"I was once your father."

Patrick Kavanagh

My Father Played The Melodeon

My father played the melodeon
Outside at our gate,
There were stars in the morning east
And they danced to his music.

Across the world bogs his melodeon called
To Lennons and Callans
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry
I knew some strange thing had happened.

Outside in the cow-house my mother
Made the music of milking,
The light of the stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

A water-hen screeched in the bog,
Mass-going feet
Crunched the wafer-ice on the polt-holes -
Somebody wistfully twisted a bellow's wheel.

My child-poet picked out the letters
On Time's black stone,
In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopea was over
Cassidy's hanging hill.
I looked and three whin bushes rode across
The horizon - the Three Wise Kings.

My father played the melodeon,
My mother milked the cows
And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned
On the Virgin Mary's blouse.

Patrick Kavanagh

On An Apple-Ripe September Morning

On an apple-ripe September morning
Through the mist-chill fields I went
With a pitch-fork on my shoulder
Less for use than for devilment.

The threshing mill was set-up, I knew,
In Cassidy's haggard last night,
And we owed them a day at the threshing
Since last year. O it was delight

To be paying bills of laughter
And chaffy gossip in kind
With work thrown in to ballast
The fantasy-soaring mind.

As I crossed the wooden bridge I wondered
As I looked into the drain
If ever a summer morning should find me
Shovelling up eels again.

And I thought of the wasps' nest in the bank
And how I got chased one day
Leaving the drag and the scraw-knife behind,
How I covered my face with hay.

The wet leaves of the cocksfoot
Polished my boots as I
Went round by the glistening bog-holes
Lost in unthinking joy.

I'll be carrying bags to-day, I mused,
The best job at the mill
With plenty of time to talk of our loves
As we wait for the bags to fill.

Maybe Mary might call round...
And then I came to the haggard gate,
And I knew as I entered that I had come
Through fields that were part of no earthly estate.

Patrick Kavanagh

On Raglan Road

On Raglan Road on an autumn day I met her first and knew
That her dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue;
I saw the danger, yet I walked along the enchanted way,
And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day.

On Grafton Street in November we tripped lightly along the ledge
Of the deep ravine where can be seen the worth of passion's pledge,
The Queen of Hearts still making tarts and I not making hay -
O I loved too much and by such and such is happiness thrown away.

I gave her gifts of the mind I gave her the secret sign that's known
To the artists who have known the true gods of sound and stone
And word and tint. I did not stint for I gave her poems to say.
With her own name there and her own dark hair like clouds over fields of May

On a quiet street where old ghosts meet I see her walking now
Away from me so hurriedly my reason must allow
That I had wooed not as I should a creature made of clay -
When the angel woos the clay he'd lose his wings at the dawn of day.

Patrick Kavanagh

Peace

And sometimes I am sorry when the grass
Is growing over the stones in quiet hollows
And the cocksfoot leans across the rutted cart-pass
That I am not the voice of country fellows
Who now are standing by some headland talking
Of turnips and potatoes or young corn
Of turf banks stripped for victory.
Here Peace is still hawking
His coloured combs and scarves and beads of horn.

Upon a headland by a whinny hedge
A hare sits looking down a leaf-lapped furrow
There's an old plough upside-down on a weedy ridge
And someone is shouldering home a saddle-harrow.
Out of that childhood country what fools climb
To fight with tyrants Love and Life and Time?

Patrick Kavanagh

Primrose

Upon a bank I sat, a child made seer
Of one small primrose flowering in my mind.
Better than wealth it is, I said, to find
One small page of Truth's manuscript made clear.
I looked at Christ transfigured without fear--
The light was very beautiful and kind,
And where the Holy Ghost in flame had signed
I read it through the lenses of a tear.
And then my sight grew dim, I could not see
The primrose that had lighted me to Heaven,
And there was but the shadow of a tree
Ghostly among the stars. The years that pass
Like tired soldiers nevermore have given
Moments to see wonders in the grass.

Submitted by Andrew Mayers

Patrick Kavanagh

Shancoduff

My black hills have never seen the sun rising,
Eternally they look north towards Armagh.
Lot's wife would not be salt if she had been
Incurious as my black hills that are happy
When dawn whitens Glasdrummond chapel.

My hills hoard the bright shillings of March
While the sun searches in every pocket.
They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn
With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves
In the field under the Big Forth of Rocksavage.

The sleety winds fondle the rushy beards of Shancoduff
While the cattle-drovers sheltering in the Featherna Bush
Look up and say: "Who owns them hungry hills
That the water-hen and snipe must have forsaken?
A poet? Then by heavens he must be poor."
I hear and is my heart not badly shaken?

Patrick Kavanagh

Stony Grey Soil

O stony grey soil of Monaghan
The laugh from my love you thieved;
You took the gay child of my passion
And gave me your clod-conceived.

You clogged the feet of my boyhood
And I believed that my stumble
Had the poise and stride of Apollo
And his voice my thick tongued mumble.

You told me the plough was immortal!
O green-life conquering plough!
The mandril stained, your coulter blunted
In the smooth lea-field of my brow.

You sang on steaming dunghills
A song of cowards' brood,
You perfumed my clothes with weasel itch,
You fed me on swinish food

You flung a ditch on my vision
Of beauty, love and truth.
O stony grey soil of Monaghan
You burgled my bank of youth!

Lost the long hours of pleasure
All the women that love young men.
O can I still stroke the monster's back
Or write with unpoisoned pen.

His name in these lonely verses
Or mention the dark fields where
The first gay flight of my lyric
Got caught in a peasant's prayer.

Mullahinsa, Drummeril, Black Shanco-
Wherever I turn I see
In the stony grey soil of Monaghan
Dead loves that were born for me.

Patrick Kavanagh

The Great Hunger

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, straitening the 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 spanning 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 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 coulter's 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
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. 'O God if I had been wiser!'
But now a crumpled leaf from the whitethorn bushes
Darts 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 his 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.
O he loved his mother
Above all others.
O 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.

III .

Poor Paddy Maguire, a fourteen-hour day
He worked for years. It was he that lit the fire
And boiled the kettle and gave the cows their hay.
His mother tall hard as a Protestant spire
Came down the stairs barefoot at the kettle-call
And talked to her son sharply: 'Did you let
The hens out, you?' She had a venomous drawl
And a wizened face like moth-eaten leatherette.
Two black cats peeped between the banisters
And gloated over the bacon-fizzling pan.
Outside the window showed tin canisters.
The snipe of Dawn fell like a whirring stone
And Patrick on a headland stood alone.
The pull is on the traces, it is March
And a cold black wind is blowing from Dundalk.
The twisting sod rolls over on her back
The virgin screams before the irresistible sock.
No worry on Maguire's mind this day
Except that he forgot to bring his matches.
'Hop back there Polly, hoy back, woa, wae,
From every second hill a neighbour watches
With all the sharpened interest of rivalry.
Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
These men know God the Father in a tree:
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.
Primroses and the unearthly start of ferns
Among the blackthorn shadows in the ditch,
A dead sparrow and an old waistcoat. Maguire learns
As the horses turn slowly round the which is which
Of love and fear and things half born to mind
He stands between the plough-handles and he sees
At the end of a long furrow his name signed
Among the poets, prostitutes. With all miseries

He is one. Here with the unfortunate
Who for half-moments of paradise
Pay out good days and wait and wait
For sunlight-woven cloaks. O to be wise
As Respectability that knows the price of all things
And marks God's truth in pounds and pence and farthings.

IV

April, and no one able to calculate
How far it is to harvest. They put down
The seeds blindly with sensuous groping fingers
And sensual dreams sleep dreams subtly underground.
Tomorrow is Wednesday - who cares?
'Remember Eileen Farrelly? I was thinking
A man might do a damned sight worse ...' That voice is blown
Through a hole in a garden wall -
And who was Eileen now cannot be known.
The cattle are out on grass
The corn is coming up evenly.
The farm folk are hurrying to catch Mass:
Christ will meet them at the end of the world, the slow and the speedier.
But the fields say: only Time can bless.
Maguire knelt beside a pillar where he could spit
Without being seen. He turned an old prayer round:
'Jesus, Mary, Joseph pray for us
Now and at the Hour.' Heaven dazzled death.
'Wonder should I cross-plough that turnip-ground.'
The tension broke. The congregation lifted it head
As one man and coughed in unison.
Five hundred hearts were hungry for life-
Who lives in Christ shall never die the death.
And the candle-lit Altar and the flowers
And the pregnant Tabernacle lifted a moment to Prophecy
Out of the clayey hours
Maguire sprinkled his face with holy water
As the congregation stood up for the Last Gospel.
He rubbed the dust off his knees with his palm, and then
Coughed the prayer phlegm up from his throat and sighed: Amen.
Once one day in June when he was walking
Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
He met a girl carrying a basket
And he was then a young and heated fellow.

Too earnest, too earnest! He rushed beyond the thing
To the unreal. And he saw Sin
Written in letters larger than John Bunyan dreamt of.
For the strangled impulse there is no redemption.
And that girl was gone and he was counting
The dangers in the fields where love ranted
He was helpless. He saw his cattle
And stroked their flanks in lieu of wife to handle.
He would have changed the circle if he could,
The circle that was the grass track where he ran.
Twenty times a day he ran round the field
And still there was no winning-post where the runner is cheered home.
Desperately he broke the tune,
But however he tried always the same melody left up from the background,
The dragging step of a ploughman going home through the guttery
Headlands under an April-watery moon.
Religion, the fields and the fear of the Lord
And Ignorance giving him the coward's blow,
He dared not rise to pluck the fantasies
From the fruited Tree of Life. He bowed his head
And saw a wet weed twined about his toe.

V

Evening at the cross-roads -
Heavy heads nodding out words as wise
As the ruminations of cows after milking.
From the ragged road surface a boy picks up
A piece of gravel and stares at it-and then
Tosses it across the elm tree on to the railway.
He means nothing.
Not a damn thing
Somebody is coming over the metal railway bridge
And his hobnailed boots on the arches sound like a gong
Calling men awake. But the bridge is too narrow -
The men lift their heads a moment. That was only John,
So they dream on.
Night in the elms, night in the grass.
O we are too tired to go home yet. Two cyclists pass
Talking loudly of Kitty and Molly?
Horses or women? wisdom or folly?
A door closes on an evicted dog
Where prayers begin in Barney Meegan's kitchen :

Rosie curses the cat between her devotions;
The daughter prays that she may have three wishes -
Health and wealth and love -
From the fairy who is faith or hope or compounds of.
At the cross-roads the crowd had thinned out:
Last words were uttered. There is no to-morrow;
No future but only time stretched for the mowing of the hay
Or putting an axle in the turf-barrow.
Patrick Maguire went home and made cocoa
And broke a chunk off the loaf of wheaten bread;
His mother called down to him to look again
And make sure that the hen-house was locked. His sister grunted in bed
The sound of a sow taking up a new position.
Pat opened his trousers wide over the ashes
And dreamt himself to lewd sleepiness.
The clock ticked on. Time passes.

VI

Health and wealth and love he too dreamed of in May
As he sat on the railway slope and watched the children of the place
Picking up a primrose here and a daisy there -
They were picking up life's truth singly.
But he dreamt of the Absolute envased bouquet -
All or nothing. And it was nothing. For God is not all
In one place, complete
Till Hope comes in and takes it on his shoulder -
O Christ, that is what you have done for us:
In a crumb of bread the whole mystery is.
He read the symbol too sharply and turned
From the five simple doors of sense
To the door whose combination lock has puzzled
Philosopher and priest and common dunce.
Men build their heavens as they build their circles
Of friends. God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday -
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.
He sat on the railway slope and watched the evening,
Too beautifully perfect to use,
And his three wishes were three stones too sharp to sit on,
Too hard to carve. Three frozen idols of a speechless muse.

VII

'Now go to Mass and pray and confess your sins
And you'll have all the luck,' his mother said.
He listened to the lie that is a woman's screen
Around a conscience when soft thighs are spread.
And all the while she was setting up the lie
She trusted in Nature that never deceives.
But her son took it as literal truth.
Religion's walls expand to the push of nature. Morality yields
To sense - but not in little tillage fields.
Life went on like that. One summer morning
Again through a hay-field on her way to the shop -
The grass was wet and over-leaned the path -
And Agnes held her skirts sensationally up,
And not because the grass was wet either.
A man was watching her, Patrick Maguire.
She was in love with passion and its weakness
And the wet grass could never cool the fire
That radiated from her unwanted womb in that metaphysical land
Where flesh was thought more spiritual than music
Among the stars - out of reach of the peasant's hand.
Ah, but the priest was one of the people too -
A farmers son - and surely he knew
The needs of a brother and sister.
Religion could not be a counter-irritant like a blister,
But the certain standard, measured and known
By which man might re-make his soul though all walls were down
And all earth's pedestalled gods thrown.

VIII

Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate
He didn't care a damn.
Said whatever came into his head,
Said whatever came into his head,
Said whatever came into his head
And inconsequently sang.
While his world withered away,
He had a cigarette to smoke and a pound to spend
On drink the next Saturday.
His cattle were fat
And his horses all that

Midsummer grass could make them.
The young women ran wild
And dreamed of a child
Joy dreams though the fathers might forsake them
But no one would take them;
No man could ever see
That their skirts had loosed buttons,
O the men were as blind as could be.
And Patrick Maguire
From his. purgatory fire
Called the gods of the Christian to prove
That this twisted skein
Was the necessary pain
And not the rope that was strangling true love.
But sitting on a wooden gate
Sometime in July
When he was thirty-four or five
He gloried in the lie:
He made it read the way it should,
He made life read the evil good
While he cursed the ascetic brotherhood
Without knowing why.
Sitting on a wooden gate
All, all alone
He sang and laughed
Like a man quite daft,
Or like a man on a channel raft
He fantasied forth his groan.
Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate,
Sitting on a wooden gate
He rode in day-dream cars.
He locked his body with his knees
When the gate swung too much in the breeze.
But while he caught high ecstasies
Life slipped between the bars.

IX

He gave himself another year,
Something was bound to happen before then -
The circle would break down
And he would carve the new one to his own will.

A new rhythm is a new life
And in it marriage is hung and money.
He would be a new man walking through unbroken meadows
Of dawn in the year of One.
The poor peasant talking to himself in a stable door
An ignorant peasant deep in dung.
What can the passers-by think otherwise?
Where is his silver bowl of knowledge hung?
Why should men be asked to believe in a soul
That is only the mark of a hoof in guttery gaps?
A man is what is written on the label.
And the passing world stares but no one stops
To look closer. So back to the growing crops
And the ridges he never loved.
Nobody will ever know how much tortured poetry the pulled weeds on the ridge
wrote
Before they withered in the July sun,
Nobody will ever read the wild, sprawling, scrawling mad woman's signature,
The hysteria and the boredom of the enclosed nun of his thought.
Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind
Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
'The grey and grief and unloved,
The bones in the backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.
Sometimes they did laugh and see the sunlight,
A narrow slice of divine instruction.
Going along the river at the bend of Sunday
The trout played in the pools encouragement
To jump in love though death bait the hook.
And there would be girls sitting on the grass banks of lanes.
Stretch-legged and lingering staring -
A man might take one of them if he had the courage.
But 'No' was in every sentence of their story
Except when the public-house came in and shouted its piece.
The yellow buttercups and the bluebells among the whin bushes
On rocks in the middle of ploughing
Was a bright spoke in the wheel
Of the peasant's mill.
The goldfinches on the railway paling were worth looking at -
A man might imagine then
Himself in Brazil and these birds the birds of paradise
And the Amazon and the romance traced on the school map lived again.

Talk in evening corners and under trees
Was like an old book found in a king's tomb.
The children gathered round like students and listened
And some of the saga defied the draught in the open tomb
And was not blown.

X

Their intellectual life consisted in reading
Reynolds News or the Sunday Dispatch,
With sometimes an old almanac brought down from the ceiling
Or a school reader brown with the droppings of thatch.
The sporting results or the headlines of war
Was a humbug profound as the highbrow's Arcana.
Pat tried to be wise to the abstraction of all that
But its secret dribbled down his waistcoat like a drink from a strainer.
He wagered a bob each way on the Derby,
He got a straight tip from a man in a shop -
A double from the Guineas it was and thought himself
A master mathematician when one of them came up
And he could explain how much he'd have drawn
On the double if the second leg had followed the first.
He was betting on form and breeding, he claimed,
And the man that did that could never be burst.
After that they went on to the war, and the generals
On both sides were shown to be stupid as hell.
If he'd taken that road, they remarked of a Marshal,
He'd have ... O they know their geography well
This was their university. Maguire was an undergraduate
Who dreamed from his lowly position of rising
To a professorship like Larry McKenna or Duffy
Or the pig-gelder Nallon whose knowledge was amazing.
'A treble, full multiple odds ... That's flat porter ...
Another one ... No, you're wrong about that thing I was telling you. .
Did you part with your filly, Jack? I heard that you sold her....'
The students were all savants by the time of pub-close.

XI

A year passed and another hurried after it
And Patrick Maguire was still six months behind life -
His mother six months ahead of it;
His sister straddle-legged across it: -
One leg in hell and the other in heaven

And between the purgatory of middle-aged virginity -
She prayed for release to heaven or hell.
His mother's voice grew thinner like a rust-worn knife
But it cut venomously as it thinned,
It cut him up the middle till he became more woman than man,
And it cut through to his mind before the end.
Another field whitened in the April air
And the harrows rattled over the seed.
He gathered the loose stones off the ridges carefully
And grumbled to his men to hurry. He looked like a man who could give advice
To foolish young fellows. He was forty-seven,
And there was depth in his jaw and his voice was the voice of a great cattle-
dealer,
A man with whom the fair-green gods break even.
'I think I ploughed that lea the proper depth,
She ought to give a crop if any land gives ...
Drive slower with the foal-mare, Joe.'
Joe, a young man of imagined wives,
Smiles to himself and answered like a slave:
'You needn't fear or fret.
I'm taking her as easy, as easy as ...
Easy there Fanny, easy, pet.'
They loaded the day-scoured implements on the cart
As the shadows of poplars crooked the furrows.
It was the evening, evening. Patrick was forgetting to be lonely
As he used to be in Aprils long ago.
It was the menopause, the misery-pause.
The schoolgirls passed his house laughing every morning
And sometimes they spoke to him familiarly -
He had an idea. Schoolgirls of thirteen
Would see no political intrigue in an old man's friendship.
Love
The heifer waiting to be nosed by the old bull.
That notion passed too - there was the danger of talk
And jails are narrower than the five-sod ridge
And colder than the black hills facing Armagh in February.
He sinned over the warm ashes again and his crime
The law's long arm could not serve with time.
His face set like an old judge's pose:
Respectability and righteousness,
Stand for no nonsense.
The priest from the altar called Patrick Maguire's name

To hold the collecting-box in the chapel door
During all the Sundays of May.
His neighbours envied him his holy rise,
But he walked down from the church with affected indifference
And took the measure of heaven angle-wise.
He still could laugh and sing,
But not the wild laugh or the abandoned harmony now
That called the world to new silliness from the top of a wooden gate
When thirty-five could take the sparrow's bow.
Let us be kind, let us be kind and sympathetic:
Maybe life is not for joking or for finding happiness in -
This tiny light in Oriental Darkness
Looking out chance windows of poetry or prayer.
And the grief and defeat of men like these peasants
Is God's way - maybe - and we must not want too much
To see.
The twisted thread is stronger than the wind-swept fleece.
And in the end who shall rest in truth's high peace?
Or whose is the world now, even now?
O let us kneel where the blind ploughman kneels
And learn to live without despairing
In a mud-walled space -
Illiterate unknown and unknowing.
Let us kneel where he kneels
And feel what he feels.
One day he saw a daisy and he thought it
Reminded him of his childhood -
He stopped his cart to look at it.
Was there a fairy hiding behind it?
He helped a poor woman whose cow
Had died on her;
He dragged home a drunken man on a winter's night
And one rare moment he heard the young people playing on the railway stile
And he wished them happiness and whatever they most desired from life.
He saw the sunlight and begrudged no man
His share of what the miserly soil and soul
Gives in a season to a ploughman.
And he cried for his own loss one late night on the pillow
And yet thanked the God who had arranged these things.
Was he then a saint?
A Matt Talbot of Monaghan?
His sister Mary Anne spat poison at the children

Who sometimes came to the door selling raffle tickets
For holy funds.
'Get out, you little tramps!' she would scream
As she shook to the hens an armful of crumbs,
But Patrick often put his hand deep down
In his trouser-pocket and fingered out a penny
Or maybe a tobacco-stained caramel.
'You're soft,' said the sister; 'with other people's money
It's not a bit funny.'
The cards are shuffled and the deck
Laid flat for cutting - Tom Malone
Cut for trump. I think we'll make
This game, the last, a tanner one.
Hearts. Right. I see you're breaking
Your two-year-old. Play quick, Maguire,
The clock there says it's half-past ten -
Kate, throw another sod on that fire.
One of the card-players laughs and spits
Into the flame across a shoulder.
Outside, a noise like a rat
Among the hen-roosts.
The cock crows over
The frosted townland of the night.
Eleven o'clock and still the game
Goes on and the players seem to be
Drunk in an Orient opium den.
Midnight, one o'clock, two.
Somebody's leg has fallen asleep.
What about home? Maguire, are you
Using your double-tree this week?
Why? do you want it? Play the ace.
There's it, and that's the last card for me.
A wonderful night, we had. Duffy's place
Is very convenient. Is that a ghost or a tree?
And so they go home with dragging feet
And their voices rumble like laden carts.
And they are happy as the dead or sleeping ...
I should have led that ace of hearts.

XII

The fields were bleached white,
The wooden tubs full of water

Were white in the winds
That blew through Brannagan's Gap on their way from Siberia;
The cows on the grassless heights .
Followed the hay that had wings -
The February fodder that hung itself on the black branches
Of the hill-top hedge.
A man stood beside a potato-pit
And clapped his arms
And pranced on the crisp roots
And shouted to warm himself.
Then he buck-leaped about the potatoes
And scooped them into a basket.
He looked like a bucking suck-calf
Whose spine was being tickled.
Sometimes he stared across the bogs
And sometimes he straightened his back and vaguely whistled
A tune that weakened his spirit
And saddened his terrier dog's.
A neighbour passed with a spade on his shoulder
And Patrick Maguire bent like a bridge
Whistled-good morning under his oxter
And the man the other side of the hedge
Champed his spade on the road at his toes
And talked an old sentimentality
While the wind blew under his clothes.
The mother sickened and stayed in bed all day,
Her head hardly dented the pillow, so light and thin it had worn,
But she still enquired after the household affairs.
She held the strings of her children's Punch and Judy, and when a mouth opened
It was her truth that the dolls would have spoken
If they hadn't been made of wood and tin -
'Did you open the barn door, Pat, to let the young calves in?'
The priest called to see her every Saturday
And she told him her troubles and fears:
'If Mary Anne was settled I'd die in peace -
I'm getting on in years.'
'You were a good woman,' said the priest,
'And your children will miss you when you're gone.
The likes of you this parish never knew,
I'm sure they'll not forget the work you've done.'
She reached five bony crooks under the tick -
'Five pounds for Masses - won't you say them quick.'

She died one morning in the beginning of May
And a shower of sparrow-notes was the litany for her dying.
The holy water was sprinkled on the bed-clothes
And her children stood around the bed and cried because it was too late for crying.

A mother dead! The tired sentiment:
'Mother, Mother' was a shallow pool
Where sorrow hardly could wash its feet ...
Mary Anne came away from the deathbed and boiled the calves their gruel.
'O what was I doing when the procession passed?
Where was I looking? Young women and men
And I might have joined them.
Who bent the coin of my destiny
That it stuck in the slot?
I remember a night we walked
Through the moon of Donaghmoyne,
Four of us seeking adventure,
It was midsummer forty years ago.
Now I know
The moment that gave the turn to my life.
O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever.

XIII

The world looks on
And talks of the peasant:
The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women, He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.
The birds that sing for him are eternal choirs ,
Everywhere he walks there are flowers.
His heart is pure, His mind is clear,
He can talk to God as Moses and Isaiah talked
The peasant who is only one remove from the beasts he drives. '
'The travellers stop their cars to gape over the green bank into his fields: -
There is the source from which all cultures rise,
And all religions,
There is the pool in which the poet dips
And the musician.
Without the peasant base civilisation must die,

Unless the clay is in the mouth the singer's singing is useless.
The travellers touch the roots of the grass and feel renewed
When they grasp the steering wheels again.
The peasant is the unspoiled child of Prophecy,
The peasant is all virtues - let us salute him without irony
The peasant ploughman who is half a vegetable -
Who can react to sun and rain and sometimes even
Regret that the Maker of Light had not touched him more intensely.
Brought him up from the sub-soil to an existence
Of conscious joy. He was not born blind.
He is not always blind: sometimes the cataract yields
To sudden stone-falling or the desire to breed.
The girls pass along the roads
And he can remember what man is,
But there is nothing he can do.
Is there nothing he can do?
Is there no escape?
No escape, no escape.
The cows and horses breed,
And the potato-seed
Gives a bud and a root and rots
In the good mother's way with her sons;
The fledged bird is thrown
From the nest - on its own.
But the peasant in his little acres is tied
To a mother's womb by the wind-toughened navel-cord
Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree -
He circles around and around wondering why it should be.
No crash, No drama.
That was how his life happened.
No mad hooves galloping in the sky,
But the weak, washy way of true tragedy -
A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.

XIV

We may come out in the October reality, Imagination,
The sleety wind no longer slants to the black hill where Maguire
And his men are now collecting the scattered harness and baskets.
The dog sitting on a wisp of dry stalks
Watches them through the shadows.
'Back in, back in.' One talks to the horse as to a brother.
Maguire himself is patting a potato-pit against the weather -

An old man fondling a new-piled grave:
 'Joe, I hope you didn't forget to hide the spade .
 For there's rogues in the townland.
 Hide it flat in a furrow.
 I think we ought to be finished by to-morrow.
 Their voices through the darkness sound like voices from a cave,
 A dull thudding far away, futile, feeble, far away,
 First cousins to the ghosts of the townland.
 A light stands in a window. Mary Anne
 Has the table set and the tea-pot waiting in the ashes.
 She goes to the door and listens and then she calls
 From the top of the haggard-wall :
 'What's keeping you
 And the cows to be milked and all the other work there's to do?'
 'All right, all right
 We'll not stay here all night '
 Applause, applause,
 The curtain falls.
 Applause, applause
 From the homing carts and the trees
 And the bawling cows at the gates.
 From the screeching water-hens
 And the mill-race heavy with the Lammas floods curving over the weir
 A train at the station blowing off steam
 And the hysterical laughter of the defeated everywhere.
 Night, and the futile cards are shuffled again.
 Maguire spreads his legs over the impotent cinders that wake no manhood now
 And he hardly looks to see which card is trump.
 His sister tightens her legs and her lips and frizzles up
 Like the wick of an oil-less lamp.
 The curtain falls -
 Applause, applause.
 Maguire is not afraid of death, the Church will light him a candle
 To see his way through the vaults and he'll understand the
 Quality of the clay that dribbles over his coffin.
 He'll know the names of the roots that climb down to tickle his feet.
 And he will feel no different than when he walked through Donaghmoyne.
 If he stretches out a hand - a wet clod,
 If he opens his nostrils - a dungy smell;
 If he opens his eyes once in a million years -
 Through a crack in the crust of the earth he may see a face nodding in
 Or a woman's legs.

Shut them again for that sight is sin.
He will hardly remember that life happened to him -
Something was brighter a moment. Somebody sang in the distance
A procession passed down a mesmerized street.
He remembers names like Easter and Christmas
By colour his fields were.
Maybe he will be born again, a bird of an angel's conceit
To sing the gospel of life
To a music as flighty tangent
As a tune on an oboe.
And the serious look of his fields will have changed to the leer of a hobo.
Swaggering celestially home to his three wishes granted.
Will that be? will that be?
Or is the earth right that laughs haw-haw
And does not believe
In an unearthly law.
The earth that says:
Patrick Maguire, the old peasant, can neither be damned nor glorified:
The graveyard in which he will lie will be just a deep-drilled potato-field
Where the seed gets no chance to come through
To the fun of the sun.
The tongue in his mouth is the root of a yew.
Silence, silence. The story is done.
He stands in the doorway of his house
A ragged sculpture of the wind,
October creaks the rotted mattress,
The bedposts fall. No hope. No lust.
The hungry fiend
Screams the apocalypse of clay
In every corner of this land.

Patrick Kavanagh

To The Man After The Harrow

Now leave the check-reins slack,
The seed is flying far today -
The seed like stars against the black
Eternity of April clay.

This seed is potent as the seed
Of knowledge in the Hebrew Book,
So drive your horses in the creed
Of God the Father as a stook.

Forget the men on Brady's Hill.
Forget what Brady's boy may say.
For destiny will not fulfil
Unless you let the harrow play.

Forget the worm's opinion too
Of hooves and pointed harrow-pins,
For you are driving your horses through
The mist where Genesis begins.

Patrick Kavanagh

Wet Evening In April

The birds sang in the wet trees
And I listened to them it was a hundred years from now
And I was dead and someone else was listening to them.
But I was glad I had recorded for him
The melancholy.

Patrick Kavanagh