

# Three Poems

BY TERENCE WINCH

These poems are from Terence Winch's new collection, *Boy Drinkers*, published by Hanging Loose Press in 2007. Family pictures on following pages show, in order, Confirmation Day, c 1958, (Terry Winch is fourth boy from the left); Frankie Keenan and Terry Winch in the Winch apartment, Daly Avenue, Bronx, NY, c 1964; Rob Thornburgh (fiddle) and Terry Winch (accordion) performing with Celtic Thunder at the Dubliner, Washington, D.C., during the 1980s.

## BOY DRINKERS

I had my first drink in a bar  
when I was fourteen.  
I was big for my age  
and had a phony draft card.  
Then I drank and drank for years.  
We would start  
at two or three in the afternoon  
and keep on till four a.m.  
In the bars in those days  
the excitement of intoxication  
filled our souls,  
made everything pulse,  
leaving the material and spiritual  
worlds enhanced, illuminated.

When we were sick as children,  
my mother gave us blackberry brandy,  
and I later developed a taste for it.  
When I was in high school,  
I would buy a pint of it before going to a dance.  
The boy drinkers would assemble  
in the boys' bathroom  
and guzzle their pints of Scotch  
or rye, often polishing off the bottle  
in one quick visit. I gulped down  
blackberry brandy, the family favorite.

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writer, composer, musician and the son of  
Irish immigrants, grew up in the Bronx.  
His latest music CD is the anthology,  
When New York Was Irish: Songs & Tunes  
by Terence Winch, featuring the bands  
Celtic Thunder and Narrowbacks. ©2007.  
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I remember being somewhere in West Farms  
in the Bronx, drinking my brandy,  
then throwing up over the chain-link fence  
in front of Mister Donut.  
I liked the sweet sticky  
essence of blackberry brandy.

At home, though, we kept a big jug  
of Gallo Port right on the floor  
in a corner of the kitchen.  
My parents enjoyed Gallo Port,  
though I never cared for it.

2.

I remember coming home from school one day, maybe a year earlier, and finding my mother stretched sideways across one of the beds in the room I shared with my brother. She was crying and I remember how frightened her weeping made me. I knew the world would never be the same again.

My father stayed up with her every night for years, after having worked all day. I learned how to inject my mother by practicing on oranges.

My father embraces me and we stand there in the middle of the living room holding each other and crying, as though our huddle could contain the pain invading our lives. I hear my mother say to someone Thank God Paddy and the boys are close.



Father Byrne came to visit her, and this meant a great deal to us. He was the new handsome priest who could sing like Bing and everybody adored him. When it got really bad, our cause was taken up by the Dominican Sisters of the Sick Poor, an order of nuns each of whom was a registered nurse. They came every day and demonstrated what real selflessness looked like.

After she died, we held a benefit for those nuns and raised more than a thousand dollars. Before she died, we moved a TV into the front room and borrowed a hospital bed. We all watched the Nixon-Kennedy debates in that room, my mother like all of us amazed an Irishman might wind up in the White House.

My father never bounced back and that was hard for me to accept and made me angry at him, although I knew his heart was broken, and every other night I'd be woken up by his nightmares and I'd shake him awake but I already knew at sixteen how easily we break.



# Celebration

In our world, nothing compared with Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. God's power surging through the congregation, from altar boys in our stiff collars and big red bows, to the solid men of the parish in their finest array: Blue suits, gold wrist watches, crisp white shirts. The women perfumed and girdled, lipsticked and bejeweled. Enough incense in the air to do the Wise Men proud.

The procession wound through the church, organ honking, voices lifted in the special Christmas sense of the slate wiped clean and the universe beginning anew. The tree in the house lit with fat colored bulbs that looked good enough to eat. The old suitcase full of fragile decorations, buried treasure found every year on Christmas Eve and set free again. The baby Jesus alive and well! Herod thwarted!

This called for presents. Toys, games, maybe a watch or a knife. Along with Jesus came the whole cast of Yuletide characters—Santa, Rudolph, the Chipmunks, Bing Crosby, Frosty, Scrooge. I'm surprised the Easter Bunny didn't crash the event. My father put out apple pie and a glass of milk for Sanny, the remaining traces of which on Christmas morning were proof enough for me and my brother Jimmy of the entire supernatural infrastructure of Bronx Irish culture.

But it was the party after Midnight Mass that I remember most. Relatives and neighbors would pour into our apartment for an all-nighter. My mother would get the percolator going, and start making breakfast for half the parish. Bacon, eggs, blood pudding, plates of fresh rolls with poppy seeds bought that day in the Treat Bakery on Tremont Avenue.

Eating breakfast at two in the morning! This was a miracle for a ten-year-old boy. Bottles of Seagram's and Canadian Club stood at attention on the kitchen table, silver ice bucket ringed with penguins awaiting duty beside them. Ladies smoking and gossiping. Glasses clinking. Laughter throughout the house. The smell of pine, the delicious aroma of sizzling bacon, all welcoming Jesus back for another year.

Then the music and singing would start up, my father on the banjo, P. J. Conway on the box. "The Stack of Barley," "The Lakes of Sligo," medleys of marches, waltzes, and polkas. Theresa McNally, from my mother's own town in Galway, would sing "Galway Bay." Steps would be danced, jokes told, more drinks mixed and gulped.

I would go to bed so filled with the spirit it seemed impossible to believe that life could ever return to normal. Lying there exhausted, but anxious to sneak down the hall at the earliest opportunity and tear open the tantalizing packages, I believed in everything: Jesus our Lord, Santa our magic benefactor, my parents the immortal source of the ongoing celebration that could never end.

# Prayer to St. Patrick

St. Patrick, snake-handling Brit, forgive us our sins, our wins, our losses, forgive us our employees and bosses, forgive us those stupid four-leaf clovers that the ignorant confuse with the Holy Trinity-signifying shamrock, especially around this time of year. Forgive us green beer, Hostess cupcakes with green icing, forgive us the moronic greening of hair, food, water. Forgive us the total lack of meaning that now attaches to your name. It is all truly unseemly and insane.

Grant us a moratorium on any more news of the triumphs of Michael Flatley or Frank McCourt. God bless Paddy's pig and Paddy Moloney's wig, Mickey and Andy Rooney, Rosemary and George Clooney. Requiescat in pace, Versace et Liberace. In nomine Dei, we've had enough of Leahy. Dear saint of our isle, we'd like to send ya an urgent plea to abolish Enya.



Let the bar owners pay  
the poor musicians  
a small fortune.  
They're earning it.

Banish misfortune for the Irish  
over here and the Irish over there.  
While you're at it  
banish "Danny Boy" and "The Unicorn."

Let there be an Irish-American fin de siècle  
starring Mark McGwire and Margaret Heckler.  
Grant another eighty-seven years to my Auntie Nora  
and let history smile upon the Irish Diaspora.

Let the music be on the mark.  
Lead the fiddle players from the dark  
of orthodoxy. Oremus for my brother Seamus.  
Let a thousand poems and songs  
end the battles and undo the wrongs.