



## THREE OLD BROTHERS



**Three Old Brothers  
and Other Poems**

**By  
Frank O'Connor**

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To  
Seán Ó'Faoláin



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## Three Old Brothers

While some goes dancing reels and some  
Goes stuttering love in ditches,  
The three old brothers rise from bed,  
And moan, and pin their breeches.  
And one says, "I can sleep no more,  
I'd liefer far go weeping,  
For how can honest men lie still  
When brats can spoil their sleeping?"  
And Blind Tom says, that's eighty years,  
"If I was ten years younger  
I'd take a stick and welt their rumps,  
And gall their gamest runner."  
Then James the youngest cries, "Praise God,  
We have outlived our passion!"  
And by their fire of roots all three  
Praise God after a fashion.

Says James, "I loved, when I was young,  
A lass of one and twenty,  
That had the grace of all the queens  
And broke men's hearts in plenty;  
But now the girl's a gammy crone,  
With no soft sides or bosom,  
And all the ones she kist abed  
Where the fat maggot chews 'em.  
And though she had not kiss for me,  
And though myself is older,  
And though my thighs are cold to-night,  
Their thighs, I think, are colder."

And Blind Tom says, "I knew a man  
A girl refused for lover  
Worked in America forty years,  
And heaped copper on copper;

And came back all across the foam,  
Dressed up in silks and satins,  
And watched for her from dawn to dark,  
And from Compline to Matins;  
And when she passed him in her shawl,  
He bust his sides with laughing,  
And went back happy to the west,  
And heeded no man's scoffing.  
And Christ," moans Torn, "if I'd his luck  
I'd not mind cold nor coughing!"

Then Patcheen says, "My lot's a lot  
All men on earth might envy,  
That saw the girl I could not get  
Nurse an untimely baby."

And all three say, "Dear heart! Dear heart!"  
And James the youngest mutters,  
"Praise God we have outlived our griefs  
And not fell foul like others,  
Like Paris and the Grecian chiefs  
And the three Ulster brothers!"

## Sweeney

I am Sweeney they call the mad,  
I am as tall as any tree,  
I am a tree that has no roots,  
And yet the wild hills nourish me.  
If I should go and live with men  
Ivy would choke me, body and breath,  
But here I am like oak and beech,  
And when they die I may see death.  
I do not love the looks of men,  
But I love beeches straight and tall,  
Whose muscles strain their shining skin;  
Women I do not love at all;  
But I love water bright and cold  
That does not measure out its words  
And talks as I do, all alone  
Without a break. I love to run  
And scale the mountains like a storm,  
Waving my arms to scare the birds  
And screaming with them in their flight.  
I love to frighten men and herds,  
And so I hide in some dark gully  
Above their homes, and when the sun  
Climbs on the ridge of a mountain fully,  
Or when the great round harvest moon  
Rises, I leap across the light  
And stretch my coat tails to the sky,  
And plunge the valley into night,  
And make men bless themselves for fright,  
And make the little children cry.

## The Last Ghost

Whee the last ghost is laid  
Men may securely rest;  
I know my time has not come,  
For I am still possessed.  
And all the neighbours cry  
That know my board and bed,  
A wonder on the nights  
That do not strike me dead.

Space in my heart for a dream!  
That dream torments me still,  
I have had my fill of all,  
Not love not knowledge fill  
The empty place it left—  
Like God I look within  
Myself and view the void  
Where solemn planets spin,  
Planets of age and youth,  
Planets of sun and shade,  
Whiteness, brightness, gold hair  
Where is the last ghost laid?

I ask the whirling sky,  
With solemn stars arrayed  
Not for my burial.  
Where is the last ghost laid?  
(Laughing in my beard)  
Winds blow, I am not afraid;  
I ask the hurtling winds,  
"Where is the last ghost laid?"

## Alone

In my attic all alone  
Now my man, praise God, is gone,  
And my son, the rascal, too,  
And my face that would not keep,  
And my eyes that would not sleep,  
Dreaming things not worth a thought  
I have dreamed a thing that's true,  
And let fools have all they sought.  
I have dreamed the truest thing—  
A better end than pope or king—  
That I'll have ease of all my pain  
Some night when Christ is born again.  
All day long the rain will fall  
And the river overflow,  
And the floods creep up the wall,  
And the big ships come and go  
And sail upon the solid land,  
And I shall see and understand.  
At eight that night I'll rise from bed  
And wash myself from toe to head,  
At nine I'll put the kettle down  
And brew strong tea, at ten put on  
My habit and pray out the hour;  
And then I'll light and fix secure  
Candles in four brass candlesticks  
About my table-ends, and fix  
Myself between them calm and tight,  
And, till the end comes, sing delight.  
I'll sing no more, the house will shake,  
The rotten walls will reel and break,  
The floods will rise and rise and rise,  
And lift me up, and like a queen  
With my bright candles and shut eyes  
They'll take me, beautiful and serene,

Along the street, and every height  
Will be playing music in the night,  
And Shandon bells will ring out sweet  
As I float down through Patrick Street,  
And ships blow sirens as I ride  
From Patrick Street to the main tide;  
And the Lord Bishop on the hill  
And all the anointed choirs will kneel,  
And sing as I go out to sea,  
*Domine, adoremus te.*

## The Master

And he said and he said and he said,  
And I damned him in despair  
As I watched the red-haired girl  
Jest with men at the bar.

And he said while God gave him breath  
“The crime of Cain is rife,  
And the younger generation  
Is doomed to sanguinary strife.”

And he said as he sipped his pint,  
“You should be, I surmise,  
A votary of the muse,”  
And fixed me with his eyes.

And he said the scenery  
Took a Virgil’s pen to limn,  
And that the modest country maiden  
Seemed the best to him.

And he said she was like Venus,  
And she had eyes of blue ;  
And I wondered what wild waters  
Would I liken the red girl to.

As she winked at me from the bar  
And nodded her bright sly head,  
That would lure the fox from the hill,  
The fish from the ocean’s bed.  
And he said, ”The loveliest maid  
That mortal ever viewed,  
She lies in her cold and silent grave  
In the bloom of maidenhood.”



## The Patriot

Be Jases, before ye inter me  
I'll show ye all up!  
I've everything stored in me memory,  
Facts, figures enough  
Since I first swore an oath of allegiance  
As a patriot boy  
To avenge me maternal grandfather  
They hanged at Fermoy.

Ye slink away when ye see me—  
Ye know that I know!  
That I've everything sifted and sorted,  
Your motives so low,  
Every detail of cowardly behaviour,  
From Healy that ran for his life  
The night they murdered the peeler  
To Leahy that married his wife.

Some think when the sod is laid on them  
They're finished with me,  
But little they know me, the traitors,  
I'll drag them, you'll see,  
To my own private General Judgment,  
I'll sit on my throne—  
The Almighty may choose to give mercy,  
But I will give none.

Ye think ye'll escape me?  
'Tis true that my sight's a bit shook,  
I was never no hand with a pen;  
But I'll write one terrible book  
Before, with gun-carriage and pipers—  
Ye dastardly crew !—  
Ye bring to his grave in Glasnevin  
The one man that was true.

## Prelude

This is winter in Castleraynal,  
This is a say-gull high in the air,  
This is the man that hears the say-gull,  
This is the '98 monument in the square,  
This is the chapel up the hill,  
This is the hill down to the quay,  
This is the *Mary Rose*, Glandore,  
This is the postman by the sea,  
This is the cliffs he leaves behind,  
This is the band plays "Belle Mahone,"  
This is the bridge that he must cross,  
This is the house where he will come,  
This is the old widow by the fire,  
This is the young widow by the fire,  
This is the hotel, this the lodger  
Sipping his last bass by the fire,  
This is the son, the stalwart man,  
Sipping tea in his queenie's house,  
This is the Vincent de Paul meeting,  
This is the daughter, Mary Rose,  
This is the younger son, bedamn,  
Coorting his madam up the hill,  
This is the madam gay and bold,  
This is the spots he kissed her fill,  
This is the priest in the madam's house,  
This is the madam's ma he tells,  
"This is the coming big retreat,  
This is for all they rings the bells,"  
This is the bells rings ten o'clock,  
This is the daughter good gets up,  
This is the priest says, "Time to go,"  
This is the ma that gives him snuff,  
This is the son's (the stalwart's) rise,  
This is the younger son says, "Stay,"

This is the madam gay that sighs,  
This is the "Belle Mahone" they play,  
This is the lodger stands a round,  
This is the postman hears the rings,  
This is the winter-stricken wave,  
This is the song, the song she sings,  
This is the bell, the bell that rings,  
This is the candle climbs the stair,  
This is the wind blows it about,  
This is a sea-gull cries in the air,  
"Life is many, is many, is many,  
Is fair, fair, fair,"  
This is the wind that blows it out.

## Wedded

Let you be king and me be queen,  
And take the muddy floor,  
And dance as if our feet this night  
Had scaled some castle wall.

And dance as if we two had fled  
From proud and crafty kindred,  
Or as if here to-night our sleep  
An old man's sleep had hindered.

And we'll not heed the broken delf,  
The cupboard bare, the dripping wall,  
And never grieve if here our sleep  
Disturbs no other's sleep at all.

And when the wind cries through the glen  
I'll say, "The dogs are on our track,"  
And when the broken hinges creak  
I'll say, "A foot is on the path ! "

And you recount the toilsome sleep  
That Grania with her young man made,  
And I can say , "Come closer, love,  
What need have we to be afraid.

The winds may find no resting-place,  
The birds no place to rest their side,  
But we are safe in night and storm,  
And none shall reach us where we hide."

And we'll not heed the broken delf,  
The cupboard bare, the dripping wall,  
Nor grieve that we to-night will break  
The sleep of none at all.

## Return In Harvest

Near the wood, girt round with stubble,  
One bright patch of corn is standing,  
And a man laughs, and the girls there  
Laugh with him and hoist their dresses.  
On a stubble-blade he chooses  
A young farmhand trains his cudgel,  
Striking with a grim precision,  
I well-screened I think regard them.

Then a whistle and a scurry  
And the last gold patch is toppling,  
And the young man swings his cudgel  
And the girls in all directions

Flit, and pull their skirts about them,  
Laughing with mock screams of terror;  
One in my direction flying  
Seems as though her fear were real.

She runs still, the rest are turning,  
She drops skirts and runs the faster,  
Does not scream though she grows paler  
As she tops the fence above me.

Pale she is, and her looped tresses  
Are dull gold with lights of silver  
As she stops and pants beneath the  
Lancelight of the rustling branches.

## Irish Channel

### I

Suddenly a siren waked me,  
Pealing through the ship's intestines,  
Setting every timber creaking—  
Dawn above the Irish Channel !

Through my porthole frame the morning  
Thrust its faint, cold, russet beauty,  
And the porthole glass above it  
Mirrored bright and tumbling waters.

I leaped up to see the wonder ;  
Dawn had broken over England,  
Europe's sleeping-beauty sister,  
Ireland, still lay locked in darkness.

Dawn had broken over England,  
But a vessel close beside us  
Passed lit u with dimming lanterns,  
Yellow in the morning brightness.

Oh, that beauty and that silence,  
That black ship on russet waters  
With her score of yellow lanterns  
Dim like golden moons of August !

Then your face shone out before me,  
I crept back and hushed my breathing,  
Thinking how that face had never  
Mixed with commoner daylight dreaming—

Even when the world was falling,  
When the heart was rent asunder,  
Coming only in some dewy  
Wakening that was half a slumber.

All experience draws about me  
Nets to trap the dream that haunts me,  
Walls to deaden that wild music  
That blew then so sweetly, faintly—

Echoing through me in a silence  
Broken by the throb of engines  
And two ships' exultant greetings  
Over seas half dawn, half darkness.

I was yours for one wild moment,  
I was yours and yours forever,  
As like drowsy cocks they trembled,  
Cleared their throats and crowed sedately.

## Irish Channel

2

The dream of which our spiritual life is born  
Returns to haunt us still but sternly more subdued  
    As 'twere a horn  
Whose voice grows faint in dark recesses of a Wood.

But, oh, what wild melodious languor does that blast  
Pierce our grave worldly hearts with between sleep and sleep!  
    And what at last  
Shall be its sweetness lost in the woods' farthest deep.

O spiritual shape that to our life gives birth,  
Too burning bright to mix with shadowy thoughts of day,  
    Or tread the earth,  
Whose sweetness grows forever in our hopes' decay

You come and bring to me tears of delight to weep,  
Eyes I remember well, lips I have never known,  
    While our strong ship  
Crushes her way through the calm russet seas at dawn.



## Beggars

A tram came round the corner like a lion let loose,  
The driver was foaming and pounding his bell,  
The heart was like death in me, watching it pass,  
And thinking of ways I had once loved too well.

The streets had a crowded, bleak scent of perfume,  
And the throng, quick and capable, shouldered me by,  
And so sure of its step that my eyes filled with tears  
As I thought, "How serene they walk, not as I!"

The gay, audacious finicking soldiers went past  
With elaborate females all perfume and lace,  
And only a blind beggarman and myself  
That had nowhere to go did not stir from the place.

He scented the hunger beside him and growled,  
But hearing no coin chink was happy with that—  
"O blind beggarman, you may well be content  
That love's not a thing you can throw in a hat—

Or I that am even more luckless than you  
Would sit down beside you for all men to see,  
And shout till I'd deafen the damsels that pass  
And toss you a penny, with 'Hi, look at me!—

And pity, kind Christian, and aid from your store,  
A young lad lost his girl in his twenty—fourth year,  
And little you'd dream if you'd seen him before  
Himself was the desperate youth you see here 1—

Oh, pity, kind Christian young lady! I'd shriek,  
But you, Rags-and-Bones, would earn nothing all day,  
If love was a thing that the hungry could seek,  
Or the generous-hearted and young give away."

## The Grand-Vizier's Daughter

### I

Good God, to rhyme from day to day  
And know your life depends upon it .'  
If I could get even an hour alone  
    To sit with the great Grand Vizier's daughter I  
But I must sing Sultan Mahomet to sleep,  
    And a wakeful lord is our Lord Mahomet ;  
Oh, I must sing Sultan Mahomet to sleep,  
    And she has already too many to court her ;  
    And when I cease my singing to sigh,  
    The axe will fall and so shall I.

### 2

Verse! But, Christ, I'm sick of verse,  
I'd sooner this minute be stretched on a hearse  
With four grave bibulous mutes to bury me  
And a portly priest with a printed breviary ;  
And then I would ask no more grace of the Lord  
Than that she should look out as we passed up the road.  
And she to be perched on a new lover's knee ,  
And to sigh with that pensive, sweet, casual air,  
"He is gone as all mortal things go, even we!"  
And "Vanity passes!" and "Earth is our share!"

## Quest Of Dead O'Donovans

He stood on the last ledge of rock  
Where beats the cold, monotonous wave  
Of outer sea; an icy sun  
Crept down the wintry peak of heaven.

From tier to tier of cloud it sank,  
And seabirds fluttering home to rest  
On the last islands passed from sight,  
Merged in the gathering weft of grey.

As one afraid he did not turn  
Nor take his last glimpse of that shore  
In daylight, where the pyramid  
Stood hopeless as a blind man's brow.

"Oh, if these dead dream, their one thought  
Is their own utter loneliness,  
With no succession by their God,  
Abandoned on an alien shore."

Monotonously the long grey wave  
That on his deeper silence broke  
Like a dead friend's remembered voice  
Made wintry music for his dreams.

"But what of him who lives?  
Is he The happier for the strife or peace  
Where the old crafty alien race  
And craftier peasant fight it out?"

Beyond the surge the winter sea  
Swayed as it were but from the core,  
And, darkening, seemed one long low swell  
Of mute revolt from west to east.

"Frustration is no man's complaint,  
'Tis but a dream the dead must share  
Who ask and hear a speech unknown  
Fall on the night not answering them."

The grey wave lapped the crags and cried,  
"When this cold flood or that bare rock  
On lips and eyes resume their sleep,  
Shall darkness wake such dreams in you?"

And "No," he said, "but I have felt  
What some great, ageless song brings back  
On waking in an old world town  
In Flanders when the moon is up."

"We have no thought," they said, "no more  
Than wind or stars or earth of you.  
We are the desert where you dwell  
And what you dream us," and were still.

"O forge of life, the link you break,  
The link you forge again are we,  
And yet in dreams we forge a chain  
Which, broken, brings us death indeed.

And as we hope for memory, we  
Remember, though ourselves we pass,  
And all our loveliness is mixed  
With tears whose springs are long-dead eyes"

He lingered, but the gradual sound  
Of wave on wave, prolonged within  
His ear, was voiceless, for the night  
Forbade him their cold company.

Beside that tomb his choice was made,  
And man a time unmade before  
The loneliness of these, his kin,  
Took up its dwelling in his mind.

He stood on the last ledge of rock,  
And did not turn, as though he feared  
The desolation, or knew not  
Which side lay Ireland, which the sea.

## A Statue Of Life

### I

God rest those humble people,  
The dwellers in Time's poke,  
Who, flayed by war and famine,  
Shook off the gentry's yoke,

And built their steaming cabins  
About the merchants' feet,  
And raving of old kingships  
Died in some city street.

Who more than throne or empire  
Held dear some naked rock  
Where saints the flesh discarded  
To put on fancy's frock.

And thousands more, uncoffined,  
Thrown to the bursting wave,  
And all that found in exile  
A dreary home and grave.

Those that at bench and counter  
Of freedom learned to think,  
And planned a Roman triumph  
And blabbed the plans in drink.

Whisky and hell tormented,  
God rest and comfort those  
Who for a fat priest's blessing  
Killed our Caractacus.

I saw them in my childhood  
    With bonfire, band, and torch.  
O'Brien's men and Redmond's  
    Pursued the war in church.

Farewell, poetic speeches,  
    And unpoetic songs!  
Drummers that beat the neighbours,  
    While neighbours slashed the drums.

God rest the decent people  
    Who changed the colour then—  
And keep their shadow from us,  
    And make their children men!

## A Statue Of Life

### 2

Before I die, God grant me  
To put a statue up  
In that old Danish seaport  
Among my mother's folk.

That every man and woman  
With blood that still runs wild  
May see at night and morning  
A mother and her child.

No tamed and virgin beauty,  
A face to shock and fright,  
And shame the pallid houses  
And plan with noon and night—

To swell the tides of passion,  
And straighten every back,  
And fill the town with music,  
Give life to Joan and Jack.

From every twilit archway  
The shawly girls would slip,  
And link their boys beneath it.  
And flutes would lead a step.

And men that fought for England,  
And boys that fled to sea  
And saw that face in dying,  
Even in their graves would see

The market with its tumult  
Become her fold and camp,  
And hear on distant highways  
Her singing legions stamp.

## A Statue Of Life

### 3

What are the forms of life but an illusion?  
Every passion, every institution,  
Imagination built them all,  
And having built, must bring them to their fall.  
    You prate of classlessness and classes,  
    And you of alien blood and races,  
    As though the forms of life were fixed,  
    Not daily, hourly intermixed.

The patterns change because they are a fiction  
Which we create out of some contradiction  
Within the channels of our blood,  
Dream words misspelt, misunderstood.  
    Go you, work miracles, and build bridges, you,  
    In spite of everything you do,  
    There is no grandeur but will be overthrown  
    When morning comes and finds your dream is flown.

And so I say when myths are out of fashion  
Theories lead men to perdition.  
Ignobly got, ignobly born,  
They take and take, give nothing in return.  
    So I would put a statue up  
    That the imagination's cup  
    May fill again and Joan and Jack  
    See a golden age come back.

31



## Echoes

### 1

Patrick, you chatter too loud  
And lift your crozier too high,  
Your stick would be kindling soon  
If my son Osgar were by.

If my son Osgar and God  
Wrestled it out on the hill  
And I saw Osgar go down  
I would say your God fought well.

How can the Lord you praise  
Or his mild priests singing a tune  
Be better than Fiunn the fighter,  
Generous, faultless Fiunn?

There never sat priest in church  
A doleful psalm to raise  
Better spoken than these,  
Marred by a hundred frays.

What you and our monks proclaim  
The law of the King of Grace,  
That was the Fenians' law,  
His home is their dwelling-place.

If happier house than heaven  
There be, above or below,  
'Tis there my master, Fiunn,  
And his fighting men will go.

Ah, priest, if you saw the Fenians  
    Filling the strand beneath,  
Or gathered in streamy Naas  
    You would praise them with every breath.

Patrick, ask of your God  
    Does he remember their might!  
Or has he seen, east or west,  
    Better men in a fight?

Or known in his own land  
    Above the stars and the moon,  
For wisdom, courage, and strength  
    A man that was like to Fiunn?

## Echoes

### 2

I was taught prayer as a child, to bend the knee,  
And beat the breast, to ask his peace of Christ,  
And wake with delight at the first sweet call of the bird  
In praise of the Lord God punished and crucified.

Woe for this sleep on me now and my bed not readied at dawn,  
And I no longer in haste to praise the might of the King,  
Beating my breast and bowing my knees with grief  
When the first wind wakes the first bird to sing.

And all at once the cock starts up with a cry,  
And from deep sands the fish rise to the water's height,  
And sparks flash up wherever the sods are blown—  
Ah, then woe, woe for this slumber on thee, thou senseless soul.

Thou senseless soul! Great is the folly of sleep  
When sparks rise from the bearded flame at dawn,  
And boughs are stirred and leaves are stirred in the wind,  
And even the birds are singing the Lord God's praise.

## Echoes

### 3

Three things seek my death,  
Fast at my heels they run—  
Hang them, sweet Christ, all three! —  
Devil, maggot, and son!

So much does each one crave  
The morsel that falls to his share,  
He cares not a thrauneeen what  
Falls to the other pair.

If the devil, that crafty man,  
Can capture my sprightly soul,  
My wealth may go to my son,  
My flesh to the worm in the hole.

My sons care more for the money  
That falls to them when I die  
Than a body they could not spend,  
A soul that none would buy.

And how would the maggots fare  
On a soul too thin to eat,  
And money too tough to chew—  
They must have my body for meat.

Christ, speared by the blind man!  
Christ, nailed to a naked tree!  
The three that are waiting my end,  
Hang them, sweet Christ, all three!

## Prologue And Epilogue

### I

I know I have been here before  
In this deserted ante-room,  
And seen through every swinging door  
The silent figures go and come.  
I am as poor as once before  
When I came begging in this den,  
But when I leave, or through what door  
I pass, is just as vague as then.  
The others never speak a word—  
A woman passes through the hall  
As if on air, and makes no sound  
And does not hear me when I call;  
Like one who hugs a secret fast  
She passes with averted face;  
Beyond the door a starry sky,  
And sure at last that there's the place,  
I cry to pass, but silently  
The door swings back, I may not go,  
Another ghost behind me treads  
A soldier with a face I know,  
And through the door by which he came  
The golden fields stretch far away—  
Oh, magic, magic, all around  
Starlight is interblent with day.

The labyrinth of images  
Again makes all my labours vain,  
Vainly I question and pursue  
The servants of the law again,  
And yet I have been here before  
And shivered in this ante-room,  
And flung myself at every door,  
And seen the angels go and come,

And once before I found a way  
Into a midnight black with storm,  
But what did I care for night or day,  
Or calm or tempest? I shall stay  
Till to the magic I return.

## Prologue And Epilogue

2

By the creaking gate,  
Now my guests are sped,  
I ask pardon for  
Every word I said;  
Some to please a friend,  
Some to praise the state—  
A tree in the wind—  
Now, maybe too late,  
To the stars I cry,  
Trembling from head to toe,  
“From magic we come,  
To magic we go.”

## Song

I filled my heart with fantasy,  
And when the maiden life went by  
I trembled so from head to toe,  
I dared not lift an eye;  
Remotest fancy seemed more clear  
Than this that walked so near—

The twilit face of Adam's seed,  
Where the old conflict is renewed  
And battle thunders as of old  
About the pillar of the world,  
The will, that centred in her heart,  
Holds chaos and the night apart.



## Boredom

If a man had his wish,  
What more could he choose  
Than meat for his dish  
Or a trout from the stream?  
What more could he wish  
Than a pair of good shoes—  
Unless it be the dream  
Of a child in the lap,  
A trout in the stream,  
A steed in the gap,  
A star in the sky—  
Unless it be the gleam  
Of a sword in his hand?  
What more can he ask  
Than a wave on the strand,  
A star passing by?

## Self Portrait

Last Sunday morning,  
Sitting on the tram,  
I found myself beside a priest,  
A fat and gloomy man;  
I looked over his shoulder  
And I read *namquam*.  
Now I happened to be reading  
*Les Amours de Madam*,  
And even though he scowled at me  
I didn't give a damn.  
And that just shows you  
The sort I am.

THE END



