

## A IS FOR AXE

A is for Axe

Six pounds of forged iron hafted to a length of hickory with steel wedges driven into the end. During the autopsy the coroner dug from my father's skull a small, triangular chip which was entered as prosecuting evidence by the State. It was passed among the jurors in a sealed plastic bag like the relic of a venerated saint.

More than any detail of my crime it is this axe which has elevated me to a kind of cult status in this green and pleasant land of ours. I am not alone in sensing a general awe that at last, small-town Ireland has thrown up an axe murderer of its very own. It bespeaks a kind of burgeoning cosmopolitanism. At last our isolated province has birthed a genuine, late-twentieth-century hero, a B-movie schlock-horror character who is now the darling of downmarket newspaper.

As I was led to trial several of my peers had gathered on the steps of the court-house. Long-haired, goateed wasters to a man, they sported T-shirts emblazoned with my portrait and short lines of script: *Gerard Quirke for President* they read, or *Gerard Quirke - A Cut Above the Rest*. My favourite is *Gerard Quirke: A Chip off the Old Block*.

B is for Birthday

I have picked through the co-ordinates of my birth and I find nothing in them which points to the present calamity. I was

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born on the twentieth of October 1973, under the sign of Libra, the scales. It was the year when the sixth Fianna Fáil administration governed the land, added two pence to the price of a loaf and three on the pint. In human terms it was a year of no real distinction - if there was no special degree of bloodshed in the world of international affairs neither was there any universal meeting of minds, no new dawn bloomed on the horizon.

I have these details from a computer printout which I got from James, a present on my eighteenth birthday. He bought it in one of those New Age shops specialising in tarot readings and incense that are now all the rage in the bohemian quarters of cities.

I was named after St Gerard Majella whom my mother successfully petitioned during her troubled and only pregnancy.

C is for Chance

Chance is at the root of all. 20, 10, 3, 12, 27, 8. My date of birth, my father's date and my mother's also. These are the numbers my father chose on the solitary occasion he entered for that seven-million-pound jackpot, the biggest in the five-year history of our National Lottery. And for the first and only time in his life the God of providence smiled upon him.

D is for Defence

I had no defence. To the dismay of my lawyer, a young gun hoping to make a reputation, I took full responsibility and pleaded guilty. I was determined not to waste anyone's time. I told him that I would have nothing to do with claims of diminished responsibility, self-defence or extreme provocation. Neither would I have anything to do with psychiatric evaluation. I declared that my mind was a disease-free zone and that I was the sanest man on the entire planet. As a result the trial was a short(ened) affair. After the evidence was

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*Mike McCorwack, Getting it in the Head,  
London, Vintage, 1996*

presented and the judge had summed up, the jury needed only two hours to reach a unanimous verdict. I was complimented for not wasting the court's time.

#### E is for Election

As a child, nothing marked me out from the ordinary, except for the fact that I had been hit by lightning. I had been left in the yard one summer's day, sleeping in my high, sprung pram when the sky darkened quickly to rain and then thunder. All of a sudden a fork of lightning rent the sky and demolished my carriage. When my parents rushed into the yard they found me lying on the ground between the twin halves of my carriage, charred and blackened like a spoiled fruit. When they picked me up they found that the side of my head had been scored by such a perfect burn, so perfect in fact that, were it not for the ear it had carried with it, you could have admired the neatness and tidiness of it. While my mother carried me indoors my father stayed in the downpour, shaking his fist and bawling at the heavens, cursing God and his attendant angels.

In the coverage of my trial much has been made of this incident and the fact of my missing ear. Several column inches have been filled by popular psychologists who have repeatedly drawn parallels between the lightning strike and the axe. All have sought to deliver themselves of fanciful, apocalyptic axioms. It surprises me that at no time has a theologian been asked to proffer his opinion. I feel sure he would have found in it some evidence of a hand reaching out of the sky, a kind of infernal election.

#### F is for Future

My life sentence stretches ahead of me now, each day an identical fragment of clockwork routine piled one upon the other into middle age. I do not care to think about it.

Ten months ago, however, after my father came into his fortune, I dreamt of a real future. Hour after hour I spent in my room working out the scope and extent of it, embellishing it with detail. I polished it to a gleaming prospect of travel in foreign climes, sexual adventure and idle indulgence. I mapped it out as a Dionysian odyssey, a continual annihilation of the present moment with no care for the morrow. It would take me in glorious circumnavigation of the earth all the way to my grave, ending in a fabulous blow-out where I would announce my departure to the assembled, adoring masses — an elegant, wasted rake. I was careful enough to leave blank spaces in the fantasy, filling them out during moments of conscience with vague designs of good works and philanthropy. I confess that these were difficult assignments: my mind more often than not drew a blank. My belief is that I had not the heart for these imaginative forays. My cold and cruel adolescent mind was seized mainly by the sensual possibilities and I hungered cravenly for them.

#### G is for God

My father stayed in the downpour to decry the heavens and my mother pointed out in later years that it was at this moment God set his face against us and withdrew all favour. Whatever about God, it was at this moment that my father turned his back on all religious observance, an apostasy of no small bravery in our devout village and probably the only trait in his personality I inherited when I entered my own godless teens. A steady line of self-appointed evangelists beat a path to our door to try and rescue him out of the cocoon of hunkered bitterness into which he had retired. But my father's mind was set. The God of mercy and forgiveness was nothing to him any more and the community of believers were only so many fools. He could be violently eloquent on the subject. In black anger he would wrest me from the cradle and brandish me in their faces.

Pantheon within which I will now discreetly take my humble place.

I is for Indolence

After my leaving cert I signed on as a government artist - I drew the dole. It was an issue of some scandal in the village; after all, my father was the possessor of probably the biggest private fortune in the county.

One evening after signing on I sat in a local pub putting a sizeable hole in my first payment - I was quickly discovering the joys of solitary drinking. On an overhead TV I listened to the news and heard that the unemployment figures had topped three hundred thousand for the first time. The figure was greeted with equal measures of awe and disgust by the other drinkers.

'Christ, it's a shame, all those young people coming out of school and college and no jobs for them. The country is going to hell.'

'In a hand cart,' another added.

A third was not so sure. 'I don't know,' he said, a large, straight-talking man. 'Half of those fuckers on the dole have no intention of working, they'd run a mile from it. And it's not as if there isn't plenty of it to do either. Look at the state of the roads or the graveyards for that matter. A crowd of friggin spongers the whole lot of them if the truth be told.'

It was a brave thesis, particularly so in a townland surrounded by subsistence farms, the owners of which topped up their incomes with government hand-outs.

But he was right, at least in my case he was. I went home that night and for the first time in my life I knew what I was. I was a sponger, a slacker, a parasite, a leech on the nation's resources. Like most of my generation I had neither the will nor imagination to get up and do something useful with my life. And what was worse I took to my role joyfully, safe in the knowledge that I could fob off any queries by pointing to the

'There is no God of mercy and forgiveness,' he would roar. 'There is only the God of plague and affliction and justice and we are all well and truly fucked because of it. This child is the proof of that. More than any of you I believe in Him: I only have to look at this child to know. The only difference is I have no faith in Him.'

These rages would reduce my mother to a sobbing shambles. She would recover, however, and then redouble her observance on his behalf, attending the sacraments twice daily to atone for his pride. Icons flourished in our house and the shelves and sideboards seemed to sprout effigies overnight. My father ground his teeth and reined in his temper.

H is for History

I admitted my interest in killers at the pre-trial hearings. However, even now, I maintain that it is nothing more than the average male teen infatuation with all things bloody and destructive. Like most young men of my generation I can reel off a list of twentieth-century killers quicker than I can the names of the twelve apostles. At school I listened critically to the tales of the great ideological killers - Hitler, Stalin et al. I became convinced that the century was nothing more than a massive fiction, an elaborate snuff-movie hugely budgeted and badly edited, ending with an interminable list of credits. I came to believe that beneath this vast panorama of warring nations and heaving atrocities the true identity and history of my time was being written by solitary minds untouched by ideology or political gain - solitary night stalkers prowling alleyways and quiet, suburban homes, carrying their knives and axes and guns and garrottes. And I believed also it was only in this underworld that concepts of guilt and evil and justice had any meaning, this world where they were not ridiculed and overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. Bundy, Dahmer, Hindley, Chikatilo, Nielsen, the list goes on, an infernal

statistics or by saying that I was indulging in a period of stocktaking and evaluation before I launched myself on the world with a definite plan. I could loftily declare that I was on sabbatical from life. Only in solitary moments of truth and pitiless insight would I speak the truth to myself: I had no worthwhile ideas and no courage; I was good for nothing.

J is for James

The only shaft of light in my childhood years was the presence of my friend James. Throughout my trial he was the one constant, sitting in the public gallery with his hair pulled back in a tight braid, chewing his bottom lip. I could feel his eyes upon me, placed like branding irons in the centre of my chest. Now he comes to me every week, bringing me my record collection and my books: Hesse, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, a young man's reading or so I'm told.

James was more than my friend, he was my champion. I would be at the centre of one of those taunting circles, my tormentors wheeling about me, dealing out cuffs to the side of my head and insults. 'Ear we go, ear we go, ear we go,' they would chant. My defence then was to disappear down inside myself, down into that part within me which was clear and painless, a place lit by fantasy, ideas, books and music. Almost inevitably James would round the corner. I would see in his eyes the dark fire that was already igniting his soul.

'Leave him alone, you pack of cunts,' he'd yell. 'Leave him alone.'

Then he would wade into the centre of the circle, shouldering me aside, his Docs and fists flying, working his surprise to the limit by scoring busted noses and bruised balls. Sooner or later, however, he would find himself at the bottom of a pile of heaving bodies, curling into a tight foetal position to ward off the kicks and blows that rained down on him. Just as suddenly my tormentors would scatter, yelling and whooping,

leaving James bloodied and bruised on the ground like carrion. In those moments I used to think that James was the victim not of his love for me but of his own rampant imagination. Now I can see him rising from the dust, his face bloodied and running like a clown's make-up, and I curse myself for my cynicism.

K is for Kill

The axe swung through the air and cleft my father's skull in two and he lay dead upon the floor.

L is for Lug

When I reached my teens I grew my hair to my shoulders. By then, however, it was already too late to prevent me from being teased mercilessly and earning a succession of nicknames. My peers were never short of cruel puns and covert abuse whenever I was near. 'Ear ear,' they would yell whenever I opened my mouth to speak or, 'Ear we go, ear we go, ear we go,' whenever we gathered to watch football matches. From national school my name was Lug and in secondary school the more technically-minded tried to amend it to Mono. But Lug was the name that stuck and I hated them for it, hated them for their stupid wit and their lack of mercy. But I did not hate them as much as I hated my father on the day he discovered it. He returned from answering the phone in the hallway. It was one of my 'friends'.

'Lug,' he said gleefully. 'Christ, they have you well named there and no doubt about it. We used to have an ass with that name once - Lugs. Mind you, he was twice the creature you are. He could work and he had a full set of ears.'

I burst out crying and ran to my room. I stayed there the rest of the afternoon, weeping and grinding my teeth. I eventually dried my eyes and took a look at myself in the mirror and I resolved then that no one would ever make me cry again.

## M is for Music

Because of my impaired hearing my love of music has caused much wonderment. Again this has proved a fertile snuffling ground for those commentators desperate to unearth truffles of reason in this tale of blood and woe.

I am a metal head, a self-confessed lover of bludgeoning rhythms in major chords and rhyming couplets dealing in death and mayhem. My record collection, now numbering in hundreds, reads like a medieval codex of arcana: Ministry, Obituary, Bathory, Leather Angel, Black Sabbath and so on. My greatest solace now is that I can listen to these records in the privacy of my cell without maddening anyone. If there was anything certain to unleash my father's temper it was the sound of these records throbbling through the house. He would come hammering at my bedroom door.

'Turn that fucking shite off,' he'd roar. 'Christ, you would think a man of your age should have grown out of that sort of thing long ago.'

But I never did grow out of it and I don't foresee a day when I will. This horror of this music is rooted within me as deep as my very soul and I would no more think of defending it than my father would his own lachrymose renditions of 'Moonlight on the Silvery Rio Grande'.

## N is for Never

As in never again. At the bottom of our souls all young men are sick. We do not grow sick or become sick nor is it some easy matter of hormonal determinism. This sickness is our very nature. Having suffered from the disease myself I know what I am talking about. It manifests itself generally as a disorder of the head, a slant of the imagination that pre-occupies us with mayhem and blood, slashing and hacking, disease, waste and carnage. There is not a young man of my age who, in the privacy of his own heart, has not thought of

killing someone. Many times James and I would sit fantasising about a kill of our own, our very own corpse. We weighed up the options like assassins and narrowed it down to a single, clean strike in an airport terminal bathroom where there is an abundance of unwary victims and suspects. We were armchair psychos, already tasting the blood. Most young men grow out of this sort of thing, taking to heart second-hand lessons in mercy and compassion, turning in wonder and revulsion from their former selves. Some never learn and continue to stalk the earth with weapons, amassing victims in the darkness. But the truly wretched ones turn away also, not out of principle or humanity but from the antidote at the heart of the disease itself, the terrible soul-harrowing and puke-inducing disgust.

## O is for Obsequies

QUIRKE (MARY ELIZABETH) died suddenly at her residence, Carron, Co Mayo, May 21st 1993, in her fifty-ninth year. Deeply regretted by her sorrowing husband Thomas, her son Gerard and a large circle of relatives and friends. Removal to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Carron, this (Wednesday) evening at 7 o'clock. Requiem mass tomorrow (Thursday) at 12 noon. Funeral afterwards to Cross Cemetery. No flowers. House private.

Your story on earth will never be told  
The harp and the shamrock  
Green white and gold.

## P is for Patrimony

Four months ago James and I stood in a green field behind our county hospital, two unpaid extras witnessing a dedication. There was a small platform bedecked with ribbons, a few local politicians, the diocesan bishop and my father. The field was

populated by a motley collection of patricians, merchants and outpatients; a few nurses stood at the fringes. Incredulity hung in the air like a fine mist. We were here to witness the sod-turning on the foundation of the Thomas Quirke Institute for Alcoholic Research, a laboratory annexed to our county hospital and funded in equal measure by European grant aid and the single biggest bequest to the health services in the history of the state — my father's entire lottery win. I listened as the politicians spoke on the straitened circumstances of the health services and on the pressing need for an institution of this sort in a province ravaged by alcoholism. My father was commended as a man of vision and philanthropy. I saw the bishop sprinkle holy water on the green earth and invoke the saints to guide the work of the institute. Then my father stepped forward to turn the first sod, his public awkwardness belying his easy skill with the spade. The audience whispered and shook their heads and as the earth split and turned I saw my fortune vanish before my eyes.

In honour of the occasion James and I left the field for the pub across the road and got sinfully and disastrously drunk.

### Q is for Quietus

We sat in the kitchen drinking the last of the whiskey. It was two in the morning and darkness hummed beyond the windows. James was slumped at the table, his head resting in his extended arm, clutching a glass. His speech came thick and slow.

'Every penny,' he was saying, 'every fucking penny gone up in smoke and pissed against the wall. I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. And every one of them bursting their holes laughing at him behind his back. The Thomas Quirke Institute for Alcoholic Research no less. Sheer bloody madness.'

'Give it a rest, James, I'm fed up hearing it.'

It had been a long day and I badly needed sleep. A monstrous headache had begun to hammer behind my eyes.

'Are you not mad, Ger? Christ, I'd be mad. A whole fortune squandered in one act of vanity. You're his son, for Christ's sake, it wasn't just his to throw away. You're his son and you could have been set up for life.'

'I know, James. It's all over now, though, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. It's all over.'

'I'd kill him,' he said suddenly, rising up and swinging the bottle wildly. 'Stone dead I'd kill him. He hadn't the right, he hadn't the fucking right.'

My father entered at that moment, his face flushed with drink, the knot of his tie well over his collarbone. James sat down at the table.

'Hadn't the right to do what, James, hadn't the right to do what? Go on, you young shit, spell it out.'

He was standing with his legs apart inside the door, the cage of his chest rising and falling. He looked like a man who was going to reach for a gun.

'I was just saying, Mr Quirke, it was a real pity that all that money couldn't be put to better use where right people might benefit from it.'

'Is that so? And I suppose if it was your money you'd know what to do with it.'

James' head was lolling heavily, a wide smirk crawling to his ears.

'I'd have given it to the poor of the parish,' he said, guffawing loudly and gulping from his glass. 'Every last penny. And I'd have put a new roof on the church,' he finished, now giggling helplessly.

'And I suppose you wouldn't have left yourself short either, James? You being one of these poor that weigh so heavily on your mind.'

He was leaning with both hands on the table now, towering over James. He wasn't totally drunk, just in that dangerous condition where he could argue forever or loose his temper suddenly.

'Do you know what it is, Mr Quirke? Something I saw today. Every one of those people were there patting you on

the back with one hand and smirking behind the other. Telling you what a great man you were and then going away bursting their holes laughing at you. I saw it with my own two eyes.'

James had lost the run of himself now, he didn't care what he said. I stood between them.

'Cut it out both of you. James, it's time you left, I need to get to bed.' I began hauling him to his feet.

'He'll leave when I'm finished with him,' my father hissed, squeezing out the words between his clenched teeth. 'When I'm finished and only then. What about you, James, were you laughing?'

'I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Mr Quirke, I was in two minds.' He was swaying drunkenly now, bracing himself between the chair and the table. 'I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. I was standing there thinking that some people have more money than sense.'

My father lunged at him, his outstretched hands reaching for his throat. James keeled backwards spilling the chair and my father landed across him, bellowing in rage and surprise. They grappled wildly for an instant. I threw aside the chair and James' boot flicked up as he rolled over, catching me under the chin and knocking me sideways into the table. I fell down, grabbing the tablecloth and bringing the bottle and glass shattering to the floor. We scuttled to the end of the room and my father came off the floor clutching the neck of the bottle at arm's length.

'I'll cut the fucking head clean off you,' he roared.

He moved towards James slowly, as if walking over broken ground. It was at this instant that the axe rose into the air, just off my left shoulder, and passed in a slow arc over my head. And it was at this instant also that there was a sound of breaking glass and the light went out. The fluorescent light showered down around our shoulders as the axe clipped it and there was a sudden rush of cold air in the darkness, a grim sound of something splitting with a soft crunch. I rushed to the wall and turned on the bulb.

'Oh Jesus, oh fucking Christ.'

My father lay face down on the floor, his head split open and the axe standing upright in it as if marking the spot. He was dead beyond any salvation. James was doing some frantic, crazy dance about his head and there was a smell of shit in the room. 'Oh Jesus, oh fucking Christ, what are we going to do, what are we going to do?'

I was stone-cold sober then, hiccupping with fright but perfectly in control. I started dragging James towards the door, hauling him by the collar.

'Go home now, James, there's nothing you can do. Go home.'

I pushed him out into the darkness and slammed the door. My breathing came in jagged bursts and I needed to sit down. I righted the chair and sat at my father's head, a four-hour vigil into the dawn with no thought in my head save that now, for the first time in my life, I had nothing.

When the grey sun rose I stepped into the hall and rang the cops.

### R is for Responsibility

Not for the first time James was picking himself up off the tarmac, wiping the blood from his face. I was after telling him rather imperiously that his imagination was running away with him. He was having none of it.

'Those fuckers walk all over you,' he sobbed. 'When are you going to stick up for yourself?' He was near crying.

'I can take care of them in my own time,' I said cryptically.

'Well, it's about time you started. Look at the size of you, you're well able for them, what the hell are you afraid of? And your father too, Christ, you put up with so much shit, it's about time you started hitting back. You have to be every bit as cruel as they are. You have to meet every blow with a kick and every insult with a curse. You shouldn't take this any more, it's not right.'

'I never asked for your help,' I said coldly.

'Well, this is the last time,' he yelled. 'From now on you can be your own martyr or your own coward. I want nothing more to do with it.'

'No,' I said, 'you'll always be there. You can't help it, you have the imagination for it.'

I walked away, leaving him sobbing on the ground.

#### S is for Summary

Even now, in the fifth month of my sentence, I still receive weekly visits from my lawyer. There are loose ends still in need of tying up, details to be put to rest. He informs me that public interest in my case has not waned - apparently its notoriety is being seen as indicative of some sort of widespread malaise in the minds of our young people, a kind of national tumour in need of lancing. He tells me that there is much probing of the national psyche in the media.

More recently he has presented me with a sheaf of proposals from publishers and film producers, all of them looking for the complete story, the first-person account. I have refused all of them, returned the documents through the wire mesh. I have no interest in the superfluities that necessarily accrue within the scope of the extended narrative. I have chosen this alphabet for its finitude and narrow compass. It places strictures on my story which confine me to the essential substratum of events and feelings. Within its confines there is no danger of me wandering off like a maddened thing into sloughs of self-pity and righteousness.

#### T is for Truth

Under oath and on the Bible I swore to tell the truth. I confined myself to the facts, which may or may not be the same thing. I believe now that this preoccupation with the

facts is exactly the problem with all kinds of testimony. A clear re-telling of the facts, no matter how accurately they record actual events, is a lamentable falling short of the truth. I know now that the true identity of things lies beyond the parameter of the facts. It lies in the treacherous and delusive ground of the fiction writer and the fabulist, those seekers after truth who speak it for no one but themselves with no motive of defence or self-justification. This is the terrain in which someone other than myself will one day stake his ground.

During the days of testimony I saw James leaning forward in his seat, chewing on his bottom lip which had blossomed out in cold sores under the stress. His eyes bored at me from the other end of the courtroom as I confined myself to the facts.

#### U is for Unravel

The thin bonds of our family unit sundered completely after the death of my mother. On some unspoken agreement my father and I commenced separate lives within the narrow scope of our house and small farm. I rose each day at mid-morning when I was sure he was about his business in the fields. I ate alone in the kitchen, staring in mild surprise at the creeping ruin which had taken possession of the house. Now that we seldom bothered to light any fires, paint had begun to peel from several damp patches on the walls. A light fur like a shroud clung to the effigies and icons all about and the windows scaled over.

Yet neither of us would lift a hand to do anything. We were now caught in a game of nerves, each staring the other down, waiting for him to crack. But neither of us did: we were too far gone in stubbornness and pride. The dishes piled up in the sink and cartons and bottles collected everywhere. The house now reeked of decay.

I came down from my room one evening and he was at the table, drinking a bottle by the neck. I stopped dead inside the

door and continued to stare at him. We spoke at the same time.

'This place has gone to hell.'

And still neither of us made a move.

V is for Visit

Now that I have all my records and the last of my books I have begun to sense a distance opening up between myself and James. It gets worse with every visit, a widening fissure into which our words tumble without reaching each other. Most of the last few visits have been spent sitting in silence, staring at the blank table-top. We have made sudden despairing raids on old memories, seeking frenziedly among old battles and fantasies for warm, common ground. But it is hopeless, it is as if we were re-telling the plot of some book only one of us has read, and not a very good book at that. I am surprised at the different ways we have come to remember things. I tell him of one of his heroic interventions on my behalf and he grimaces and speaks dismissively of a rush of blood to the head. He tells me a bitter incident of crushed youth and violent temper and I wonder who he is talking about. We are different men now and we hold different memories.

This week he had a real surprise. He sat across from me with his eyes lowered on his hands, the curious air of a lover about to confess some long and ongoing infidelity.

'This is the last time I'll be here, Gerard,' he mumbled. 'I'm going away. America.' He had developed a twitch along his jaw-bone since his last visit and I noticed that his nails bled.

'When did you decide?'

'A few months back, seeing you in here and all that. Everything's changed, it's all different now. I've got the medical and a job set up in New York. It's all set up,' he repeated. He continued to stare at his hands.

I was obscurely glad that it was going to end like this. James' days as my protector were at an end and my incarceration was

his loss also. I knew our friendship had exhausted itself – consummated might be a better word – and I knew that I was looking at a young man whose mission in life had been completed.

'I hope it goes well for you over there. Make big money and meet lots of women. American women go mad for paddies, I'm told. It's the dirt under the fingernails. Tell them you live in a thatched cottage, I hear it never fails.'

He smiled quietly. 'I don't know what I'm going to do. Probably work for a while and save a bit of money. I'd like to go to college.'

'That's good. It's good to have a plan if only to have something to diverge from.' I rose from my chair and held out my hand. 'Best of luck, James, I hope it goes well for you.'

'So do I. And thanks, Gerard. You were the only real friend I ever had.'

'It goes both ways.'

'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

I watched him leave and I tried to remember a time when I had ever seen him walking away before. I couldn't.

W is for Wisdom

My father made it clear to me that life wasn't easy. It was his favourite theme, particularly in those drink-sodden days after my mother died. He would fall upon me roaring, snatching the headphones from my ears.

'I suppose you think that it will be easy from now on, ya useless cunt,' he'd roar. 'I suppose you think that it's all there now under your feet and all you have to do is bend down and pick it up. Well, let me tell you here and now that it won't be like that, it won't be like that at all, at all. No son of mine is going to be molly-coddled and pampered and I'll tell you why. Because you'll work for it, like I did when I was your age and every other man of my generation. Because, and make

no mistake about it, you young cur, it's work and nothing else that makes a man of you, a real man, not like those fucking long-haired gits I see you hanging around town with.'

He was well into his stride now, pacing the floor and breathing heavily.

'Started work after national school we did, every man jack of us, footing turf at two shillings a floor, nearly a hundred square yards. And damn the bit of harm it did us. It made men out of us, real men who knew the value of money. Now all this country has is young fuckers like you spending all day on your frigging arses, cunts who know the price of everything and the value of nothing, eating and drinking the quarter session with no thought of tomorrow. I'm sick of the fucking sight of you.'

He would grab a hank of my hair then and lift my face up, his whiskey breath burning my skin.

'But if your mother was alive there'd be a different tune out of you, I'll bet. She'd have put skates under you and not have you sitting here all day like a frigging imbecile.'

This was the inevitable point of breakdown, the moment at which all his vehemence would drain away, rendering him mawkish and pathetic. He would collapse by the stove, weeping and snuffling into his hands.

'Oh Mary, Mary my love.'

I did not know which was the most terrifying, the honest and direct terror from which there was no escape or this genuine grief which was his alone.

X is for Xenophobe

We watched the interview on television the following evening. A study in western gothic, it showed the three of us standing in the doorway, my mother staring into her hands, plainly abashed by the attention, my father square-jawed and sullen, glowering darkly at the camera. At their backs I rose up between them, a half-wit's leer covering my face. The

bright young interviewer, all smiles and bonhomie, waved a microphone in my father's face.

'Mr Quirke, you are the latest Lotto millionaire, the biggest in its history, it must have come as a complete shock to you.' Father avoided the bait skilfully.

'No,' he said drily, barely hiding his contempt. 'When you have lived as long as I have it takes more than a few pounds to surprise you.'

'How did you find out that you'd won?'

'I just checked my numbers on the nine o'clock news and when I found out that I'd won I went and had a few pints in my local like I always do.'

'You didn't throw a party or buy a drink for the pub?'

'I bought my round as I always do, I've always had money to buy my own drink, anyone will tell you that.'

'Now that you have all this money, surely it will bring some changes to your lives, a new car or a holiday perhaps?'

'The car we have is perfectly good,' he answered bluntly. 'It gets us from A to B and back again. If we wanted to live somewhere else we wouldn't be living here. There'll be no changes.'

The interviewer hurriedly thrust the microphone to my face.

'Gerard, you are the only child of this new millionaire, no doubt you have high hopes of getting your hands on a sizeable share of it,' she said hopefully.

'My father has a sound head on his shoulders, he'll not do anything foolish with it,' I said simply, barely able to keep from laughing.

The interview ended in freeze-frame, catching my father with his jaw struck forward in absurd defiance and the half-wit's leer spread back to my ears. In the news coverage of my trial it was this image which defined the tone of all articles. The national press barely managed to suppress a tone of there-but-for-the-grace-of-God righteousness. Their articles were snide exercises in anguished hand-wringing and between-the-lines sneering at their dim, western cousins. Some

the-mill savageries. But an axe is something else again. It is the stuff of myth, the instrument of the truly sick of soul.

From the beginning I have received fan mail, curious and vaguely imploring missives from faceless well-wishers. *Dear Gerard Quirke, Not a day passes when I do not think of you alone in the isolation of your cell. You are in my thoughts every day and I pray for the deliverance of your wounded soul.* Today I received my first proposal of marriage.

I have begun to think again of my future and I have made some tentative plans. Yesterday I signed for an Open University degree in English Literature and History; it will take me four years. Now my days are full, neatly ordered within the precise routine of the penal system, meals and exercise alternating between longer periods of study and my record collection. At night I lie in this bed, plugged into my stereo and smoking the good quality dope that is so plentiful here. The lights go down and peace and quiet reigns all about. I spend the hours before sleep remembering back to the final day of my trial and I acknowledge now without irony the wisdom of that judge when he handed me this life sentence.

## A IS FOR AXE

day soon I expect to read accounts of sheep shagging and incest purely for tone.

Y is for Yes

Yes, I have my remorse. All that night I sat over my father's corpse and watched the blood drain from his skull over the floor. I was experiencing a lesson in how death diminishes and destroys not just life, but memories also. All that night I had trouble with my recollection. I could not square this overweight, middle-aged corpse with the towering ogre who had terrorised and destroyed my teenage years. That was a creature from a different era, a prehistory of myth and violent legend. It had nothing to do with this small, west-of-Ireland farmer, this lord of forty acres with his fondness for whiskey and cowboy songs.

There was a clear and horrible disparity in that room, a terrible and universal lack of proportion.

Z is for Zenith

On the first morning of my detention a small deputation of prisoners greeted me in the exercise yard. I was amazed to see that they bore several gifts for me – a ten spot of hash, a quart of whiskey and a list of warders who could be bought off for privileges. I stood bemusedly trying to conceal these gifts in my baggy overalls, watching the bearers retreat diffidently across the yard. Evidently my reputation had preceded me, elevating me on arrival into that élite category of prisoner who were not to be fucked with. I had a secret laugh about that. This of course is on account of the axe. There is no doubt but that the nature of my crime has made it a transgression of a different order, even in here, where there are men doing time for crimes that are barely speakable. Knives or guns are understandable – they are the instruments of run-of-