

## ***Free Class***

Tomás Ó Máille it was  
Kicking up a racket  
Shouting his mouth off in a front seat,  
Paul Boland his accomplice.

A fellow could get  
A caveat for that.  
The Goose was sick in  
Bed. We'd no Latin.

I prayed to Sweet  
Jesus the two would buy a big Bottle  
Of Cop-on.  
Grace, like a lion,  
Was on the prowl.

I wanted to pass  
My Inter Cert. Study the free class.  
My black heart didn't give a shit  
If he caught the two at it.

Grace bowled in the door.  
Out of the blue.  
All froze in the glue  
Of fear.

My first days

I'd won his praise

As he belted boys left

And right for the pluperfect.

My CBS ground it

Stood me good so it did.

Grace made a bee

Line down to me.

Smiled down to me, "Who is doing the talking,

John?"

I smiled back up at him, "I heard no one".

\*

At the bell, the class crowded me where I sat

Said I'd still make the Prefect of this or that.

### ***Lough Carra***

Arriving there we said was like opening the first page of William  
Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. Heaven lingering on in the dew, the lamb's  
Tongue and dovesfoot pastures we walked to or in Ben's car  
With tripods, baskets, wide refectory teapots. Lough Carra,

Castle, woods, ruins, games to get lost in, monkey a bit  
In branches. As the sun rose, we stripped, I learned to float.  
Harold and Wilfred Owen we were in Broxton on holiday  
Stretched on the late daisied May grasses, Tom Fenlon and I.

“The fat cotton-wool clouds that moved so slow across the blue” were ours  
Tommy O’Malley’s too, his chest got burnt badly lying in the sun for hours.  
Darkness did not exist, that tunnel in which we could not speak, utter a word.  
Just hours and hours, two soul friends, wandering so close in the sorrel wood.

Growing out of stone walls, the hazel woods rose with their canopies.  
A long ago Burke’s domain run wild and uprooting walls, the ash trees.  
Maybe revision for an hour or so. Maths. History. Connie and Blake.  
Like greyhounds we streaked his tiger verses, forgot him in the lake.

Prefect of Work my final year, I fetched buckets, tripods at the ready,  
Brimfuls of spring water from the Lough Carra well, brewed the tea.  
Mad with hunger by the afternoon, all tucked in. Tiny Michael McKee,  
Newry first year, “Where’s he putting it?” drank a dozen cups of tea.

I handed out the maids’ topped-up sandwiches wrapped so neat  
One by one. Some said it was a miracle, that the bottom of a basket  
Survived. I fed last as was customary with prefects. At the tidy-up  
At the lake edge each boy in the lapping waters rinsed his own cup.

Out in the lough water, at the back of the castle, was a flat boulder  
I’d drag Fenlon to before we’d leave, each year as we grew older.  
I’d say I’ll ask special permission to be cremated, and right solemn  
Asked him if he’d scatter my ashes on Lough Carra. Well, Tom?

Years later when I re-visited our sacred spot, I was approaching neither Sanctity nor fame. And the winds had blown us apart hither and thither. I was trying to salvage what could be salvaged. Again, time for re-vision, Sit by Lough Carra a while. "Without contraries, there is no progression".

Good-bye green happy place, all

The hazel woods of our content, each nervous guardian angel

Whose wings beat next us as we climbed the castle height.

There were ruinous footholds student generations had worked out.

The grass was lush on the green where we tomfooled. Wild

Dandelions were sprayed now, I got the sickening smell.

The doors of our adolescence had closed on us.

The flesh of our lake field had departed on us.

I left through thorn and briar we helped each

Other through to the priests who'd come in cars to fetch

Us as twilight dimmed. They were so different, clowned

When they caught the wind off Lough Carra in their gowns.

After the rule-embittered year, they did their bit to please.

But the trees we dallied beneath were not their trees.

