

COLIN FLEMING

PADRAIG AND LORCAN

“But Lorcan,” Padraig replied, “even if I grant that there is merit in your ‘overarching treatise’ (and I see you have been in my new stash of books), what about our customary monetary concerns? Why the fuck have you had me lugging around this sack of discarded metal vessels, drained of their libations—it is the poet in me that eulogizes them so—when you don’t even want to get some money back? I mean, we owe it to ourselves, no? As citizens. Late of the Beara Peninsula. And of Cleveland, USA. Two entrepreneurs, down on their luck, in southwest Detroit. We’ve already paid for the deposit. Or are you a man insistent on financial suicide?”

Lorcan stared at his slightly less disheveled companion, he of the clean-shaven face and, weirdly, bloodshot-free eyes, and thought what he normally thought of Padraig in those final moments before his friend/box-mate passed out, with his glorious knack of never having his head land in the fire that emanated from a flower pot on the towel-covered, asphalt floor of their parking lot abode.

“Padraig. God knows we’ve scammed our way left and right across the flat-chested middle of this country. Let me make two points. Point the first: you’re a twat. Lord love a twat, though, when the twat honestly believes he has been pressed into the service of his art, as you do. No matter that you’re horrible at it. But fear not: I have an opportunity for us to redress this matter. Which brings me to point the second: it is time for us to give back to this community from which we’ve profited over the years. A grand communal gesture is incumbent upon us.”

There was no wind, but the other bums scattered in groups of two or three around the disused drive-in theater premises were all in agreement that there had never been a colder late October. It was the stuff of everyone’s conversation. Even straight-laced Don Mulch—so named because he had worked as a mulch spreader for Don’s Proprietary Landscaping (a favorite of wealthy hedge-fund funded widows)—was drinking a good two bottles of Listerine a day to keep the cold out.

“Profited? You told me last winter after we made our escape from Cleveland—with the coppers only just a tad too dumb to find us—that if my finger didn’t turn back to a flesh color in the next fourteen hours (and what

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sort of arbitrary number was that?), that you were going to have to take it off. 'I will be removing that digit from the service of your left hand, Padraig.' What the hell. Only, you didn't say it in quite such an articulate way. And we didn't even know Don Mulch at the time, as he was making a proper go of being a landscaping superstar, so there wouldn't even have been Listerine handy to wash the germs out and other gangrenous things. You want to talk about what's incumbent upon us? Can we buy books so I can master the rigors of my craft? Fuck no. It's trips to the library (and you know it's a good two hours round trip on foot) so I can toss books out the back window and then race around into the alley—one which is loaded up with an especially barbarous group of vagrants, one of whom I inevitably hit with a book, thereby triggering another brawl and sometimes a beating for me—just so I can try and retrieve my haul before someone else profits by my hard work. Who knew there'd be such a run on surrealist, Gaelic, symbolist, and pornographic poetry amongst our transitory ilk? And now you're talking to me about giving back? This is what I bloody think of giving back."

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He began his now familiar protest gesture with a richly comic swirl of his arms in an interlocking circular motion, bringing his right forearm to his nose and letting go a bright yellow strand of mucus just as he passed out amidst a heap of Miller High Life cans ("This, Lorcan, is not the champagne of beers, no matter what anyone tries to tell you"), a common enough Padraig-specific ritual that Lorcan knew would later be compared to something Nijinsky might have attempted, had Nijinsky fancied himself a thespian, as well as a ballet dancer who spoke in the elevated style that Padraig considered a poet's birthright.

As the fire snapped away in their cardboard shanty, cracking the sides of the flower pot, Lorcan bade his companion good night. "You are a giant twat, my friend. As are most people one encounters. But I expect that the rendering of the Decider Wall will help to change all of that. Locally, at least."

It was all so very Victorian, the initial saga of the cans—from an ideological standpoint; the actual sight of Padraig making his Corktown rounds with the hum of the Lodge Freeway in the distance was somewhat different.

"Not as Dickensian as you promised, Lorcan," Padraig said, coughing up phlegm and spitting it into broad arcs in the air. He liked to imagine himself a doomed Irish poet, storming about in haste, as though the writing of some epic ode hung in the balance of how quickly he could get from one point to

another. He always wore a flat hat, which was normal enough in autumnal Detroit, especially near Michigan and Trumbell Avenues, where a lot of people—the upper middle class and the poor alike—dressed like immigrants poking around for work in the early industrial days of the Middle West. A pencil nub was forever behind his ear, and he looked robust, despite a love of anything with alcohol in it, no matter how foul, or how long it'd been in an empty bottle filled with piss, rain, sweat, and God knows what else on a street corner.

“How is it that you keep that bilge down,” Lorcan asked once, after nearly vomiting as Padraig triumphantly dashed off “a bumper of canal stew” that he'd found in an open bottle of malt liquor with the top smashed off under a Mexicantown bridge. Padraig glibly wiped his mouth and sat down on the cement alcove, right beside a lipstick container and a pair of used condoms—“Goodness, what a party was had here, Lorcan”—and whipped a cheap Walgreens notepad from his pocket and scribbled off some lines. “I shall call this one ‘*Nota bene*,’ Lorcan—a term that must be meant ironically, given the circumstances”—he flung one of the condoms aside with the sawed-off top of his pencil nub—“of its inspiration.”

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Lorcan broached the subject of his Decider Wall—and the empty, torn-apart beer cans that were to festoon it—not long after. Padraig was to collect as many as he could on his travels from library to library, and these would be put to decorative use on a wall that Lorcan had selected as the canvas, so to speak, for a communal art project.

“In addition to what we redeem from the refreshing treats that we buy, we'll have scores of cans that we can put to use for our especial purposes. And we won't have to scam a soul this time.”

“I have no problem with the soul scamming, Lorc,” Padraig replied. Whenever the one shortened the other's name, a conspiratorial element was at play. “No outsiders will be coming over the battlements tonight, Lorc,” as Padraig put it when he had something of tangible significance to say—like when someone had clocked on to one of their fleecing schemes, or was about to.

“You are doubtless a twat, Pad. But in this case, one with whom I'm inclined to agree.” Considering Padraig's past—and one event in it in particular—Lorcan marveled at how his friend never gave voice to the concerns that had made him terrified of the world—of every fast-approaching form that he did not anticipate or seek out. There had been no drinking in any

of the other cities they had come to call home for a while. Still, Padraig did his best to pretend that his one worry in life was adding to his collection of poetry books, which he kept under a rock ledge in some half-starved forest about a quarter of an acre wide that ran alongside the drive-in parking lot. But when “Lorc” was shortened to simply “L,” Lorcan knew, as Padraig put it, that “fleeing is of the essence, lest the cognoscenti lay their hands on us,” a comment that he would often append with “and they’re not going to lay their hands on my scrotum.” This was a typically cryptic Padraig-ism that sufficiently lightened the drama, making it easier to run from the scene of the latest crime. For which Lorcan loved Padraig all the more, twat or otherwise.

They scammed hard in Boston, Philadelphia, Yonkers; briefly in St. Louis, and then for long stretches in Chicago and Cleveland. “Artful scams,” as Padraig called them. In Chicago, Lorcan hooked up with a guy who trafficked in coin forgeries. He had a press in his North Side townhouse and was known in underground antiquity circles as a master mold maker. Padraig, attired as a cosmopolitan Irishman of the world in a wool sweater and buff slacks, acted the part of a representative of the National Gallery’s currency department. The Gallery had taken on more Francis Bacon paintings than they knew what to do with. Or so he’d say in his most convincing brogue, lingering over each letter as it made its way from the back of his throat. On top of that, there had been a new discovery of Bronze Age artifacts—“it was all crated up in Estonia”—resulting in a space problem.

A solid eighth of the coin wing had to go, but in a very hush-hush fashion. “No need to alarm the blue-haired Ulster brigade,” Padraig remarked to any well-heeled coin collector—or better yet, museum honcho or auction-house boss—happy to be getting a genuine half-groat from 1487 at half price. “And look there—you see how clean that raised ridge is around the lettering of ‘Dominus Hibernia?’ Beautiful, beautiful. It means ‘Lord of Ireland,’ as you know, of course. Though to me it sounds more like ‘don’t go to sleep on a deal like this.’ Har.”

The salad days were always temporary. People would get wise, or the cops would get involved. Inspectors with strange titles like “Captain of Circumspect Metallurgical Affairs” became regulars in what Padraig had begun calling his “Romantic Realist Verse—the ultimate poesy hybrid.” They barely made it out of Cleveland when the prospective buyer of a classic Hiberno-Norse design coin from 1000 AD turned out to be an undercover

agent who was part of a team that had already busted the man with the plates in Chicago.

“We’re really what you might call dupes,” Padraig explained. “We see very little of the money. I mean, we share a one-bedroom apartment.” The inspector was unmoved. Padraig sighed and turned to his friend.

“Must I, L?”

Lorcan hesitated and then nodded. Padraig pulled a blackjack from inside his jacket’s breast pocket and cracked the inspector over the head. Twice. He felt bad as they ran—the inspector remained a motionless heap on the floor—and omitted the scrotum portion from his standard “jig is up” commentary.

There was no one-bedroom apartment in Detroit. Padraig told his friend that he was willing to set up in business again, but Lorcan believed that it was more prudent to begin anew.

“We’ll reinvent ourselves, Padraig. During our downtime from the crime world. Might as well earn some karma.”

There was a large sack of cans inside the cardboard shanty. Padraig had drained off every last bit of residual alcohol and felt as if his teeth had left his mouth and taken up residence on the outer portion of his jaw, where they vibrated.

“Feels nice, Lorcan. And the poems have come fast and true, although I can’t say that these four days of can collecting has helped. As it is nearing Christmas (and I will thank you not to bring up amputation and home doctoring again—or cardboard shanty doctoring, for that matter; I have become used to the cold, and my skin is not troubled by frostbite in this, our second Midwest Yule) I did as you suggested and tried to get into the spirit of things when I went to the library to steal my books today. They have a room where you can watch videos, so I popped in a tape of that Sherlock Holmes story with the Christmas goose and the blue jewel. Holmes is kind of effete, don’t you think? In a leonine way. But all in all, nice Victorian Christmas cheer. A pleasing sentiment but one that dies quickly on the streets of twenty-first-century Detroit. Several fellow bums even tried to urinate on me as I reached deep into a garbage bin for more empty vessels. Nonetheless, we have cans a’plenty. Now, let’s redeem them and get some High Life.”

Lorcan pulled up the zipper on his battered Salvation Army coat and shook his head. “No, Padraig, we won’t be redeeming any cans. Do you know that white plaster wall by the Dime Building, the one that doesn’t seem to be connected to anything?”

"Only because we slept behind it with about ten other guys the first night we got in from Cleveland."

"That's the spot for our message. We're going to be the deciders, Padraig."

"I don't see how that's possible, given that we're only here because we may have killed a man, and this just happened to be the way the train was going. We didn't decide fuck all, Lorcan."

"Well, in principle we can assert ourselves now. As communal organizers. Yeah? That's a good lad. Bit of cheer. We've decided to assert ourselves as forces for the good. For an assortment of fellow transients, similarly unmoored in this chameleonic life of ours. Besides. It was only one guy who ever got a look at us. You only have to write the shortest poem you can think of, and I'll write a word."

"That's not writing, Lorc, just one fucking word."

"Don't be a twat. I'm going to do my word; you do your poem. I'm going to cash in just enough of the cans to put an ad in that paper the homeless people put out. The one with the unfortunate name."

"*Street Talent*."

100 "Yes, *Street Talent*. For now, let's find a knife and start cutting these cans open. We need something to reflect the light. It's mural time, Padraig."

"A can is worth a dime in Michigan."

"Yes, I know, Padraig. As I would think you did by now."

"Of course I do. Only it's what some fellow said to me this morning. Like I was being extra greedy asking him for his cans."

The ad that Lorcan had placed for his "Communal Event—The Decider Wall," had proved more expensive than he had anticipated. Padraig, drunk on some of Don Mulch's Listerine stash, conveniently located in a hole beside the ledge that housed Padraig's book collection, made the obvious joke.

"*Street Talent* is expensive, then."

"You need to be quiet now. And help me unfurl these cans. Cut the top off and then slice them lengthwise and peel them back as straight as you can. We're going to make letters out of them. Get it? I'll write my word on one side of the wall, and you'll write whatever you've come up with on the other side. We'll stick it all up there, it'll glow in the sun, and then people will get the idea and do their bit."

Lorcan wrote his word—"It has to be the most hopeful, inspiring word in the world, Padraig, and I am sure it will surprise you"—and Padraig busied

himself with his poem, which he also called a story. “The shortest story anyone ever wrote. Three words—well, I’m cheating a bit. But you’ll see what I mean.”

With the price of the ad, they ran out of cans. They had plenty of spackle that Padraig had swiped from a local hardware store, but it took more cut-open cans than Lorcan had anticipated to make a good, thick letter. “Pity, Padraig. These six cut-open cans don’t make much in the way of a sturdy consonant. Consonants seem to have more acreage per capita than vowels, on average. Anyway. We’re going to need a lot more to stand out on our wall. How tall do you think the wall is, Padraig?”

“Half the length of a bull whale’s bollix.”

“I don’t know about that, Padraig. I’d say it’s nearer twelve feet. By fifteen. Volume, Padraig, we must deal in volume. Go and get some more cans.”

“Crack that whip just a touch harder, Lorcan, and the only volume you’re apt to find us dealing in is my rampant ill humor. Why, even if you were my patron, a nobleman who supplied me with funds (and you are no nobleman, boyo me boyo) so that I could compose my elegant verse, I’d be forced—yes, forced, as though I were a dithering girl about to be gang-raped by a dozen toughs—to tell you to sod off. Not that you’d listen to me any more than the toughs would the dithering girl. Oh, they’d have a time, those toughs would. But would the guilt be worth it? Guilt is a bitch, Lorcan. But enough of these supple ruminations. There is no alcohol in these cans, Lorcan. None. Look. I’ve cut my tongue sticking it into these useless vessels. I am parched, Lorc. And yet, I am duty bound to our cause. What the fuck else do I have to do. I rather miss our elegant scams of yore. Let’s see if I can’t work some small-scale version of my former triumphs.”

Padraig went off on a search for more cans and saw a man walking to one of the many Corktown liquor stores with two Bud Light cartons under his arms. His jacket was ripped, and a strand of cloth trailed behind him like some vestigial tail. Padraig asked the man for money, knowing that it’d be easier just to give him the cans.

“You can take these around the corner,” he said, handing Padraig the two boxes. “They’re good for six bucks.”

“They know me in there. We have had some altercations. Could I just have the cash?”

The man reached into his wallet and pulled out six singles. Padraig perked up.

“Could I keep the cans too? Because it’s Christmas and all?”

“Yeah. Keep ‘em. Dick.”

On the night before Christmas Eve, Padraig and Lorcan set out across town to the Dime Building. Padraig had outfitted himself with what he considered a proper poet’s outfit. He wore an ancient pea coat he had found in the garbage, with a scarf the color and texture of sphagnum moss wrapped around his neck.

“Why’s this Deciding Wall of yours have to be worked on tonight, Lorcan?”

“Because tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. And everyone who’s not one of us is with their families. And no one goes out downtown. So any kind of hubbub around a white wall in the middle of the city is bound to get some attention, since it’s the only thing going on. And with a bunch of vagrants.”

As they passed the Penobscot Building, the white wall became visible like a slab of borax tinged gray in the shadows of the Dime Building. Lorcan stuck out his forearm in front of his friend, halting the progress of both men. The Dime Building looked imposing from a few blocks away. It was only about thirty stories tall, but it was divided down the middle by a gully that cleaved the building into two elongated rectangles.

“Pad, I grant that this is not exactly what we had in mind when we set out in our special brand of business. I just think we need to see everything through. Together. And we’ll get back to where we want to be. I know that there are certain temptations when things get tough, and an easy out presents itself. Anyone’s capable of making a mistake. Even with someone they love.”

“You mean like if you get drunk and rape your wife. AKA, the subject of one of my recent romantic realist poems.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I simply mean that I’m in this with you, Padraig. No matter what. And I hope you’re in it all the way with me.”

“And you call me a twat, Lorc.”

They did their work quickly, on opposite sides of the fifteen-foot-long wall, using the spackle that Padraig had stolen to mount the aluminum can strips in the shapes of letters. When they were finished, they switched sides to see what the other had written.

“It seems like a good word to me, Lorc,” Padraig’s voice called out from the other side of the slab. “*Onwards*. It’s a good start to anything you might want to do. A peachy little call to arms. If that’s what you’re getting at. And I see

you've labeled the Decider Wall as such (you've been holding out on me, you have, can-wise), right at the top. Ha! It's even with my head."

A pang of sadness and fear struck Lorcan as he read what Pdraig had written.

Friends are ends, our ends our friends.

"In and of themselves, I mean, Lorcan. Though I suppose one could pull a negative meaning from my poem, my most aphoristic to date."

"Yes, Pdraig. I suppose they could."

From the start, the Decider Wall was a hit with the homeless. Pdraig drummed up interest with the bums of the parking lot and even ventured into the alley behind the library to inform the barbarous vagrants that an opportunity for expression was at hand. The ad in *Street Talent* also helped:

*Tired of being kicked, shat, and spat on?! We are the deciders, friends.
We decide who we are—no one else. Life is not about how many coins
you have in your pocket. Gather at the white wall by the Dime Build-
ing on Christmas Eve day and make your contribution to our shared
art! Renounce who others would have you be!*

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Bums by the dozen turned up and crowded around Lorcan's Decider Wall, intent on making their contributions. There were messages, poems, and rough little sketches on both sides of the wall, executed in a range of mediums—in cut-open cans, in spray paint, in permanent marker.

There was enough commotion into the new year that a local news crew came by to report on the story of four or five dozen homeless people working on what the press dubbed a "Transient Pride Mural." Don Mulch was even reunited with his estranged, heroin-addicted wife, who had seen YouTube footage of the Detroit Decider Wall phenomenon while in a three-quarter house in Saginaw.

Interest increased throughout the winter. By spring, even non-vagrants, encouraged by the warmer weather, were making contributions of their own. Every few days, late at night, Pdraig would journey to the wall. There, he'd whitewash a portion for his epic verse, covering the day's various scribbles, and commence with a poem. Most nights, he'd return to the cardboard shanty to find Lorcan asleep. One evening, his friend was up waiting for him.

"I'm not sure this was the best idea after all, Pdraig."

“Lorcan, you are a man who is never satisfied. The vagrants have crossed over into mainstream society. This is hardly a bad thing, no?”

“It’s a lot of attention, Padraig. We should lie low. I didn’t quite expect it to go like this.”

Padraig’s smile hardened into something darker. “You need not fear that, Lorcan. The inspector, I mean. The fellow I blackjacked. If that’s what you’re referring to.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Padraig.”

“The inspector. From Cleveland. I twatted him. The night before last. He turned up. As I suspect you thought he would have. Was it the well-placed phone call, or was it some impressive outlay of police procedural efforts? A photograph, a sketch, a snatch of video that put the bloodhounds back on our trail?”

Lorcan didn’t know if Padraig was serious.

“Twatted him?”

“Ran him through, Lorcan. With a handy blade. What sort of man comes up on a poet from behind? He caused me to smear, he did. The marker went all over the place. Sure, I suppose it gave my line, which was meant to be enjambed, a struck-through quality. The topography of verse, Lorcan, the topography of verse.”

“Come on, Pad. You’re having a laugh. You can’t really think I’d set you up. And you’re not someone who’d kill anyone anyway.”

“A corpus is a most malleable thing, Lorcan. When you really work it. Work on it, I mean. Where to put it, where to put it. Do you mash it up? That’s a no-go. I guess you could leave it. Stash it behind something. Or under something. Like a dumpster. Stay there for a few hours and shit a bit. Maybe that overpowers the smell, so that passersby think ‘hmmm, there’s some shit around here,’ which is unpleasant but common enough. Whereas corpses kicking around are not.”

Padraig’s face softened back into a smile, and he laughed, which caused Lorcan to relax and laugh as well.

“I’ve saved you some High Life, Padraig. It may not be the champagne of beers, but cheers to you anyway, sir.”

They eventually passed out in their cardboard shanty, having both vomited in the empty cracked flower pot in the center of their makeshift domicile. When he awoke, his head pounding, Lorcan discovered that his friend was not to be found. After wandering around the parking lot and not seeing or

hearing Padraig, he made his way to the Decider Wall. The strips of cans had been taken down. "That's a bit bleak," he thought to himself. "Not exactly ideal auguring."

Returning to the edge of the disused drive-in theater parking lot, he was met by Don Mulch and his wife, who both frantically informed him that the feds had turned up and were asking questions.

"They are on the verge of laying their hands on my balls," Lorcan thought. "To float me down a Rubicon from which there is no return, as mine is to be a fate worse than Caesar's. I've been sold out, I have. Then again, that point is hardly definitive. He might have wandered off on this otherwise fine morning and realized that interlopers had emerged on our scene, thus keeping him squirreled away at a safe distance, thoughts pinned to me clocking on as well and making my own advance to safer environs. Good fuck. I'm even sounding like him now. I wonder how his balls are. Perhaps they're free. And in the good way. Not in the rat fuck way of having finagled a deal."

Don Mulch and his wife watched as Lorcan shook and tears began to wet his cheeks. He turned on his heel and started running for the railway yard. He figured his best chance of finding Padraig was there, if he was going to find him at all.