

THE BLACK GARDEN

My Great Aunts pruned our family tree the way they served up cottage cheese: a perfect igloo on the plate, so grand it spoiled your appetite. & though the spinsters never claimed that Royalty was in our blood, their stately silence filled the blanks: Our true descent came from a crown.

That would have been our proper past but for one lone dissenting voice, Jerome, their unruly brother, who chainsmoked till the day he died. “The Irish have no Kings!” he’d roar. His fist made all their doilies quake. “We couldn’t follow, wouldn’t tame; we made poor Kingdom for the Celts.

The Landlords made our farms patchquills & still we wouldn’t bow — that took a bug. A microscopic mite that ate a tunnel to the roots & made our lives an empty plate. The spuds lay rotting in the muck, their leaves black as a hungman’s tongue. It was The Land. They took its soul.

The Land we worked but couldn’t own. The Gaelic tongue we couldn’t speak. The Catholic Host we couldn’t eat. & when we couldn’t meet quota they’d put us on the road like dogs. We ate grass. That was The Hunger.

My sisters comfortably forgot The Wild Irish of Connacht

who’d wait upon the darkest storm to rage upon the coast then down the cliffs we’d come with flint & wood to build a bonfire on the rocks to catch the eye of any Captain lost & praying for safe harbor. He’d steer his vessel to the shore & find his refuge turned to stone.

He’d mash his spine upon the crags — Then you & me & all the men would dash down to the wreck to fill our pockets, help ourselves. I don’t suppose the Ladies told you that?” He’d roar a laugh that hurt to hear, so sharp he’d have a coughing fit, the buried phlegm still audible

deep in his darkening lungs. Jerome, who used to drive, his elbow out the window till a Studebaker clipped it so he never could quite get it straight again. Jerome took no nourishment from a lie. "There were no Kings!" He'd roar & cough. "The Ladies found their blood was full of Pirates!"

My mother's ancestors, the Glynnns, came from County Mayo. There still stands today the family's small stone house named Garra Dubh: "The Black Garden."