

OHMS

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CONFINED TO BARRACKS.....

was the tag that complicated my Larkhill stretch,
and the simple grammar of the Plain. And sometimes,
I rewind a Saturday on my tod, caught
in a sour silence after one long week's
bloody bastard slots of shithouse duty
rusty-razor-blading the piss slabs,
or weeding and sleek close-cropping the greens
we would never play on. Bedded and begrudging,
down to my last fags, little money for the NAAFI
I never could face alone, and sorry to heaven
for the missed 36 hours pass I'd forfeited,

just once I tested the garrison library:
a mothy room of ailing, under-thumbed books,
where something father had once said made me
(always immune to our school's rhyming pitch)
stop at the poetry shelf – maybe a dozen -
and pick the one he'd encouraged me (no luck)
to read: even chastised me for mispronouncing
the poet's name (twinning it with Keats).
Beached to the world, I struggled with
Wandering Aengus, Cuchulain and Oisín.
They could have been dummies in a shop window.

Then there he was in the doorway. Not the poet,
our Paddy regular from down the corridor:
unsmiling, not at all at ease, in scruffy
civvies I'd never seen him in before.
He hated our lives, they said, was remote,
not 'military-sharp', was desperate for demob.
But he sussed the book. "Yeats! Galway races...Yes",
and eyes focussed unblinking at the window
over my head, started: "There where the course is..." -
each phrase placed reverently like drystone -
no dull stiff parade of words - through to

"Men that ride upon horses". For one moment -
"its flesh being wild, and it again crying aloud..." -
the lines could have been a bridge between us,
our exclusions, what we missed.

He wished me luck.

I never saw him again. Till now. But
the poem has never turned its back on me.

(Larkhill Camp, Salisbury Plain, 1950 – 1952)