

Daniel Tobin

The Crown

My father in the kitchen hammering the keys
decodes my high school scribble, thought by thought.
I've never been one for the plumb fidelities
of proper cursive that the nuns taught,

or florid majuscules, like those I'd stoop to read
in someone else's work. His Smith-Corona hums
like a troop transport thrumming in desert heat.
He thumb-pops another Pabst, and soldiers on

through my treatise — Camus and Shakespeare's prince —
the both of us bound inside a nutshell
and neither of us king of infinite space.
Years later, I meet his best old friend at the funeral.

He hands back my book, the one I'd dedicated
to Father on the author page, carefully inscribed,
and gives it to me now, for good. "You read it,"
he says he heard him say, "I don't get a goddamn word."

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Palimpsest

After James Stephens (1880 -1950)
After Aoghan Ó Rathaille (1670-1726)

We'll have to wipe our tears and turn away,
Stanch our troubles and try to find some peace
Knowing all's been lost — greatness, grace,
The hand truly given, any welcoming words,
Friendly nods, shared laughter — extinguished.
Now what's best in us is blasted into shards,
Our deep song muted, with our lost art's finesse.
Stifled, we're made to muzzle our gravest griefs.
Nothing isn't scrapped that should have carried on,
Nothing of us endures of all that was our own.

The Game

It's all only prowess and appreciable returns,
as long as you catch what you yourself have thrown —
only when, unexpectedly, you find you are the player
who's caught a ball fired perfectly into your core,
launched to the crosshairs by some eternal teammate
in one of those spinning arcs of God's vaulted design,
only then does mere technique attain to gift —
not yours, but a world's. And if you, then, at all,
had the heart and strength to throw back that ball —
no, more wonderfully — to have already thrown it,
having forgotten strength and heart. . . . (just as
the year hurls the birds, those peregrine flocks of birds
that the turning, aging warmth of the Earth
hurtles over the oceans —) only with such needful risk
does one really play, neither making the pass
easily, without the least strain, nor hindered, hitched.
From your hands the star would shoot into the vastness.