Invisible Borders

We drove north from Dublin between stone walls and hedges bound for Bailieborough, down through Greaghnadarragh listening to the Irish language radio station, not understanding a word but loving the sounds. The soft rain glistened on stones and dripped from branches, threatening to turn to ice. On the main street of the village my ancestors called home, half the shops had my name written above the door and half the pubs were closed. We ate lunch in the Bailie Hotel, served massive platefuls and pints by a distant relation.

Late in the afternoon, long past Kingscourt, Carrickmacross, and Kavanagh country, you sat in the passenger seat as we crossed the invisible border, cradling a bottle of Aussie red picked up at a petrol station on the outskirts of Dundalk. We drove through the shadows of the mountains of Mourne down to Warrenpoint, searching for your grandfather’s summer home in the gloaming as darkness descended on Carlingford Lough.

After dark, we drove deeper into the north, through Newtownhamilton, Lisnadill and Armagh to Loughall, where an old friend waited with a warm meal and whiskey to guide us safely across borders we could not see, navigating cartography only visible to a local.

Remember Armagh

Remember that night in Armagh?
When the locals in the pub
Asked where we’d come from?
Remember the sneer
In the voice of the sloshed
Middle-aged regular at the bar –
*Why would anyone want to go to Dublin?* – she slurred, her face
Turning uglier as she dragged
Out the final syllables,
The silence hanging loudly
At the end of the question
Implying there was absolutely
Nothing possibly worth seeing
Or doing south of the border
In the *Republic*. We muttered
Something in a light-hearted
Tone about relatives, museums
And pubs, not wanting to stir up
Any troubles and turned back
to our mates. Soon signs
Were made, looks exchanged,
Pints drained purposefully,
Coats and hats donned
As we headed for the door
In search of a peaceful place
For a few quiet pints by the fire.
The Hill of Tara

Lacking a rag, I tied
a fresh white handkerchief
to a tree on the Hill of Tara
late last December
and silently thought
a prayer for my daughter
taking comfort in a ritual
that was foreign to me
but routine for my people
seeking to connect
in some small way
through a simple gesture
to my ancestors who ruled
the land spread before me
all the way to the horizon

Nathanael O’Reilly