

Mike McCormack introduces Kevin Barry

In the most lauded debut collection of recent years, *There Are Little Kingdoms*, Kevin Barry detailed a sharp mosaic of contemporary Ireland with keen humour and fond regard. An exuberant rhetoric brought to light a collection of souls adrift in a country not fully at ease with its new wealth. However, Barry's trump card was his mood of gentle empathy, a protective hold on his characters which prevented them from fully wandering into outer darkness.

In "Rico Spoke", Barry switches the terrain from small town Ireland to the newly monied suburbs of the capital. Now the mood is a whole lot sharper, less merciful. In gathering together a glib clique of youngish professionals and taking the dinner party as a fulcrum on which he ratchets up a mood of hysterical exhaustion, Barry drives his characters to their wits end. We witness a group which has spent its youth and all its choices. Now the pressure is on, the stakes are high and as one of the characters comments, "We weren't just having dinner here. We were saying our creed."

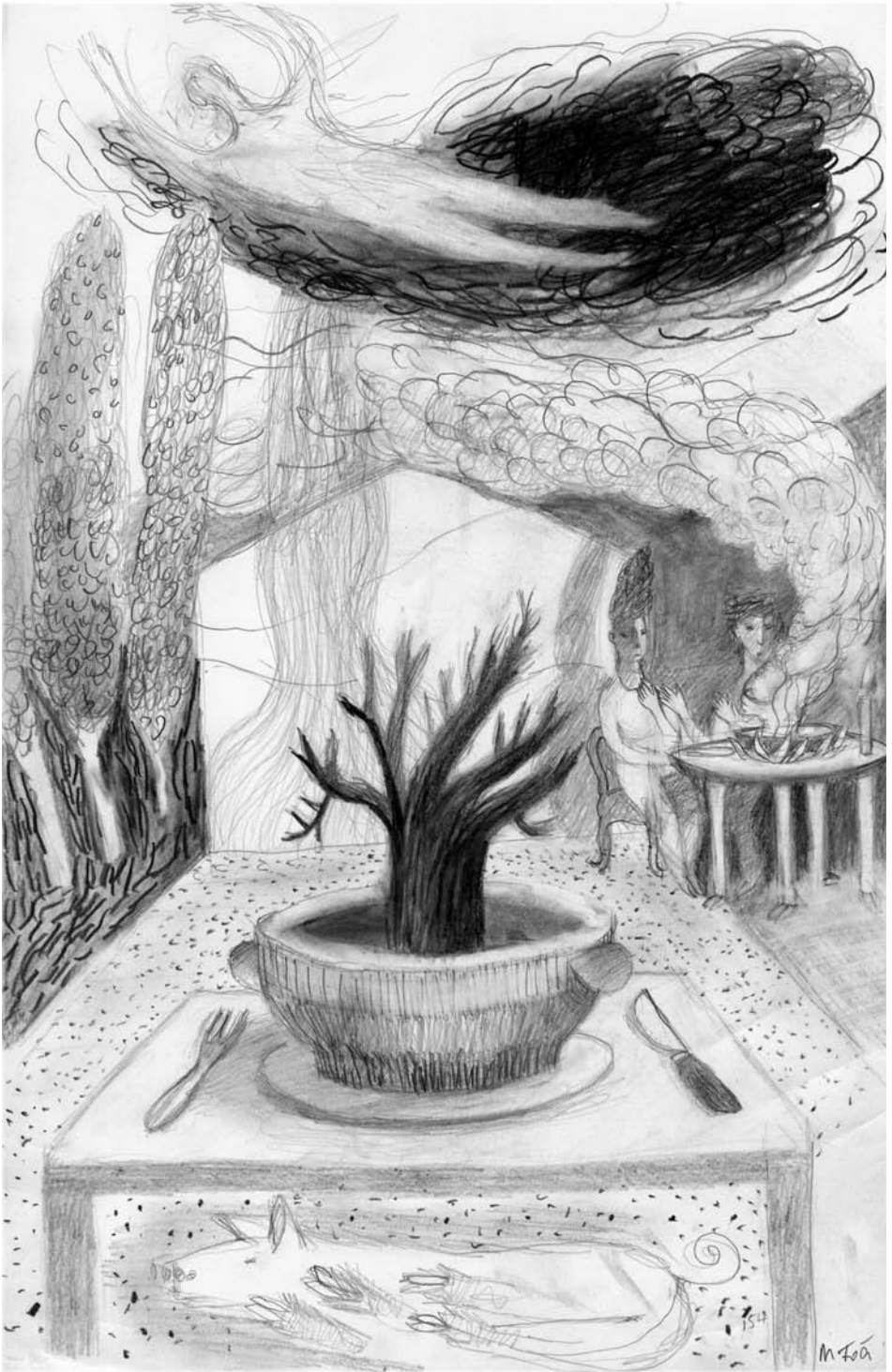
Barry sets a place at the table for the reader. We can pull in a chair and, while the food may be questionable, the conversation is great...

Rico Spoke

KEVIN BARRY

Kevin Barry's first story collection, There Are Little Kingdoms, was recently published by The Stinging Fly Press (2007). His stories have appeared in various magazines, including The Dublin Review, The Adirondack Review, and The Stinging Fly. In 2004, he was shortlisted for the Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award. Born in Limerick, he now lives in Dublin.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARYCLARE FOX



Rico Spoke

It was not yet light at the Botanic Gardens. Fearful of making even the slightest noise, I walked on the turned verges, where the earth was still moist from overnight rain. There was a sensation of give underfoot. The word “loam” was in my mouth. Everything breathed. At first I was panicked, and I darted everywhere at once, registering nothing, but after a while I began to calm, and I became systematic. I paced it out, row by row, and the colours began to discriminate in the half-light, and I sensed that I was moving among the exotics. A strange certainty surfaced and I knew that my fears had been for nothing. When I came to the place, I knew it by instinct. I closed my eyes and opened them and it was before me: the sweet achenko. From Kenyan bush to a blue Dublin morning.

Twenty to eight. I was cutting it fine. From my backpack I took the muslin and laid it on the ground. I dampened it with some Evian. It was important not to drench the muslin, just get a little moisture in to preserve the bark. The achenko is a miniature tree, knee high, like an outsized African bonzai, and I worked its bark carefully with my knife. My aim was to take off strips measuring about eight inches. The first try didn’t go so well – the strip broke after an inch or two – so I had to make the cut deeper and work the blade more firmly. The second time I got it beautifully, a perfect strip, tapered and curled, and I laid it on the muslin. I worked solidly for twenty minutes and though the morning was cool, I felt a sweat rise. I took four dozen strips of bark: that would be six each. I laid my treasure carefully inside the backpack. The tree would hardly survive the first frosts but that wasn’t my concern.

A sunless October morning was rousing. I laid the pack on top of the wall and shinned up after it. I looked left, right, then lowered myself to the street. I may have been seen by some commuters on a bus that turned down Glasnevin Road but people are blank at that hour and I’d have been no more than a moment’s curiosity: a pale fashionable man of forty, in corduroys and a duffle-coat, hawk-featured, climbing over a wall.

I walked quickly, with the pack clutched jealously to my chest. Office workers began to stream towards town and I was concerned that one of

them might bump into me and upset the shavings. I balled my shoulders and jutted my head out, arms cradling the swag, a good defensive posture. I caught sight of myself in the smoked glass of a Phibsborough bank and thought, Jesus, the contortions that life works us into! Traffic thickened, stalled. I'd be as quick to walk as take a cab. The workers were coughing and honking and I held my breath as I passed them, for fear of picking something up. Malevolence in the canal's dull gleam, malevolence too in the ashy sky. I made it across town. It was a relief to get to the quieter streets, to the old terraces, to our small red-brick home. A nervous glance at my watch as I turned onto Carnmore Road but I got to No 9, at last, and turned the key.

Ciara rushed the hall. Dressed for work, pale with tension, she could barely speak. I looked her over, let the terror sustain, then winked, and blew a kiss.

"Thank God, Riob!"

"Sorry it took so long."

"I though you'd been caught! I was thinking the worst."

"Relax. I've got it, okay? It's going to be fine. We're on track. How's the kitchen?"

"You're set. The kitchen is go."

"Good. Now shift out of here, missus, lively. Move!"

She eyed me with an evil leer.

"If I wasn't running so late ..."

We kissed.

"Can I ... can I see them?"

"Go, Ciara! The traffic ..."

She made gleefully for the door. I hurried to the kitchen. I lifted out the achenko shavings, cooing as though over a newborn child, and unwrapped them carefully. They needed to take the fuggy kitchen air for a few minutes, to breathe. Meantime, I could get on with the marinade.

The morning city rumbled outside, oblivious to my magic, like an enormous beast dying slowly in a sprung trap. The low groans of the traffic, the nasal mewling of the aborigines – soon they would all be gone, thank God. I zipped about in an ecstasy of precise labour: grinding here, pestling there, slicing, stirring, tasting. Silently I gave thanks for my

skills, and I gave thanks for the worktop space, which was generous as these terrace kitchens went. I had suitable music on: M'gubu Bota Jnr., the throat-singer. I gurgled along with it happily and by mid-morning, an unearthly aroma flavoured the air.

I had to break off for a few minutes for some work. I phoned in a tribute to a dead monologist for a radio arts show. Died by his own hand, the melodramatic old fruit. I stood in the hallway, receiver cradled on my shoulder, and I eulogized his pared language, his mastery of pause, his knack for despair, and I zested a bunch of limes as I talked. I snuck a peek at myself in the mirror by the coat rack. I was sweaty and tired and elated all at once. I was in the prime of my achievement.

We had discussed the thing at length. October nights, in the cool sheets, plotting and debating. Flambé or flash-fry? Marinade or a quick, rough rub? There is a difference of cultures in regard to our approaches. I favour elaboration. It should be complex, it should be involved, it should be bloody difficult. Ciara maintains that the higher calling is to reduce, to clarify, to give an essence. Three ingredients, she says, bang bang bang. Your spell is cast.

Our circle had become one of the most accomplished in the city that year. Since we had fallen into this regular series of invites, each couple had continuously upped the ante, and everybody's work had thus improved. This is the glorious thing about competition.

I chopped shallots, eyes streaming. I pounded chillis and garlic. I made a mash of pistachios and almonds. I raked aduki beans. I reduced a fishy stock. I allowed the achenko shavings to marinade for seven hours. It is an excellent thing to keep busy in the afternoons. Otherwise you can quite easily go mad. I sealed and I scored. I was rancid with alliums, bloodied with berry juice. I worked myself into a lather getting together an extraordinarily complex rub for the piglet starters. I put on some Sun Ra and shook out my limbs.

Come teatime, I was still hard at it but gaining control. Ciara got back from work. She had a high, excited colour: event-colour. She wrinkled her nose in the delicious way she has, and said:

“Babe? I think I smell a good one.”

“They're going to want to die,” I said, thoughtfully. “They're going to want to go home and fucking well die.”

Ciara put the finishing touches to the dining room. We'd decided on

a system of muted golds and tans. We'd pipe in a cinnamon misting, but just a little. I wasn't over-confident but I felt there was every possibility we were about to set a new standard.

Muiris and Lenore's was the first of these affairs. And strange, but what seemed the outer reaches of edge that night at the Nic Choinneachas seems bland in memory. They mained with a gingered kelp thing. It was a little yeah-right, really. Rico and Jill did better but they had professional experience and would have been expected to. Rico and Jill were the raw shark and the pan-fried hawk gizzards. Steadily, the stakes were raised.

I threw on some duck fat to melt. I beheaded six piglets. A roll of nonsense chatter took a turn through my mind, a string of garbagey mean-nothing words rolled and gridlocked and freed again. This is a means my mind has developed of letting itself spew clear. It's conceivably something worth discussing with Dr. Murtagh, my psychiatrist, but let him go and fuck himself, the arrogant prick. Ciara now seemed troubled.

"What is it, hon?"

"Nothing!"

"No, what?"

"It's ... nothing. It's just, well, the starter? I'm thinking out loud here, okay? I'm thinking ... are we maybe going a bit ethnicky?"

"What do you mean?"

"Piglets? I'm not saying anything, Riob, but are we going a bit West of Ireland again?"

"We're not."

"Fine! I'm just remembering the night of the pigs' feet."

"The crubeens? The crubeens were a hit!"

"I don't know we can say that. There were eyebrows. All I'm saying is it's pigs again and I'm getting the ethnicky worry. I'm worried we've done the West of Ireland thing."

"It's late in the day, Ciar, to be honest."

"I know."

"And this isn't a West of Ireland thing."

I knew we'd overplayed the ethnic thing, of course I did. Who did she think she was talking to? Fine, we'd overdid the peasant-Irish stuff. And the main problem wasn't the food but the whiskey. If you're doing

peasant, a bottle of whisky has to put in an appearance, at some stage, and I cannot drink whisky, or should not. But if it was a West of Ireland thing, I'd have to, and there were nights when I drank whisky after dinner, and indeed with dinner, and in quick sequence became maudlin, songful, suspicious, and violent. We had a couple of hairy ones, sure. Hugo and Bob were now refusing to attend any dinner we'd be attending. But forget about it, was my attitude. Water under the bridge.

Irritation faded. Ciara was doing some amuse gueules of an Isle of Skye fennel licked with a San Tremino chilli oil and as I watched her – so finicky! so picky! – I was caught short for a moment with ... love? I watched as she concentrated, tip of tongue emerging to press against upper lip, and the way everything came together at that moment – the mingled odours of the kitchen, an October evening outside, uilleann pipes on the sound system, it seemed magical, a moment out of time.

“What did you honestly think of Rico's hare the other week?” she said, breaking the spell.

“I thought he let himself down actually.”

“Thank you, Riob! About time somebody said it! It was so bloody dry and bland and Christ! The way he tries to pass it off as this gamey thing that's supposed to be dry when frankly, we all know full well that ...”

“Not just the dryness. It's the whole package. His sides? The seasonal thing? Seasonal is fine, but Rico is aggressively seasonal.”

“Precisely.”

This was the music of our marriage. We'd entered that long, satisfied period when couples come to physically resemble each other, in gesture, stance, set-of-mouth. I performed the final flourishes for the achenko tree bark main. A slam dunk, I thought, unquestionably.

Jarlath and Mona wowed us in July. Everybody knew. A triumph is obvious when you are in its presence. It cannot be denied. And it was just when we all thought the outré stuff had been done to death, just when everybody was thinking about going retro and ironic: spag bols, fish 'n' chips. But came that hot night in Ringsend, and the wok-load of stir-fried dog.

“And what did you do to the dog, Jarlath?”

Later, in the cab home, Ciara and I sat through the night traffic, the air was stifling and rich, the city smelled of open sewers, and we were

light-headed with chablis and envy.

“It’s not just that they served dog,” she said. “It’s that they served it so simply! Chillis and fucking coriander, Riob! Straight off Ready Steady Cook. But dog.”

“Incredibly tender,” I said.

“And simple, Riob! Good ingredients, simply treated. It’s not nuclear fucking physics.”

“You’re right.”

“And that ends the meat thing. Where do you go after dog? The meat thing is dead in the water.”

“The meat thing is history.”

“Muiris and Lenore are next. I wouldn’t worry about them. But we’re up in October.”

“Muiris and Lenore isn’t even an issue. He’ll be stuffing his little vine leaves, won’t he?”

So who’d have thought it? Who would have predicted that Muiris – Muiris! – would rip up the rule book and annihilate us all? He did beef cheeks for a main but he could have done anything after the starter. Victory was already his. He had battered and deep-fried little Reuben’s placenta, and served it with a tangy mayo. Not just tasty but meaningful. Everybody wept that night in Rathgar. Hugo was inconsolable. Rico and Jill stormed off to a three-week refresher with some kitchen nazi in the hills above Marseilles. Ciara was depressed for weeks. She took to going to bed at half past eight. I worry when she gets depressed like this because after the depression comes the hardness. The tide goes out and the rocks are exposed.

The bell rang.

“We’re on!” I cried. “Positive thoughts, yes? Benevolent expectation! Be confident.”

“I’m so there, hon.”

We slapped a high five. As always, Rico and Jill were first on the doorstep. Basically, they hated their children.

“Hi!”

“Hi.”

“Hi?”

“How you getting on in there, boss?”

“Don’t even think about sticking your nose in here. Off limits!”

“Well something smells weird.”

“Nothing weird in here, thanks.”

“And do I smell de leeeettle pigs?”

Yeah, and fuck you too, Rico! And what did he mean, weird? Ciara took them to the room. I could hear polite hmms about the colour scheme. I started the misting and took in some bottles of Nigerian Guinness. N’gutha Baal gargled his jungly wisdom on the system.

“Hey,” said Rico, as I poured, “nice decision.”

“Just right,” said Jill. “I’ve a throat on me.”

“So we’re doing the African thing again, yeah?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Pay no attention, Riob,” said Ciara, “he’s winding you up.”

“What you mean the African thing?”

“Don’t even humour him, Riobaird,” said Jill. “He’s a wind-up merchant.”

“He’s the wind-up merchant,” said Ciara.

“Sorry,” said Rico, and he smiled his horrible, orthodontic smile. “What are we listening to, Riob?”

“Some N’gutha. One of the earlier things.”

“Oh right,” said Rico. “So the 2005 revival has kicked in already, yes?”

“I, ah ... I better get back to it.”

“So what are we doing to the leeeettle pigs? Some sort of a rub, I suppose? Tell me there isn’t rosemary involved?”

“Fuck you!”

The bell, in its mercy. It was Muiris and Lenore. They looked tired but happy. They had lately been attempting to reintroduce the wolf to Connemara.

“Hi!”

“Hiya!”

“Hey.”

“HI!”

“How’re we fixed?”

In truth, I cannot handle Muiris at all. I mean, sure, I myself have been accused of playing up the West of Ireland thing but this guy? He even does the ‘sh’ thing all the time – the Wesht, how’re we fikshed, I’d

be losht without ye. The disgusting thing is the women love him. He's six five and built like one of the Cliffs of Moher. I sent in some more of the Guinnesses, and took a couple of connected breaths. It was time to taste the main.

"Ciara!" I called. "I want you!"

"Don't we all, hah?" said Muiris.

"Did you just think that, Muiris," said Rico, "or did you actually say it?"

Ciara, flushed, came through to the kitchen.

"What's up?"

"I want to taste, okay?"

We huddled over the tureen. We whispered; we shivered. Night had fallen. I ladled from the pungent, greyish stew, and we sipped.

"Hmmm," said Ciara.

"Yeah."

"HmMMMM!"

"Yeah ... it's ... it's interesting, isn't it?"

"Very!"

"Kind of ..."

"I know what you mean."

"Kind of ..."

"Yeah. Kind of ... woody?"

"What do you mean, woody?"

"Well, not woody, but ..."

"Okay," I said. "I mean, sure, there are wood notes."

"Exactly!"

"But it's not ..."

"I think it's fantastic."

"You do?"

"Honestly. It rocks."

"It does, doesn't it?"

We brought in the amuse gueules, and a couple of bottles of a Merlot-Cabernet blend made by an anarchist vineyard in New Zealand.

"Ah," said Rico, "the old Blood River yoke, is it? Good man, Riob, that's a nice drop."

"Isn't it?"

"It is of course. And you can't turn around lately without tripping

over a bottle of the stuff.”

“You wouldn’t see it that much,” said Lenore.

“No attention, Lenore,” said Jill. “He’s on a wind-up.”

“I mean, you’d see it,” said Lenore. “I mean they do it in Tesco and that.”

“Actually they don’t do it in Tesco,” I said.

“Oh? I was sure I’d seen it there.”

“You didn’t.”

“Fiachra and Bubby running late?”

“Do we want to start a book,” said Rico, “on Fiachra’s first line when he gets in the door?”

“Meeoooooww!”

“‘Traffic was a bitch’.”

“Thank you, Lenore.”

“Any joy at all,” said Muiris, “with the auld spot of damp ye were having in the landing?”

“Done and dusted, we reckon. Don’t we, Riob?”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t worry,” said Rico, “it’ll be back.”

“Do you reckon, Reek? Why so?”

“These old terraces? Come on, Riob. The damp is all part of the charm.”

“There’s an underground river goes right by here,” said Ciara.

“Still waters run deep,” said Lenore.

“Excuse me?” said Rico.

“Still waters run deep,” said Lenore. “The old saying.”

“I know the saying. Apropos of?”

“I just ... she was saying there’s a river, like, and ...”

“And are rivers still, usually, Lenore?”

“I ...”

“Hello good evening and welcome to non sequitors tonight,” said Rico. “Our host this evening ...”

“Rico? Please.”

In my mind, I walked a bleak winter beach by the North Sea, alone, and the sky was in varied shades of grey, and there was wind off the water, and I lived alone and at peace there. In a hut. Could this have been some future me?

“Did you know, Rico,” I said, “that sarcasm is disguised anger? Anger at the self?”

“Jesus,” said Rico. “Are the Weetabix boxes doing Freud now?”

“How’d ye sort the damp, peteen?”

“What we did, Muir,” said Ciara, “was ...”

The bell rang: Fiachra and Bubby.

“Hi!”

“Hiya!”

“How’re the rich people?”

“Great, Muiris.”

“Ye’re pushing the auld clock?”

“Traffic was a bitch, Muir,” said Fiachra, and Rico licked the tip of his index finger, and pointed to the skies.

“Bubby you’re looking fantastic!”

“Thanks, Ciara. I’ve had no more problems since, thank God.”

“Don’t mention the war,” said Fiachra.

“You were the first I’d met,” whispered Lenore. “I mean I’d read about gym rage but you were the first I knew?”

“The amazing thing is there’s an actual rash.”

“Cleared up easy enough,” said Bubby. “The rash wasn’t the worst of it, by any means. Was it, Fiach?”

“No,” said Fiachra.

“So that’s it with the gym, Bub, fineeto?”

“Fin,” said Bubby, “eeeeto.”

“No Hugo and Bob?” said Fiachra.

“Riob is a little rough-edged for some tastes,” said Rico. “We’re going to need a new token gay couple.”

“Rico!”

“Thinking about starters, Riob?”

I arranged the piglets on rough earthenware plates we’d sourced from the lepers in Niger. I wasn’t so nervous now. Even if there was failure, the integrity of the effort would be applauded. To act otherwise would be to pick at the binding thread of our lives. We weren’t just having dinner here. We were saying our creed.

Anyway, we’d all had our disasters. Jarlath and Mona and the famous night of the penguin shanks. And Bob and Hugo’s soul food fiasco, Bob and Hugo with the R&B, and the baseball caps, and Bob a fucking

guard, for Christsake. I spooned jus. I drizzled blossom water. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes and pictured a river of golden light flowing into my body. Ciara came for me.

“Deep breath, wren,” I said. “We’re going in.”

Some junkie-period Miles squittered from the system. I eased off the cinnamon misting. Lamplight only, with the golds and tans of the night’s scheme muted, subtle.

“Nosebag,” I said.

“Oh!”

“Oh.”

“It’s the leeeetle pigs alright,” said Rico.

“Now!” said Muiris. “Now we’re suckin’ diesel.”

“Lovely arrangement, Riobaird.”

“Thanks. And listen, I’m announcing a moratorium on Old Macdonald jokes?”

“Durn,” said Rico.

“Sorry.”

“Actually, I wasn’t going with Old Macdonald. I was trying to work something up about, like, the EU piglet mountain?”

“The pig mountain.”

“Pig mountain, yes. And actually, Riob, ‘pig mountain’ sounds like it could come from one of your poems.”

“Fuck you.”

“Take it we’re still working the old West of Ireland seam, yes?”

“Thanks, Rico.”

“And how long since you actually lived in the West of Ireland?”

“He’s on a wind-up, Riob.”

“Riob this is sensational.”

“Oh!”

“It’s like ... it’s ... melting?”

“Quare bit o’ pigeen altogether.”

“Phen,” said Bubby, “ommmmenal.”

“No, actually, Riob? I’ve got to hand it to you. This is good.”

“Thanks, Reek.”

“Seriously. It’s a bloody nicely cooked bit of meat.”

“Cheers,” I raised a glass, and I felt a glow within, like grace.

“You’re putting it up to yourself, Riob! How do you main after

this?”

“How *do* you main after this?”

“Anyway how is the poetry? Busy this time of year?”

“Fuck you.”

“The poetry is treating Riob very well. Sure hasn’t he got a residency?”

“Wow, actually, congrats on that,” said Lenore, “or have we seen you since”

“Sincere congrats,” said Rico. “I also see you had one of those poems-on-the-buses things?”

“I did.”

“Cool,” said Rico. “But I thought those were written by, like, homeless people and amputees?”

The siren of a squad car screamed past outside. It came within feet of the window, which rattled, and we paused, with forks in mid-air, and we smiled.

“I thought,” said Rico, “that this place had been gentrified. No?”

“Much done,” smiled Ciara. “Much remains to do.”

“You in local government by any chance?”

“There’ll always be the odd scumbag,” I said.

“Edgy!” said Ciara. “Gritty urban noir!”

“Needs work, Ciar.”

“What can you do?” I said.

“Thinking about mains, Riob?”

“Peasants,” said Rico, “is what we’re talking about. The northside is the northside. A terrace is a terrace, you know? Terraces are peasant housing and you’re not going to change that overnight. I don’t care what price you have on the things.”

“You’ve to let ’em die off, basically, I suppose?”

“I’m not saying anything against terraces,” said Rico. “We were on a terrace ourselves long enough.”

“The North Circular!” cried Jill.

“The horror,” said Rico.

“Most people around here I’m sure are professionals now,” said Lenore.

“Professional whats?” said Rico.

“Actually,” I said. “I think an area is most interesting when it’s in a

transitory phase? When it's neither one thing nor the other? You have edge but also you have facilities. Sometimes I really think this. That the journey is more interesting than the destination?"

"Whatever it is you're on," said Rico, "I want the prescription."

"No, I mean the area has really come on. I was talking to a guy on the street the other day and ..."

"An actual guy on the actual street?"

"Yes, Rico."

"What was doing, selling smack?"

The area had been on the cusp forever but it had never turned. You couldn't get the smell of butter vouchers out of the place. It was still faceless youths beneath baseball caps. It was ringtones and bellytops and the drone of the Piaggios and the sodium gloom of streetlamps – dreamlight of the terrace evenings – and all of these grey-skinned adolescents everywhere, their bones clacking as they waded the opiate soup.

"Grub, Riob?"

"I didn't want to be the one to say."

"Nor me," said Muiris. "But I'd ate a scabby arse through a rusty gate."

"Not the first time we've heard that one, Muir."

"I'm on it."

I went to the kitchen, with Ciara behind. We paused a moment, and listened to the lovely animated babble around our table, and we smiled. The starter was a triumph. Now we'd present the achenko tree bark main. Now we would stun the table to silence. Now we would rip these motherfuckers to shreds.

In truth, I felt a wobble of nerves during plating. The lead note was distinctly woody, there was no denying it. But innovation demands courage, and I piled the shavings into delicate towers atop each of eight plates, and I arranged the barley risonterelle for a side, and I dressed with dill, fennel feathers, lime – old skool – and I breathed a mist of magic over each of the mains.

"Done deal," said Ciara.

"You think?"

"You've closed, Riob."

"Okay. These two have breathed long enough," I indicated a couple

of arrogant Armenians. “Bring them. I’ll throw on some of the mellower N’Gutha. Then we roll.”

“We’re going in,” said Ciara, paling.

We began the procession. Conversation subsided to a chorus of oohs and low whistles.

“Riob? This. Looks! Absolutely ... Christ!”

“Now what,” said Rico, sniffing, “have we got here?”

I took my place at the table’s head. I allowed a moment for everyone to examine their plates. I clasped my elegant fingers beneath my chin.

“In the back streets of Mombassa,” I began, “I came across one morning a little book cart, and I found on it an old text, in the French, and it explained how the natives of the far interior would sometimes harvest ...”

They listened, awestruck, and tasted.

“Wow!”

“Mother of God!”

“Riob? I’m tellin’ ya ...”

“Interesting.”

“Very interesting.”

“It’s like ...”

“Now!” cried Lenore, “Now we have Africa on our plates.”

Were these the herald notes of a triumph? I fancied they were and I allowed a humble smile.

“The risonterelle,” said Jill, “is top class.”

I drew back, stunned. This was outrageous. Ciara’s eyes darted to mine. In praising the accompaniment, Jill was placing a question mark over the focus of the dish – the achenko bark. She was opening a debate. This was the initial salvo. There was no way it was accidental. She knew what she was doing! And I still believe that the room was ready to go with it, the room was ready to place the garlands, but Jill’s remark created pause. Who might come forward to fill it?

“Okay,” said Rico. “Tell me again, Riob. What we’re eating here is the kind of ... outer sheath, is that how you put it? Of this whatchacallit plant?”

“Pretty much.”

“Now when you say sheath, Riob, do you mean, like, what? A layer or a ...”

“Yeah. The outer layer of the ... am, of the plant’s stem?”

“Plant?” said Rico.

“Yes.”

“Definitely a plant? As in a vegetable?”

“How’d you mean?” I said.

“No need to be defensive. I’m just tasting and ... looking at it and ... well, the texture, you know? I’m thinking, it couldn’t be like ... I dunno. Some kind of tree, maybe?”

My breathing went shallow.

“I ... I suppose, you know, six of one, half dozen the other, you could probably call it a kind of miniature tree.”

“We could probably call it,” said Rico, nodding sombrely, “a kind of miniature tree.”

“Yes.”

“So if I’m hearing this correctly, Riobaird, what you’re telling us is that we’re actually sat here eating the bark off a tree?”

“So interesting,” said loyal Lenore.

“Unbelievable,” said Ciara.

“It is interesting,” said Fiachra.

“Mighty altogether,” said Muiris.

And I believed the thing could be hauled from the flames. Maybe, if everybody else came onside ... but then it happened. Rico put down his irons. Rico pushed back his plate. Rico spoke:

“No,” he said.

A terrible silence. Everybody looked to the floor. I pleaded, without words, but he was away.

“This isn’t interesting.”

Sharp intakes of breath.

“What it is, Riobaird, it’s the bark off a tree.”

He smiled a hideous smile, and he dropped his voice a couple of octaves, to a moist and intimate whisper, and the gristle of his tongue flashed with viper speed and licked horribly at his lips: he was moistening them to feed on weakened prey.

“Essentially,” he said, “we are sat here like some kind of jungle vermin and we are nibbling the bark of a motherfucking pygmy tree. Like those little weird cackling hunchback rats with the protruding teeth you get on Discovery Channel. And I wouldn’t mind ...”

He paused, for effect, and turned his delighted beam around the room.

“I wouldn’t mind but it tastes like boiled fucking bandages.”

Never had there been anything like this. There’d been a curled lip over an amuse gueule. There’d been a sniffy comment about a vine leaf. But this?

“You’re harsh, Rico,” said Ciara, dabbing her eyes with a napkin.

“No,” he said. “I just think it’s important it’s said. Honest, Riob. I’m not being a bollocks here. But I think the time has come to ask ourselves, you know ...”

“Maybe,” I conceded, “I’ve been somewhat adventurous.”

“It’s not that it’s adventurous, Riob,” he said. “It’s just not adventurous enough.”

“Oh why are we doing this to ourselves?” said Lenore.

“Please, Lenore! Think for yourself!”

“Whisht,” said Muiris. “He’s right, you know. That’s the sad thing. And we’re all guilty.”

“Time to call a halt,” said Jill.

“Yeah,” said Ciara. “It is.”

“Thanks, love!”

“I’m sorry, Riob.”

“I’m sorry too, Riob,” said Rico. “You haven’t been the worst offender by any means.”

“Meaning?” said Lenore.

“WE’RE IN A KIND OF HELL!” cried Bubby.

“That’s about the top and the tail of it, Bubster.”

“All I can say, folks,” I said, “is that there is actually dessert.”

“Animal, mineral or vegetable?”

“Oh please let it be shop-bought!”

And we were in the kitchen, then, numbed, and Ciara wordlessly sliced the pear tart, and with dead eyes I doled out the crème fraiche. She wouldn’t even look at me.

“Babe?” I said.

There was no response.

“So I walked up to the motherfucker,” said Rico, “and I said, okay, buster, listen up. Did you hear what I actually said about the spritzed effect? What is it you think we’re designing here, a sitcom garden? I said, do I look like Felicity Kendall?”

“He did! That’s what he said.”

“Rico!”

“And your man is sat there slackjaw. On his little rotovator. With the mouth hanging open. I nearly had to be dug out of the fucking savage.”

“Nice tart, Riob.”

“Sensational tart.”

I saw an amped-up Honda Civic flash by outside, take a speed ramp at pace, and for a moment it actually left the tarmac, all four wheels, as though hoisted by angels.

“Lupine,” said Muiris, “is to wolf as canine is to dog. And I think, what? 1780s? That’d have been about the lasht of the wolves. Carlow, I believe.”

“Yeah, right, get you,” said Rico. “Anyway, Bubby, this thing with the eternal youth. The latest regime. Please don’t tell me it’s got to the stage where you’re drinking your own piss?”

“Is it Angeline Jolie does that?”

“How’re we fixed on this boy? Will we go again?”

“Apparently she was in Cork the other week? Something about Buddhists?”

“All Cork has is the English Market. Take away the English Market and it’s a dreary little town.”

There were footsteps outside, going at a good clip, but then they stopped, abruptly. There was a pause, a breath, and the window shattered. A brick landed plum centre of the table. There was a note tied to the brick. I ripped the note off and opened it. It contained a single word, and the word was a question, and the word had the power to deliver us from our sorrows. I stood and read it aloud:

“Coffee?”

I came outside myself then. I rose up. I went through the night sky and into the low clouds and I looked down on Carnmore Road, and I saw the walls that bounded us were flimsy-seeming from up there. But the castle holds if the castle can, and why fret for its fall until all of the dust has blown and rubble fills the moat?