The Landscape of Language

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Published: September 20, 2000

In Colum McCann's fourth book, *Everything In This Country Must,* we witness the struggles of three adolescents growing up in environments torn apart by tragedy and political upheaval. Set in Northern Ireland and Galway, the narratives (two short stories and a novella) build on the promise of starting over and the possibility of peace and acceptance. None of this can happen, however, as McCann warns us in his title story, since horses and loved ones die equally well and "since everything in this country must." This phrase is apt not only because of the totality of its necessity but also because of how it asks the reader to complete it ("die" is evident from the context of the sentence, but from a broader perspective "survive" seems a better word). Because McCann puts his main characters in situations with little or no room to maneuver, they "must" live out the inevitable. So the forecast is set and the children are forced to grow up long before their time.

The opening and title story, "Everything In This Country Must," begins during a summer flood with a father and daughter trying to save a trapped draft horse from drowning. This is the most urgent and seamless of the narratives and Katie, only fifteen, takes us through it with a certain detachment and ease extraordinary for a girl her age. Standing midstream her father's anger and a soldier's kindness, Katie makes vivid through perfect detail what lies beneath the unspoken. Like the other two stories, the past proves crippling to the present and future. Katie's "Mammy" and brother who were struck and killed by a British Army truck are as much a presence in the story as the draft horse or the constant beating down of the rain. The surprise is that hatred and love are pushed to their extremes. Katie loves and her father hates. The arrival of British soldiers only accentuate these opposites. One "must" not take help from the enemy. Or wear their jackets or make them tea, as Katie learns. The soldiers save the horse, but in the end it leads Katie's father to kill it. The gunshots, "one, two, three," symbolize the loss of her mother and brother as well as her "father's favourite" horse.

McCann inverts both the seasons and the characters in his subsequent story, "Wood." It is not summer, but winter, not a father and daughter working together, but a mother and son. Like the previous story, however, this one is also told in the first person, from a teenager's point of view. Andrew is his name, though it's only used once, and shaping poles for the Protestant parade is the task that brings him and his mother out to the mill night after night. But it's a furtive undertaking (much like breaking out of a prison) and as such it establishes a tension that allows McCann to play upon its scheme:

"There was ivy on the walls and it looked like our secret was climbing up the vines to Daddy's room" (22); and: "When we got back to the house I showed Mammy the secret to keeping quiet on the stairs…." (27). "Daddy" is the backstory and the tragic shadow that McCann casts over the family. Once he (Daddy) was a talented and respected wood worker, now, after taking a bad fall in the mill and having a stroke, he is a bedridden cripple barely able to speak. But somehow he still has quite a bit of influence, as it is him that his wife and son struggle to keep their secret from. Either out of tradition or principle, the sense is that he would disapprove of the plan.

So as the story builds, so does the secret. And here is where McCann delivers an almost cinematic gaze. The boy's mother needs a distraction so she can sneak away the poles without her husband suspecting. The strategy is for the boy to shave his father's face and turn on the radio so he won't hear the van pull up the laneway. The gaze shifts from the courtyard, where the boy's mother is anxiously waiting for the van, to the upstairs bedroom overlooking it, where the boy is shaving his father's face under the noise of the radio: "I was praying the van would come soon," the boy says. "Music started on the radio and Daddy told me to turn it off, but I pretended I didn't hear him and kept shaving away" (35). After more persistence, however, the boy is forced to turn the radio off moments before the van pulls up the laneway. His father hears it and is suspicious, though apparently still in the dark.

In both of these stories McCann makes the most of the weather and sky to hone the tension and fit the mood of the action. The summer flood in the first story rages as a counterpart to the cold silence after the winter storm in the second. Nature has assumed a persona of its own and by the end of the narrative persists as something powerful playing over the land: "I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket," Katie recalls, "and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain" (15). Like bullets, like death, the rain pours down in sequences of three and nothing about the future is clear. It makes sense then at the end of "Wood," that the trees are willfully angry at the clandestine activities that exploited them: "I looked at the oak trees behind the mill," Andrew tells us, "They were going mad in the wind. The trunks were big and solid and fat, but the branches were slapping each other around like people" (37). The fusion of nature and psychology can be an effective device, and McCann employs it well in these two stories to reflect the language of the landscape.

In the novella, "Hunger Strike," we move from the small farms of Northern Ireland to the far reaching seas of Galway. But only physically. Indeed, it's ironic that the narrative most literally remote from Northern Ireland, as this one is, should also be the one most attached to it. This is because the central characters—once again, a boy and his mother—have left Northern Ireland and their home under difficult circumstances. The boy's uncle, a soldier in the Irish Republican Army, is a prisoner on a hunger strike, and it is through the days of his strike that we move vicariously. But there's also a

certain distance McCann establishes by using the third person. With the days of the strike recorded as if they were part of an Olympic contest, McCann is implying that he wants the tone to remain impersonal and isolated.

Kevin, the boy we follow through these hundred pages, is only thirteen, but as so many of his actions reveal, much older than the preceding characters. Except this is more distressing than brilliant. Whatever capacity Katie and Andrew have for wonder and obedience, Kevin does not. He's had a lonely life so far and is unhappy with just about everything that comes his way. So why go on a journey with someone you care nothing about? If the hunger strike is myopic, angry, and futile, the boy's seclusion is as well. He hungers for someone he can identify with and longs for an environment where he feels he belongs. As it is, his father is dead and his mother, with too many worries of her own, is often of little comfort. And so we are faced with a character who is self-destructive, self-loathing, and restless…a boy who finds himself on the edge of nowhere, wandering aimlessly in a land he cares little or nothing about.

There are brief moments, however, that seem hopeful. One of the unexpected turns of the narrative is when the boy suddenly walks up to the Lithuanian couple's door and asks to borrow their kayak. How do we get here? We never know, but it's still refreshing to see the boy make an effort to reach out. In the end, nonetheless, as the boy smashes the kayak with rocks, the old man and his wife prove to be too old or distant to have any real impact on his life. Another glimmer of promise is after the boy and his mother go swimming: "He helped her up the hillside and as they walked he thought to himself that his childhood had all of a sudden fallen away, that he had dropped it like a skin in the sea" (136). But rather than expand and actualize this insight, McCann tears it apart. By the end of the narrative, the boy refocused is still a boy. And why shouldn't he be? After all, thirteen is a pretty awkward age. But in this way, the circumstances that lead the boy to destroy the kayak are made more real.

From the start, McCann weaves plenty of symbols through the novella: a gravestone of a boy just about his age, chess pieces carved from bread, a black armband, an abandoned car above a cove, a stray white horse; there's even a shooting star. But perhaps the most effective question mark is the tattoo of a word the boy began to carve into his forefinger. He stopped carving it after the first letter because he had no idea what that word should be; for here is "a boy of two countries with his hands in the dark of two empty pockets" (47).

I don't think McCann ever comes as close to reflecting the troubles he sees in Ireland. The cultural and linguistic divisions waver in a wasteland of resentment and fear that's neither here nor there. Even the political disorder is old-hat. But the roots of the cause and the nature of the army are deep-seated and headstrong: a paramilitary force that will continue, if it must, to oppose the connection of Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and if it must, to continue refusing to recognize the Irish government in Dublin . . . to continue refusing—as it must—even a crust of bread.