

Sport

There were not many fields
In which you had hopes for me
But sport was one of them.
On my twenty-first birthday
I was selected to play
For Grangegorman Mental Hospital
In an away game
Against Mullingar Mental Hospital.
I was a patient
In B Wing.
You drove all the way down,
Fifty miles,
To Mullingar to stand
On the sidelines and observe me.

I was fearful I would let down
Not only my team but you.
It was Gaelic football.
I was selected as goalkeeper.
There were big country men
On the Mullingar Mental Hospital team,
Men with gapped teeth, red faces,
Oily, frizzy hair, bushy eyebrows.
Their full forward line
Were over six foot tall

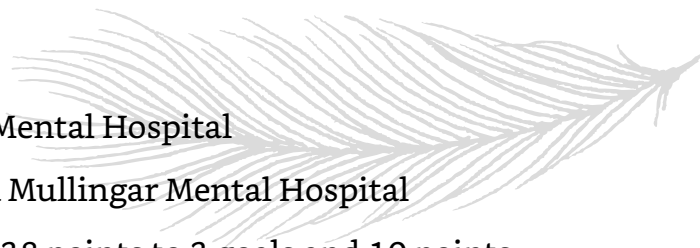


Fifteen stone in weight.
All three of them, I was informed,
Cases of schizophrenia.

There was a rumour
That their centre-half forward
Was an alcoholic solicitor
Who, in a lounge bar misunderstanding,
Had castrated his best friend
But that he had no memory of it.
He had meant well - it was said.
His best friend had to emigrate
To Nigeria.

To my surprise,
I did not flinch in the goals.
I made three or four spectacular saves,
Diving full stretch to turn
A certain goal around the corner,
Leaping high to tip another certain goal
Over the bar for a point.
It was my knowing
That you were standing on the sideline
That gave me the necessary motivation -
That will to die
That is as essential to sportsmen as to artists.
More than anybody it was you
I wanted to mesmerise, and after the game -





Grangegorman Mental Hospital
Having defeated Mullingar Mental Hospital
By 14 Goals and 38 points to 3 goals and 10 points -
Sniffing your approval, you shook hands with me.
'Well played, son'.

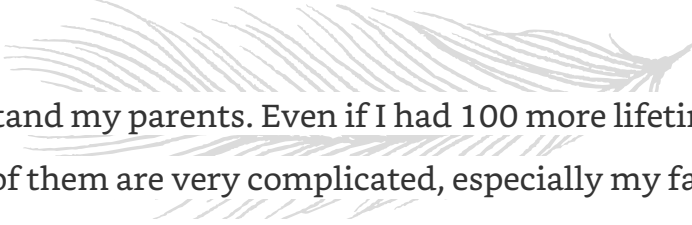
I may not have been mesmeric
But I had not been mediocre.
In your eyes I had achieved something at last.
On my twenty-first birthday I had played on a winning team
The Grangegorman Mental Hospital team.
Seldom if ever again in your eyes
Was I to rise to these heights.

Background:

Durcan's relationship with his father was a difficult one. In an interview with Alan Gilsean, he described it as follows:

"My father used to say to me from as early as I can remember that: 'Nemesis will follow you all the days of your life.' She was the Greek God of bad luck - and sure enough, he was right.

From a fairly early age, I was aware that certain kinds of people disapproved of me - particularly certain kinds of male. These men had the idea that boys had to be soldiers, chaste soldiers, and had to fit into a mould and if they didn't there was something not quite right. My father would say: 'Paul is a sissy. Come on, be a man.' I was aware of his deep disapproval. I spent all my life



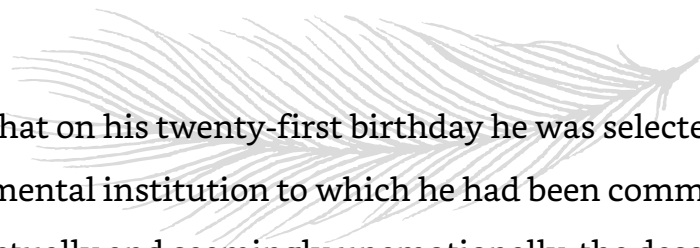
trying to understand my parents. Even if I had 100 more lifetimes, I still wouldn't. Both of them are very complicated, especially my father. I remember when he was in his early 40s he was a laughing, convivial man and a great storyteller. I remember so many rich moments with him. But then as I got older the picture darkened. He himself became a circuit court judge in Mayo and Galway but stayed living in Dublin and went every week. He took it very seriously. He would stay in hotel rooms never speaking to anyone, and over a period of time that is a tough way to live.

When I was 10, he began to be somewhat problematic. When I think about it there were gratuitous beatings and he was incredibly severe about things like examinations. If I hadn't got second or third place it was bad news, and sometimes he would take the strap off his trousers and beat me. A man has to be so very complicated if he takes a school report for a 10-year-old that seriously.”

Summary and analysis:

The title, 'Sport', implies fun, unity, teamwork and even success. However, the theme of this poem belies the title. Durcan explores the difficult relationship he had with his father and his own desire – ultimately doomed – to please and impress this austere figure.

The opening lines set the tone. Durcan tells us that his father had few hopes of him but that sport was the one area in which the young man could still make a positive impression. He plays with the word 'field', meaning both a playing field and other spheres of activity.




Durcan tells us that on his twenty-first birthday he was selected to play football for the mental institution to which he had been committed. Although this is related factually and seemingly unemotionally, the description is nonetheless terribly sad. When we think of twenty-first birthdays we think of a coming of age and a time for celebration with family and friends. For Durcan, the height of his achievement at this time seems to have been being chosen to represent Grangegorman Mental Hospital. He repeats the phrase 'Mental Hospital' twice, thus allowing us no escape from the sadness of his situation. He goes on to state that he was a patient, lest we confuse him with a staff member. There is no attempt to sugar-coat the reality but neither is there a deliberate wringing of our emotions.

Durcan addresses his father directly in this poem, which creates a sense of intimacy. There may be accusation, certainly, but there is also a closeness. The personal nature of the poem is reinforced by Durcan's repetition of the words 'I' and 'me' and 'my': they appear twenty two times in total. It is clear how much the events of that day affected him.

Durcan seems oddly grateful that his father drove 'all the way down' to watch the match. He even tells us that the distance was fifty miles – not a long way by today's standards but quite a big deal on the winding roads of 1960's Ireland.

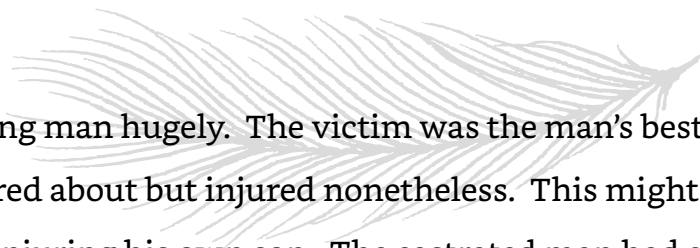
The young man's desire to impress his father is clear. He is 'fearful' that he will let his team and his father down. 'Fearful' is a rather unusual word to use in these circumstances. Normally a player would be anxious to please or hopeful that things would go well, but 'fearful' seems a little strong. It implies a backstory in which the young Durcan is frightened of his father's response to



failure.

The tone now changes to one of black humour. The Mullingar forwards attacking the goal are described in almost comical terms. They have ‘gapped teeth, red faces, / Oily, frizzy hair, bushy eyebrows.’ The inconsequential remark about their all suffering from schizophrenia adds to the surreal nature of the event on the one hand – it is a game of football after all and the psychiatric wellbeing or otherwise of the competitors should have nothing to do with it – yet it also reminds us of the sadness behind all of this. It’s not just a normal game of football but is a part of the treatment of a group of vulnerable and disturbed young men.

There is a rumour that the centre forward for the opposition had castrated his friend in a ‘lounge bar misunderstanding’. This is another example of black humour. The word ‘misunderstanding’ is associated with trivial matters yet here we have a man savagely and brutally attacked, and in such a way as to emasculate him. We must always be careful when reading poetry in that the speaker may appear to be the poet but may also play with the truth. Durcan felt under pressure to be a certain type of man (see background) and it was his father who was the main instigator of the ‘be a man’ comments. Can we view it as significant, therefore, that the castrator in the poem is a solicitor (Durcan’s father was a solicitor and then a judge)? Does the word ‘misunderstanding’ mitigate Durcan’s father’s actions? Is there an acknowledgement that his father didn’t know what he was doing when he treated his son so harshly? Was he aware that he was unmanning his son by refusing to accept that he had chosen a different path in life? The castrator had no memory of the event and had meant well, and again this makes us wonder if it is a reference to Durcan’s father who may have emasculated his son in ways that were not even worthy of his attention or memory but which



affected the young man hugely. The victim was the man's best friend, so it was somebody he cared about but injured nonetheless. This might be compared to Durcan's father injuring his own son. The castrated man had emigrated – or left the world in which he grew up. Durcan may not have fled as far as Nigeria (England hardly counts as emigration these days) but he left his family metaphorically in that he was distanced from them by their committing him to a psychiatric hospital, particularly when he never believed that he had a mental illness requiring treatment.

The game itself is described in terms of success and 'spectacular saves' by Durcan in goal. He says that the knowledge his father was on the sideline spurred him on to greater achievements than he would normally have been capable of. Durcan's need to 'mesmerise' his father seems unnaturally needy: he is desperate for his father's approval. When that approval does come, it is qualified by the formality of the father's minimalist 'Well played, son' and his shaking hands with the young man instead of clapping him on the shoulder or even hugging him. The father is described as 'sniffing' his praise: a word that is more usually associated with disapproval than with approval. However, the son is delighted nonetheless, even if this is the first time he has ever succeeded in his father's eyes: 'I had achieved something at last'.

The poem ends on a sad note as Durcan, looking back, reflects that he was seldom to 'rise to these heights' in his father's opinion again: a strange fact when you consider that the events described took place when the young man was committed to a mental hospital at the time.