

*Regarding the recent passing of friends Marea Teski and Toni Flores, the ever-gentle Miles Richardson said to me that it was enough to "make you want to stand and shake a fist." I agree. Death enrages and defeats. Sometimes it inspires retaliation. "Killing Death [That Bastard's Been Here Again]" engages death in a poetic mode properly called romantic irony. Its absurdity is therefore licensed. The ethnographic setting in this case is an Irish pub. It's very easy to find someone in a classic Irish pub who will talk about anything, if not someone who is an expert on everything. Smooth and influential talk—Blarney—is common in such settings. Sometimes deceitful, it is seldom pure malarkey. Blarney draws its mark in fact from a sacred stone. And the best Blarney-talk always contains a bittersweet truth. In this case, a recent passing creates great sadness and raises the ancient and perennial prospect of giving personified death a dose of its own project—of defeating death by killing it. The magic weapon is language. Talking is balm for the survivor's grief and it protects others from more of the same, even as it chokes the life out of death itself.*

*"My Friend Henry" is a more conventional lament about the passing of the interconnections of people and places that define the times of our lives, that give us personal history. "St. Patrick's Day" continues this elegiac theme and speaks from the grave to a lover about the greens of life and pining for them in the withering erasures of death—the need for remembering what once was in celebrations of the heart on a very green day. "Show Me a Sign" gasps at the enormity of death run amuck and yet finds something wonderfully unkillable in the wreckage: a personal expression of solidarity, the deeply motivated need to continue life and limb, and the prospects for doing so in a world more united, more conscious of its interpersonal commonalities. "Torn Shawl" is a glimpse of what was lost in other terms and places, no less tragic in consequence to the individuals involved than the World Trade Towers, Pennsylvania, and Pentagon murders, and perhaps an empathetic measure of the particular stories of the thousands of victims from so many cultures and places that fell to earth in fire on that fateful September day. "Pipers" is a query of the innocent about death and its music, a refrain assembled from a parade of symbols a week later that*

*marks both past and future in a stew of heightened consciousness. Should we have seen it coming? Among many other defining moments in our past, the uncommon horrors of World War I thickened the intellectual air on the Left Bank with questions of history and the nature of being human. That's a form of anthropology we contemplate regularly: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going from here?" Deep ideas. The trick is to put them into practice in a way that promotes unity and cheats death, not the other way around.*

*Boston, Massachusetts, August 15, 1998*

### KILLING DEATH [THAT BASTARD'S BEEN HERE AGAIN]

[hushed, deliberate speech, leaning over table] *Death, you say. Another sad-timing rip up the gullet. Let me let you in on something. A few of my pubmates at the Purple Shamrock know that I have myself tried to **kill** Death many times. I've cursed and spat upon him...[sips beer, waves barkeep to table for fresh round]...worried him in my dreams. Starved him by doing healthy and holy things. He seems unfightable, too big to fight. But he has to be fought. There can be no caching of arms on the premise that Death is just the rolling over of life. That's a lying cover for a hunger the likes of which no mortal man ever sees until it's too late. You'll do well to keep your guard up and your aim straight. And never shoot at the heart. **This greedy Bastard has no center!** He is without purpose or plan, save three: Eat what is loved. Nip viciously at the spirit of every caring thing nearby. Strike at night if possible.*

[louder, engaging nearby patrons] ***Yeah, Death is cruel and cold and, as we know [sips beer], unrelenting.** But there is a secret that has come to some of the Irish through the backwinds and corridors of family lore. It's an idea as old as thought itself—older than shamans, it may be the first magic, and it can set the Bastard on his heels. [sips beer, points forefinger in air] **Death, we have come to learn, is afraid of words!** And he doesn't care much for music either. Death rots with every song sung at him*

*and just the hint of wit in the room can sting him in the eyes. It works out to be about a pound of words for a pound of the Devil's flesh. [quiet laughter] Truly now, the right words, danced out, can really give him a knock. And if you need to slow him down, a song sung true in the light of the moon can lock the Hellion in ice for a week or more. You can add an extra day to his freeze for each really good song and dance performed immediately thereafter.*

*So if the truth be known, wordsmithing smites the Reaper and saves our souls. [sips beer] That's why we talk in our sleep. Why we wrap our babies in poems in the evening and sing all night for the dearly departed. Why our heroes have always been talkers and writers and such. Why we shout on the battlefield and etch the names of the dead on stones and walls and speak of them often. Why the Holy Word is our castle, comfort, and emblem. Why poets are Saviors and speaking ill of the dead is absolutely forbidden. Why the wake is a mighty sop for talking through tears—a festival of toasting, a solidarity of words. **We have reason to be heard!** [shakes fist in the air, takes long draught]*

***So tell everyone you know that that Bastard's been here again. Tell them twice. Then sing it to them and tell them to pass it on. Maybe we can talk the Reaper Thief into his own grave. Maybe we can kill him with what he knows least and therefore cannot resist. Maybe we can kill him with **meaning born of heartache**....*** [finishes beer, wipes lips with wrist, bangs glass on the table]

[hushed voice, leans into the table again] *More on this next time we meet. [louder] **Barkeep?** [waves hand, cuts arc in the air with forefinger] **Another round for my friends here. Another round for everybody. Another round for everybody except that sneaky Reaper Bastard hanging in the bushes outside....***