

Fifteen Silver Shillings

Riona McCormack

1842, Aughnacloy

Fifteen silver shillings, that is the price. The mill overseer counts them into McCann's hand, bright from the mint. New coins for the dead.

"You're lucky," says the overseer. "They pay only twelve up at Dunbar's."

The dead child's age will go down in the book as ten; this is a lie.

In the scutching room, the men at the flax rollers are coughing and feeding, feeding and coughing. Wooden blades whick up and down. McCann sits at his berth and gathers the retted stems from his load and the other men do not raise their eyes to his. Beneath the blades and the pump of the shaft, there is the groaning of the great wheel turning. The coins weigh heavy in his pocket.

The dead child has been washed of dust from the flaxmill and laid out on the table. A cloth covers the worst of the wheel's damage. McCann brings a stool to the child's side.

When she comes in from the bleaching fields, McCann's wife holds out a reddened palm.

"John," she says, when he does not move. "Where is it?"

"I threw it away."

"Away where?"

"In the river."

She strikes him then, hard across the mouth. McCann raises his forearms over his face. His lip is cut; he tongues blood from it. When he lowers his arms, she is gone.

In the corner, the living child stirs the fire and is silent.

He finds her wet to her skirts in the river, searching. In turned-up sleeves he wades in alongside her. The water is winter-cold.

Together, they retrieve nine of the shillings. In the dark, on his knees, he wrings out her heavy skirts. He can feel her shiver against him.

She holds his elbow back across the Mulcahy fields, to where the fire from their own cabin shows like a light at sea.

"We will name the next one John," she says. Upstream, unseen, the millwheel grinds on.