

Crash Centre

I used to straighten the line the instant
I entered it: the spin pass from Fitzy
at Fly Half to Jan, the First, then me
at Second Centre—there was our tendency
to drift, but I took the ball head-on:
not scissors move or counter angle,
but because the others were imperceptibly
drifting towards the touch line with every pass,
when I took it straight it was a cleaving.

“You’re what they call a *crash centre*!”
my father said. It was JPR Williams
counter attacking against the All Blacks
with no gum shield, bizarre Boer War
side burns, his socks round his ankles,
unafraid as a holy fool, it was Trevor Ringland
pretty boy blond, cowed hair of a novice,
but taking the ball into contact, and through, it was
the one direct thing I knew to do.

Sometimes my opposite number would be
horizontal in air
trying to tackle me, and his hands
clattering off my thighs as I went through
was sound barrier, triggering the G force of
they will not stop me,
decisive as a hand-off to the face—
will not take me down.

Sometimes I made the line myself.
Once, after carving 40 yards from our own 22,
attacking out of defense—made shit of them—
the only man left ahead of me the Full Back
—a boy, in all that space—
the confidence to finish it deserted me,
and another ran in for the try.

Whenever Father Terence appeared on the touch
line in his black robe, he attracted teenaged apostles.
All through 1989 and 1990, he side stepped
and wove, wheedling: “but, you’re a *poet*!
Rugby’s so boring. I don’t understand team sports.
Wouldn’t it be better if, when they caught someone,
like the Bacchante in Greek times, instead
of just tackling them, they tore them apart?”

I left the team in fifth year to go and talk
to him three times a week about Rilke.
Ravens wheeled from the battlements
as I walked across to the monastery.
Half past three to five in the afternoon
was the lull: dead time. Touching time
in the reception room.

I had loved seeing our wings, Eoin
or Andrew, running in clean, untackled,
knowing: *I made the extra man*.
My shins grass-matted, a stud dent,
blood-trickle among the mud,
and he: completely clean.
I wanted to be that classy winger,
but I was proud to do the one thing I could do.

When I crashed the gap, when I took the tackle
—sustained by it, almost—slowing, but keeping
going, giving high knee-hits,
studs cutting the air, as more and more
of them dragged me down, I felt the wind
of support coming

our forwards: Egan, the leggy Open Side
Flanker, who scythe-tackled at ankle level
and was always first to the breakdown
shouldering me, slotting in, driving the maul,
the bind of Fabo's stone hands
then Nuge the Number 8, the Locks,
and at last Bromhead the Hooker,
and the Props, Seán and Psycho,
out of the engine room core: first in and last out
of every scrum, picking themselves out of the mud
to run across field all day long to find you.

I found myself at the centre
of a human shield, what it might have been
in the war turtle of Leonidas—
in the steam and maelstrom
our heads close, touching, as if planning,
a hand binding you, a hand ripping back the hands
that reached for you in the dark, an urgent voice,
pass it back, or: on your left, Glocky—Left side!
We connected to our own kinesis,
harnessed it, and drove forward.

On the Junior Cup team, my job was:
even if you are tackled, taken out,
create space as you punch through
for someone else, for our wings
or pass it back inside to Jan,
never give a hospital pass,
but be the continuity, like being
the place where a negative inheritance
stops. That was what I had loved:
ceasing lateral drift. Straighten the line.