

KEVIN CLARK

The Ex-Priest

for Joe Ryan

(i)

Chest-high in a sunshaft,
the wide and hollow stump
draws him deeper
like the first recollection

of an old memory:
the ornate signature of insects
chiseled on every inner inch
is the old cathedral of his childhood.

Life-size Christs stare
from the walls, tongues of flame
blazing like certitude over each
replica of the one true face.

To his left, the Child instructs
his parents, the Boy walks
among lambs. To his right, the Man
whips profiteers from the Temple.

(ii)

He is an altarboy kneeling
for the Eucharist. Above
the altar, through a veil
of frankincense, a stained-glass

window leads a rod of light

to the floor where he prays,
head bowed. The same light
draws his gaze to the base

of the stump where a dead cat
lies in a fright, its mouth
frozen sharp and open, a beetle
twisting on its blue tongue.

The cat's coat completes
the memory: black
as the thumb of the priest
who would smudge his brow

with the oiled pitch of palm
leaves, the sign of the cross worn
for death every Ash Wednesday,
turning shadow by dinner.

(iii)

By dusk, the forest-shock
of night has seized him.
The trees are dead quiet.
Silence hangs like air.

He cannot see to step. He thinks
this again: the moment
of resignation swelling
in his chest like the cavernous

dark breath of the church
after Midnight Mass.
The single black-robed figure
of a boy can be seen:

the care he takes extending
the curled rod over the last few
flames of the holy candles!
How he kneels each time he passes

the tabernacle! His love sings
like the whispering sound
of his robe as he goes quickly
into the sacristy for the special

blessing. Soon
he will attend the holy cards,
dust the delicate tables, and
then, fervent and safe, step

like a priest into the night air!