

# 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!