

# John Hewitt

## THE GREEN SHOOT

In my harsh city, when a Catholic priest,  
known by his collar, padded down our street,  
I'd trot beside him, pull my schoolcap  
off and fling it on the ground and stamp on it.

I'd catch my enemy, that errand boy,  
grip his torn jersey and admonish him  
first to admit his faith and, when he did,  
repeatedly to curse the Pope of Rome;

schooled in such duties by my bolder friends;  
yet not so many hurried years before,  
when I slipped in from play one Christmas Eve  
my mother bathed me at the kitchen fire,

and wrapped me in a blanket for the climb  
up the long stairs; and suddenly we heard  
the carol singers somewhere in the dark,  
their voices sharper, for the frost was hard.

My mother carried me through the dim hall  
into the parlour, where the only light  
upon the patterned wall and furniture  
came from the iron lamp across the street;

and there looped round the lamp the singers stood,  
but not on snow in grocers' calendars,  
singing a song I liked until I saw  
my mother's lashes were all bright with tears.

Out of this mulch of ready sentiment,  
gritty with threads of flinty violence,  
I am the green shoot asking for the flower,  
soft as the feathers of the snow's cold swans.