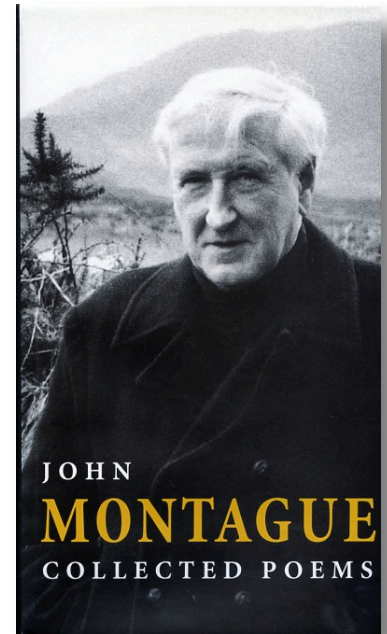


## The Cage

### **Background**

John Montague's parents left Ireland in the 1920s, hoping to find wealth and success in America. The reality was very different to the dream and the family came to live in the poor area of Brooklyn, New York. In 1929, after a difficult labour, John was born. His parents, unhappy in their marriage and living in poverty, sent the four year old James back to Co. Tyrone to live with two maiden aunts. His brothers were sent to live with their grandmother. Montague's mother returned to Ireland when he was seven, but Montague remained with his aunts. In a 2010 interview on RTE radio, he explained the situation as follows: 'I think there was a subtle kind of psychological warfare going on between the aunts who wanted to keep me....and my mother who didn't have enough money to reclaim me'.



James Montague, the poet's father, remained in Brooklyn for the next twenty years before retiring and returning Garvaghey.

### **Summary and analysis:**

#### **Title:**

The title of the poem immediately brings to mind images of imprisonment, sadness and frustration. The poet's father worked in a booth in the underground station in Brooklyn, separated from the public by an iron grille which resembled a cage. He was trapped in his job, in misery, in poverty and in alcoholism. His confinement was both physical and mental.

#### **Stanza One:**

The poem opens conversationally, almost as if the poet is discussing his father with someone who didn't know him but has enquired about him. He answers the imagined question bluntly and simply, 'My father, the least happy / man I have known'. This is a very negative statement and must have been difficult for the poet to admit. He goes on to explain that his father never lost the paleness that came of working underground in the

New York subway system for so many years. It was as if he was in prison, missing out on life in the outside world, a fact which is reinforced by the description of the "lost years". They were also years in which James Montague was lost to his son. In a newspaper interview Montague says of his father: 'He returned to Ireland in 1952, so that was 18 years in between I didn't see him, so I was inclined afterwards to be kind to him I think. One time when I was working away at my typewriter, in those later years, he came into the room to me, and he said, "I frittered away all my chances, John. All my chances"'.

The onomatopoeic 'shudder' in line 7 refers to the sound of the trains on the lines, shaking the ground as they pass. However, the word 'shudder' also brings to mind revulsion and horror.

### **Stanza Two:**

The word 'But' at the beginning of this stanza seems to offer some hope that all may not have been as bad as the picture painted in the first stanza. This hope is not realised, however. The poet's father is described as a 'traditional Irishman', in other words a white Catholic with a fondness for drink. Every day he was 'released from his grille' like an animal. This animal imagery, introduced in the title, is reinforced here and again in line 14 where the father is described as drinking himself into 'brute oblivion.' The only way the poet's father can find happiness is to remove himself completely from the misery of his existence. He has no happy home and his dreams have come to nothing so he drinks to escape the frustration and isolation he feels in his daily life. Ironically, he has created another cage for himself by doing this. His body becomes a cage too, one which he has created for himself.

### **Stanza Three:**

The opening of the third stanza again raises our hopes for a moment. The words, "And yet" make us wonder if there is still a chance of happiness for the poet's father. We soon learn that there is not. There seems to be something sarcastic in the use of the words 'traditional Irishman'. The stereotype of the Irish is that they are frequently drunk and this certainly seems to have been true of Montague's father who could manage to pull himself together enough to go to work 'most mornings.' The picture of his hungover father 'extending his smile' to his neighbours in the all-white, Catholic neighbourhood is an interesting one. Did James Montague feel superior to those who were neither white nor

Catholic? There is an implication that he was particular about the company he kept, which is ironic, considering his own situation.

This stanza can be read in a serious way, imagining the poet admiring his father's resilience in getting up each morning and facing the world. In a 1988 *Irish University Review* interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Montague says that his 'poor old battered father' was 'an intensely believing Catholic' and that this faith gave him great comfort.

#### **Stanzas Four and Five:**

These stanzas run together as Montague tells of his father's return to Tyrone after more than twenty years in America. The poet's father wants to walk the 'fields of Garvaghey / to see hawthorn on the summer / hedges, as though / he had never left' but of course it is a dream that cannot be realised. The run-on lines here capture the sense of ease and freedom as father and son walk together. Although James Montague may not wish to acknowledge the years that he spent in Brooklyn, his son cannot smile with him, cannot recapture lost time. The father who comes back to his home place is not someone he knows now, not someone who played any significant part in his upbringing. They cannot 'smile in the shared complicity / of a dream'. The flowers may grow in the same places on the same road but little else remains unchanged in the twenty years since the poet's father left Tyrone. The time that has passed cannot be recaptured. Montague refers to the story of Odysseus who spent years away from home, fighting in the Trojan war. When he returned, it was time for his grown son, Telemachus, to leave home. The poet is an adult now and is ready to move on with his life. His father is too late.

#### **Stanza Six:**

In this final stanza, the poet speaks of how he often thinks of his father when he travels on the subway or the underground. He imagines that he can see his father's bald head, marked by the scar of a car accident, trapped behind the bars of the booth he worked in. It is a sad image for the poet to have of his late father, one in which his father is forever in the cage of his workplace, far away from his home country. We know the poet's father has died because he refers to his father's forehead as being 'ghostly'. This word, 'ghostly' also reminds us of stanza one in which Montague refers to his father's 'pallor'. It is interesting to note the poet's use of the word 'descend' in this stanza; he descends into the underground but also into memories and feelings of guilt.

**Themes:**

The poet's relationship with his father.

Exile, the difficulties faced by the Irish who emigrated to America.

Loneliness, isolation, the feeling of being trapped

**Tone:**

The tone at the start of the poem is conversational and factual.

The becomes quite sarcastic when the poet is talking about his father being a 'traditional' Irish man.

In the fourth and fifth stanza, the poet shows some empathy for his father's situation.

The poem ends on a sad, realistic note. There is a sense of hopelessness as the poet reveals that his lasting memory of his father will be of a trapped and defeated man.

