

# Critical thinking on three poems about mothers and homeland

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



My family used to own a farm that took up about 120 acres in northeastern Texas. The nearest town was a sleepy hamlet called Ector, that had about 800 people in it when I was a kid; the town has grown smaller since then. Bonham was further down the road, the seat of Fannin County. When I was a kid, you could go into Bonham to bowl or watch a movie, or even shop at Wal-Mart. But we didn't do any of those things when I was a kid, and we went down to the farm. Instead, we stayed there - first in the old, rickety farmhouse that stayed up for a decade or two past its expiration date. Later, my great-aunt and uncle bought a modular home and put it on the property, because buying that was cheaper than renovating the house and adding indoor plumbing would have been. I remember many different images of that farm: the stubborn rows of Granny Smith apple trees that grew just to the north of the house, decades after my great-grandmother had even used the apples for cooking, let alone planted them; the wobbly fencing that held the cattle that my great-aunt and uncle raised inside the barn and the pasture nearby; the dangerous ladder that led up to the barn's attic, where we would throw down hay to the waiting pickup truck; the peculiar stalls that waited for horses that were no longer on the land; the odd silence that comes when using an outhouse, instead of the liquid echo from the waiting toilet bowl in my own bathroom; the weird sadness of watching my first quail fall from the sky after I had killed it with a shotgun. Now, the land has been sold to another family, as none of my mother's generation could afford the taxes or upkeep on it in addition to the costs of their own homes and families, and so now it is part of someone else's story. A distant part of me wonders why we

let that land go, but then I realized that individual pieces of property are losing their individuality.

Here's an example: when we used to drive out to the farm, we would go through a tiny town called Bells, which appeared on a wall map of the United States that I had, even though its population was about the size of Ector. I asked my great-uncle why it was on a map that large, and he told me that it was because two railroads intersected there. When I drive over a railroad crossing now, I just feel the metal annoying my tires. I never think of the vast network of rails and ties that still cross the nation, even though they do not dominate transportation like they once did. In Bells, though, there was a shack without a company name on it. If you stopped there, you could get eight burgers for \$1. They weren't very big, but they were amazingly good. You could eat three or four, even if you were very young, before you were full. Nowadays, that shack is long gone, replaced by a Dairy Queen. That shack, when it was there, was the only shack that made burgers with that recipe and with those ingredients in the entire world, or so I thought. The HungrBuster you get at the Dairy Queen in Bells is made according to the same instruction manual that guides food preparation at every Dairy Queen on the planet. Now, there is no reason to drive to Bells for hamburgers, although there used to be.

It is no longer necessary to drive across America to see most of what is important to the country. Every 30 minutes, the main visual stimuli simply repeat themselves: Chili's, McDonald's, SuperTarget, Wal-Mart, a mall, Dick's Sporting Goods, and (every now and then) a Bass Pro Shop. The Olive

Garden, the Texas Roadhouse (even far outside Texas), Exxon, Texaco, Starbucks. It is true that if you never go to Arizona, you will never see the Grand Canyon. On the other hand, you'll save gas, and you'll still have the same range of choices when it comes to restaurants.

In other words, our homelands have become impossible to find, because the United States has been covered with an endlessly drifting set of photocopies. Thank goodness we can program our home addresses into our TomToms, because without them, it would be difficult to remember which Kentucky Fried Chicken location is nearest to our own home. In the three poems under consideration here, though (Male's " My Mother's Homeland," Morejon's " Mother," and Irish's " For Her Grandmother," we read about three maternal figures who refuse to surrender their identity to an unforgiving and apathetic milieu. The sense of home and of personal identity is so important to the three mothers in these poems that they literally scratch and claw against their surroundings to create a sense of individuality, of belonging, of uniqueness. While these three characters were fighting more against harsh elements than against food wrapped in paper and Netflix boxes cloning themselves rapidly across the Union, from sea to shining sea, the struggle is similar - and it requires just as much tenacity and vigilance.

Male's " My Mother's Homeland" starts out with what one might consider an actual surrender of the notion of homeland. Her mother says that " your homeland is any place,/preferably the place where you die" (2-3). This reminds me of those distant childhood years when we would pack into the car on either a breezy Memorial Day or a really chilly gray day between

Christmas and New Year's and head to two cemeteries: one where my great-grandfather was buried, and the other where my great-grandmother (different couples) was buried. In May, we would put down a flag at one and spring flowers at the other; in December, we would put down fake poinsettias, in the hopes that by the next May, they would still be there. The caretakers would pick them up before we came back, though. In between, we would pass the cemetery where my mother's father was buried, but we wouldn't stop; in fact, I didn't know he was buried there until I was much older. But the idea that you come to rest in your homeland, instead of being born there, speaks volumes about her mother's notion of what home is. Instead of being where one enters the world, it becomes what one makes of the world. This is why the mother buys "the most arid land,/the saddest landscape,/the driest grass" (4-6) so that "beside the wretched tree" (7) she could begin "to build her homeland" (8). She does not want anything that has been started or formed by anyone else; instead, she wants to create her own wonder out of the world. She progresses "by fits and starts" (9) until she has a house that she claims as her homeland. It is interesting that the mother is so intent on adding structure that she must occasionally remember to add "holes to let air squeeze in" (11). She seems so focused on providing shelter that she forgets to remember comfort, so focused on her legacy that she almost forgets to let it live.

Morejon's "Mother" seems quite similar to Male's in a number of ways, perhaps most memorably in that she also creates her homeland in an inhospitable environment. Instead of a garden, for example, she has only "

cliff-edged islands/floating, under the sun" (2-3); she was left with "lots of garottes" (6) instead of a "clean branch" (5). Instead of the "ivory bedroom" (11) or the "wicker-furnished drawing-room" (12) or the "silent stained-glass of the tropics" (13), she only could run "barefoot/on the whitewash of the orphanages" (7-8). In other words, she has none of the material wealth that went to the most privileged of the colonial residents of the tropics. Instead, though, she has a power of personality that far exceeds the glory found in large houses or expansive verandahs: "her singing" can "rock the faith of [the speaker's] insides," allowing her mother to "lift up her head of an unheard queen" (14-16), finding majesty in personality and passion and love.

Irish's "For a Grandmother" highlights a paradox that anyone who remembers their grandparents can appreciate. From the time when we enter their world, our grandparents appear old to us. Because they have always looked old, it is difficult for us, particularly when we are children, to conceive of them as children, or even as young adults. Even the places they inhabit seem much larger than our own. My own paternal grandparents lived in a three-story house, which I remember, as a four-year-old seeming immense. The kitchen seemed the size of a gymnasium, and the back yard seemed like an eternally golden spot where we could play badminton or shuffle around with children's versions of golf clubs, chasing balls for hours. But then they moved out of it, when I was seven, and when I drove back by it as an adult, it looked as small as the three-story tower the firemen use to train for accidents, and the yard was as big as any semi-detached house in that

neighborhood had, which was to say that it was quite small. Irish's speaker, though, allows her grandmother a full life, beginning with the "matutinal fragrance/borne on soft, nascent rays/and unpolluted breezes" (5-7), adorned with "pure, pink petals" (3), a lyrical instance of alliteration that allows the reader to slow down and dwell on the innocence with which all of us should begin life, even if we are not permitted to. At noon, which the speaker ascribes to adolescence, the "adolescent eyes/now wide awake to beauty in humility" (12-13) took in her own abilities, represented by "petals/of joyous loving and service" (14-15) that form a "complete personality" (18). Near the end of her life, in evening, her exterior still shows "the secret of an inner self,/the essence of a deeper faith,/the texture of a rose's wealth" (21-23). In other words, despite her aged appearance, the grandmother's beauty of personality is still visible - not just to the speaker, but to all of those who know the grandmother.

All three of the speakers refer to maternal figures of considerable strength and character. It takes a powerful personality to chisel a homeland in a new, bare land, particularly when one has very little in the way of wealth. Instead of marble columns or fine tapestries, one must rely on love and integrity and determination to build a home. Luckily, all three of these women have this character trait - and all three of the speakers notice this, and laud it in the women who form the subject of their poetry. Morejon and Male write more about the specific environment in which these women had to create their lives and build their legacies, while Irish writes more about the inner person with her grandmother. The figurative language in all three poems is

powerful; in the cases of Morejon and Male, the figurative language primarily describes the external settings, while in Irish's case, the extended metaphor of the flowers serves to express the beauty inside the grandmother, not the place where she lives. The most powerful device throughout all three poems is the image-based metaphor, which time and again serves to express the fragile solidity (or the solid fragility) that characterizes every woman who takes in the sheer difficulty of life and decides that, with her love for those around her and with her determination to make that love into a shelter for those she loves, she will turn bare rock into a garden that rivals Eden.

### **Works Cited**

Irish, J. A. George. "For a Grandmother."

Male, Belkis Cuza. "My Mother's Homeland."

Morejon, Nancy. "Mother."