

Martin Robertson

A Ballad

from the Greek

That time we started drinking
early on Saturday
and went on over Sunday
and never stopped all day.

Monday morning early
we found the drink was out
—the Captain had to pick on me
to fetch another lot.

I didn't know the way, though
—a stranger in these parts.
The roads I took turned into lanes,
lanes dwindled into paths,
and where should the path bring me to
but a church in a churchyard?

A little church, with few graves
lying close together
—brothers and cousins, I suppose,
sticking by one another,

but one was at a distance,
separately made.
Before I even saw it
I trod right on the head,
and then I heard the dead man
how he groaned, and said

“Are you a Turk? Trample me then,
foul me if you're a Jew,
but if you're of my own blood
let me speak with you.”

“You’re dead and laid into your grave
and yet you speak and groan.
Is it the earth that weighs on you,
that and your heavy stone?”

“It’s not the earth that weighs on me
nor yet my heavy stone.
Was there nowhere for you to tread
but on my head alone?

Wasn’t I a lad too once,
as likely as they come?
Hadn’t I my ten-palm sword
and my fathom gun?
A likely lad, a bonny fighter
by nights without a moon.

Three nights and days together
two-score Turks I killed,
and two-score more took prisoner
fighting in the hills.

But then the sword broke in my hand,
the steel snapped clean in two.
A Turkish dog came riding,
his scimitar he drew,

he swung it high to strike me
—I caught and held it high,
but he pulled out his pistol
and laid me where I lie.
Friend, you’re a christened man,
weep for me, weep for me.”