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by Nonnie Augustine

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The Liverpool census in 1851 lists him:
Thirteen years old, Irish. Occupation: beggar.

Only that. I will do more for him.
I will see him in torn jacket and too-short pants
singing all day of the fields, the cliffs, the Shannon
and Liffey, the Clares, Annies, and saucy Rosies.
I will give him a pure tenor and a brother clicking bones,
keeping time while he's tuned to the doings in the street
and to his big brother's sweet, hungry voice.
Two stevedores march past on their way to the docks.
Their clothes gray and their caps grimy, they are tired, silent
men who have no time, money, or even a listen to give them.

Here is a man coming through in a well-cut coat,
and his hat is a gentleman's hat. The boys eye him
slow down and stop. Sure, but he's English
thinks the singer and the rhythm of the bones
never falter though the player is thinking of boots.
They finish their tune, stand, stare, and wait.
"I'm a music teacher and I thank you for your music."
He smiles, opens his purse, and hands them coins.
"Get some food, go home, rest your fingers, rest your voice."
The kind man walks on and the beggars are done for the day.

The census taker's fine script hurled itself at me; his facts
smashed something too soft in me, but I've caught these boys, given
them music and food. Tomorrow I'll give them warmth.

