

Human Frailty

by Steve Finan

Conceptio culpa - Conception is sin

My grandfather was a man of flint. He had only daughters and longed for a son. God would not give him a son for God knows what he would have done to damage a man child. He married his middle daughter, my mother, to Artur — who he thought would have made a good son. But Artur was a man of flawed iron. He had no love for my mother, or for any living thing. My grandfather mistook cruelty for a strong will. My mother, a happy and obliging woman, so they say, became a bruised peach. But she had a streak of her father's contrariness. She rebelled in her own way. She fucked the neighbour's 18-year-old son. A strapping, dark-eyed youth named Estrad who laughed often and was a great favourite with the womanfolk. He was my father. Artur killed him with a mason's hammer. The blood was on all four walls and the ceiling and flowed out under the door, so they say. They hanged Artur. No-one mourned.

Nasci pena — birth is pain

Bastard child. I killed my mother. My grandfather never grew weary of telling me these things. She deserved death, he said. A whore. She died giving birth. In the end, they ripped me from her. There was blood on all four walls and the ceiling, so they say. My grandfather stretched me on the rack of a childhood that was to have been the torture instrument reserved for his own son. I became a man able to endure. This made me strong, in all the wrong ways. This made me hide inside my heart. To the day he died my grandfather remained as inflexible as the rod he beat me with. I killed my mother. I killed my mother, so they say.

Labor vita — life is toil

As soon as I could, I fled. I took the first job that seemed like escape. Down into Hell. I worked the pit, I hewed the black coal. All the wrongs of my young life I would erase and my tool would be labour as hard as a man can endure. I would be free if I could

support myself. I would marry, I would be none of the things I'd grown with. There is a woman for every man, even a bastard child, a mother-killer. So they say. But to my surprise I found Devona, the sweetest of girls. She tended the nets along the coast. I brought my money to her, I tried to find the words to tell how much love I had. I worked harder than any man. I worked till the sweat made pale rivers on my dark-dusted back. I gave her everything except the children she needed.

Necesse mori — death is inevitable

I endure. I learned this skill in my grandfather's house, I proved it in the pit. Now I will show how a man dies. The dust got in my chest, so I say. The pit owner insists I have lung rot and it is not his affair. I do not have money to bring a doctor to our village. No, I will not demean myself by complaining; only the weak complain. If it is my lot to leave this earth before even half of my threescore years and ten, then so be it. I will go knowing that I did no harm, that I loved my woman and that I was not my grandfather. I have no use for pity. Weep for yourself, not for me.

