

# Wormwood, lizards and the railroad man Pt.1

[francis mckee](#)

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I want to believe the glass of green liquid is absinthe. It's a fluid talisman for the album and it brings its' own history to bear on the songs too. The drink's reputation verges on myth. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was considered a powerful hallucinogen: swallowing it could lead to epilepsy dementia, mind-bending visions, perceptions of other worlds. Famous consumers of the spirit

included James Joyce, Alfred Jarry, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Lewis Carroll, Aleister Crowley, Pablo Picasso and Oscar Wilde.

Absinthe is anise flavoured liqueur mixed with sweet fennel, hyssop, angelica root, mint and, vitally, extract from the wormwood plant (*artemisia absinthium*). That final ingredient conjures dreams of the apocalypse:

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

In the following verse of *Revelation* 'The fourth angel blew his trumpet' striking out the light of the sun, moon and stars so that 'a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining'. This is the quivering nightscape of Flynn's *Look over the wall, look at the sky*. The album opens with an old Dublin song, 'The Zoological Gardens', Flynn's lone voice summoning an ominous picture of a storm swept city in blackout:

Oh thunder and lightning is no lark  
When Dublin city is in the dark  
So if you've any money go up to the park  
And view the zoological gardens

When the band surface in a fuzzy, electrical, crackling drone the image only darkens. A city drenched in wormwood where life plays out despite the coming cataclysm. Previous recordings of the same song by Brendan Behan and the Dubliners dwell on the salacious double meanings scattered through the lyrics. Those meanings are just as clear here but, in this setting an impatient wife pining for the 'hairy baboons' and 'the old cockatoo' seems more bestial than the earlier songs 'kiss me quick' approach suggests. As the lyrics state 'she was one of the rare old stock/From outside the zoological gardens'. Beasts, it seems, exist beyond the fences of the institution. The zoo had its roots in British imperial expansion and it was known across the world for its lion breeding. One of its most famous regular visitors was Ludwig Wittgenstein who seemed to shuttle between the botanic gardens, the zoo and a dank hotel in Parkgate street while he lived in Dublin.

He too sensed the dark side of the place and the dark side of his own occupation

- *To imagine a language means to imagine a life-form.*
- *We mind about the kind of expressions we use concerning these things; we do not understand them, however, but misinterpret them. When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.*

While he lived in Dublin he wrote a significant portion of his *Philosophical Investigations* and in it he made his famous observation that 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.' People are still arguing about what exactly Wittgenstein meant in that short sentence. But, as in so much of his work, it clearly points to the many ways in which misunderstanding plays a role in our lives.

The apocalyptic darkness brooding over Dublin in The Zoological Gardens is an ominous portal leading us into another world. The following song, 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground' draws us deeper into that landscape. It's an old American folk song, collected by Bascom Lamar Lunsford from Fred Moody in North Carolina in 1901 and recorded by Lunsford in 1928 for Brunswick Records in Kentucky. It found a longer life on the Anthology of American Folk Music compiled by Harry Smith. The writer Greil Marcus explores that set of recording in *Invisible Republic* (1997) and in an earlier book, *Lipstick Traces* (1989) he speaks specifically of Lunsford's version of 'I Wish I Was a Mole':

Now what the singer wants is obvious, and almost impossible to comprehend. He wants to be delivered from his life and to be changed into a creature insignificant and despised. He wants to see nothing and to be seen by no-one. He wants to destroy the world and to survive it. That's all he wants. The performance is quiet, steady, and the quiet lets you in....You can imagine what it would be like to want what the singer wants. It is an almost impossible negation, at the edge of pure nihilism, a demand to prove that the world is nothing, a demand to be next to nothing and yet it is comforting.

Like Wittgenstein's lion, the mole will not be understood as its language would emerge from another form of life. It's also subversive:

If I's a mole in the ground I'd root that mountain down  
And I wish I was a mole in the ground

This quiet anger and desire to pull down everything was one element of the song that drew the attention of Flynn. In an interview in Hot Press he says

I was drawn to this song for its almost hallucinatory, anti-authoritarian spirit at a time when Dublin was being torn to shreds by property developers and vulture funds. Nothing much has changed there if I'm honest, but there's always hope when people are willing to fight for their communities. I wanted to get to grips with the rebellious energy I felt in the city through the jagged arrangement and to highlight the visceral language used in the song by speaking the lyrics as opposed to singing them.

He goes on to talk about the recent fight to save the Cobblestone pub – a vital venue in the revival of folk music over the past decade. Threatened by developers, it was saved by community protests which Flynn and other musicians joined. In a Bandcamp comment on the song, he talks about how he sensed that resistance to capitalism in the last line:

the weirdness of the song, and its aggressiveness. The last line is: I don't like the railroad man/  
the railroad man will kill you when he can/ and he'll drink up your blood like red wine, and I wanted to get to grips with that emotion.

That line about the railroad man took on a life of its own when Bob Dylan incorporated it into 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again' in 1966.

Mona tried to tell me  
To stay away from the train line  
She said that all the railroad men  
Just drink up your blood like wine

And I said, "Oh, I didn't know that  
But then again, there's only one I've met

And he just smoked my eyelids  
And punched my cigarette"

That song was on the *Blonde on Blonde* album where the cover had a now iconic blurred photo of Dylan. Taken on a freezing day in the Meat Packing district of New York, the blur was a result of both the artist and the photographer shivering in the street. For Dylan fans though, the shaky reality of the cover image reflected the surreal, proto-psychedelic songs in the sleeves. The railroad men, drinking blood and smoking eyelids, embodied that haunted landscape.