Dublin-born Richard Power (1928–1970) was a bilingual novelist and short story writer whose best-known work, *The Hungry Grass* (1969), is a novel dealing with the last days of a parish priest in rural Ireland. Eleven years earlier Power published *Úll i mBárr an Ghéagáin*, an autobiographical work in which he recalls the periods he spent living on the Aran Islands, where he studied Irish, and in Birmingham, where he worked as a navvy and manual labourer during the mid-1950s, before moving to Iowa. Translated into English by his brother Victor, the book’s last five chapters provide a rare autobiographical insight into Irish emigrant culture in post-war Birmingham. In recording his impressions of the Irish men and women he encounters in the boarding houses, pubs and dancehalls of the city, Power is troubled by ‘the restless, unsettling way of life that they engaged in, without any definite goal, without household, without authority, without having to answer to their family, to the state, to anyone at all’. Yet their seizing of the personal and social freedoms offered by emigration makes him question his own preconceptions about the privations of exile and the consolations of nostalgia: ‘Could it be that my own memories were already eroding so that they’d be consistent with the unreality I’d carry about with me from now on?’ The final chapter, reproduced below, shows the narrator leaving Birmingham by train and finding himself eavesdropping on a subdued, tragicomic mini-drama which, as Power configures it, has the unity, momentum and compressed lyricism of a short story. Indeed, the chapter’s diminuendo mood and mimetic power are reminiscent of Sean O’Faolain’s ‘A Broken World’ (1937), his Joyce-inspired attempt to write a chapter in the moral history of his country, which is also set in a train compartment. It may not be too fanciful to read Power’s sharply observed vignette, with its deep and steady sympathy for a hapless victim of circumstance, as an instalment in the moral history of his compatriots who had lost their country.

The months slipped past. Spring arrived, the sap of life rising in the trees, and the city of Birmingham became more hideous by the day. I hated the fresh-green evenings getting longer and the plain streets becoming even more unattractive.
One cold night in February, I said goodbye to Cóilín and Mike and my other friends. Frost rimmed the shovels that day, ice sheeted the water puddles and stiffened sand so that you needed a pick to loosen it. The east wind blasted across the desolate fields. It gave me a great relief to throw aside the shovel with the arrival of night.

The same cold wind blustered through the streets of the city as I hastened to the railway station. There were only a few people standing in the streets, flayed by the sharp cold outside the cinemas. Half the workers had gone home, and the other half were already clocked in for the night’s shift. It was the daily turning of the tide.

It was a wasteland, this black city under the glacial street lamps, a moonscape where you could hear the constant throbbing of machinery, with never a let-up. In a way I was sorry to leave it. There was a curious vitality about it. In the pubs, as I passed, lights were gleaming, the clash of glasses; high-pitched conversation, the warmth of fellowship. It was the same animation that infused the lives of the expatriate Irish who lived here, drinking, working, eating, condemned to relentless proximity to one another. And although this galloping dissipation of life attracted me, it was not what I was seeking.

There were two others in the carriage along with me. A black man in the corner, quiet, perceptive, curiously observing the people who walked past on the platform. Next to him an Englishman read a newspaper, his face set against conversation for the rest of the journey. Just as the train was pulling out, the guard entered, gripping a drunk.

‘Sit down there,’ said the guard testily. He was from Wales. ‘I’ll tell you when we reach the station.’

‘The second shtop,’ said the drunk, as he tried to put his luggage up on the rack. ‘The second shtop.’

‘Here, give it to me,’ groaned the guard, and hurled overhead the old fibre suitcase, fastened with rough twine. ‘Didn’t I say I’d call you.’

‘The second shtop,’ repeated the drunk, holding up two fingers as a reminder. He was Irish. ‘The second shtop . . .’

‘Sit down and shut up,’ ordered the guard, going out.

He sat down. He gazed about him, yawning. The train tooted a whistle and began to glide. He stretched out his arms and sat next to me. He farted. The Englishman glared at him and turned over the page of his newspaper.

‘Where are you heading for?’ asked the black man.

‘The second shtop,’ replied the Irishman.

‘But where is that?’ asked the black man, laughing.

‘The second shtop, I tell you. Is it looking for fight you are?’

‘Ah, sit down, brother,’ said the black man evenly.

He was twice as brawny as the next man. He laughed quietly.

‘I’m a working man and you’re a working man. Why are you looking for fight?’

‘Matter a damn. The second shtop, I tell you.’