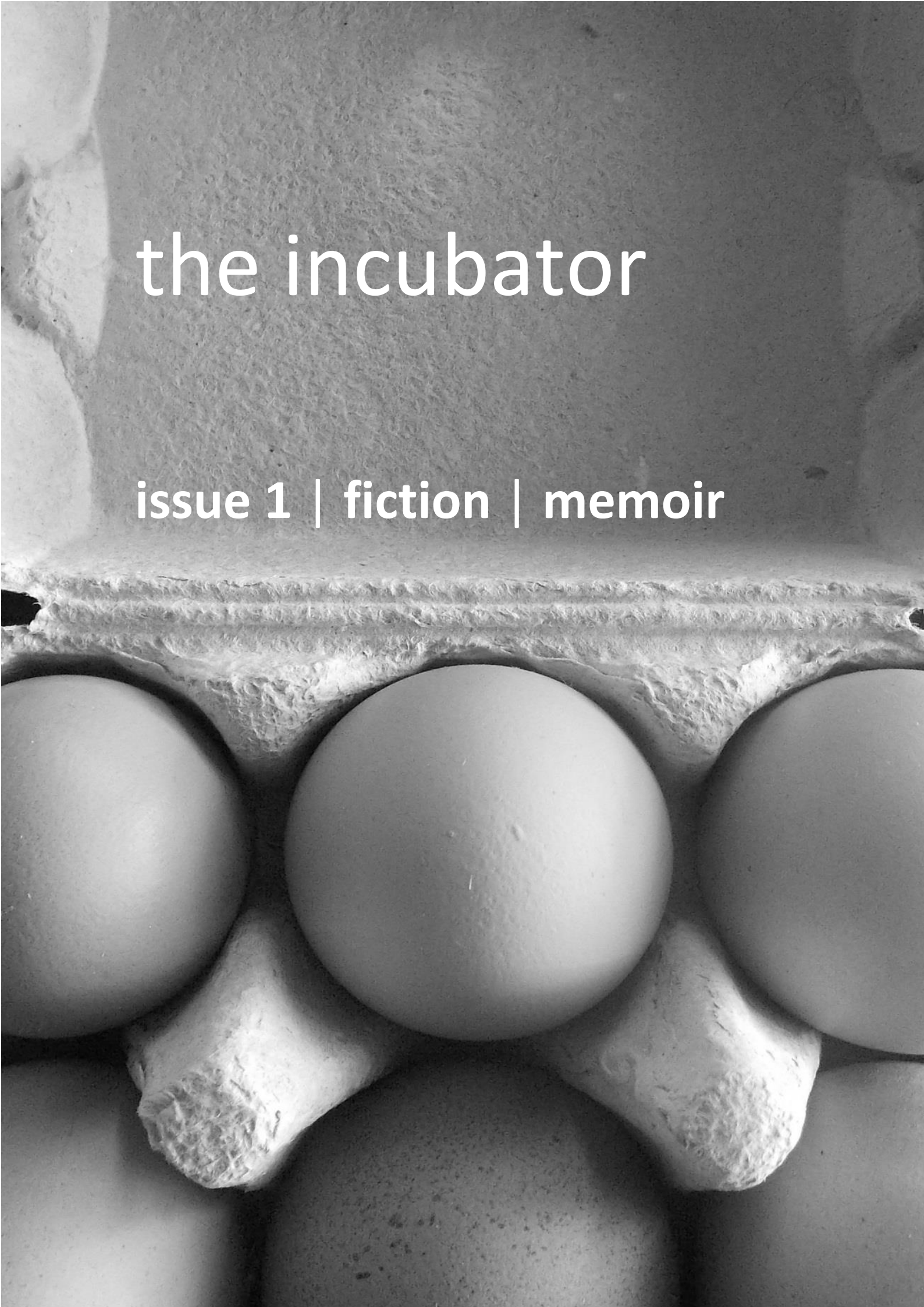

the incubator

issue 1 | fiction | memoir

the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(June 2014)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 2

(due to be published in September)

*we are seeking **flash fiction**, **short stories***

*and **one scene plays** (10 pages max.)*

Guidelines are at

theincubatorjournal.com

*Follow on twitter **@incubatorthe***

Please send any reviews or queries to

editor.theincubator@gmail.com

contents

flash fiction

short story collection review

short story

editorial

preparation

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD THE SENTENCE, 'IT'S ALRIGHT FOR YOU, YOU'RE creative!'? Loads of times, right? But we're all creative, aren't we? And what's more, creativity doesn't just happen. There are those who have gone so far as to say that it comes in stages, and it's the second fascinating stage – fascinating for me at least – which is called *incubation,* and after which **the incubator** took its name. But this is issue 1 and we must focus on the beginnings of things, despite the attraction to get ahead of ourselves.

This journal has been in stage 1, *preparation*, for half a year, and maybe an extra year on top of that as a kernel in my mind. Like all the writing in here it was not thought up overnight; it first came in the guise of a problem: *How can Northern Ireland have its own literary journal which has the short story at its heart but also showcases memoir, plays, essay and poetry?* It was a desire, added to the need to overcome many obstacles, which has structured what the incubator has become.

The memoir and fiction you will read here were not thought up overnight, not penned half-heartedly over one heady cup of coffee, but chipped away at and then buffed until the words shone from the page. I believe that you will love reading these diversely refreshing voices as much as we, the editorial staff, have.

Do let us know what you think. Don't just submit. But read. Share. Get in touch with the writers and let them know what you think of their work. Tell us your thoughts on the journal; this is a process after all.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Aileen Armstrong

author of End of Days

HELLO AILEEN, THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO BE INTERVIEWED FOR OUR FIRST ISSUE. I first read your work in The Long Story, Short Journal. How important have lit journals been in getting your collection published? Do you have any favourites that you subscribe to?

The *Stinging Fly* is a really vital Irish journal and it's maybe the one that's most capable of surprising. Otherwise, I've tended to rotate my subscriptions over the years – to the *Dublin Review*, and to some of the big American journals such as *Glimmer Train Stories*, and to whatever else catches my fancy. I'm not sure if it quite counts as a 'lit journal', but I go through phrases of buying the *New Yorker* compulsively. The *Long Story, Short* is a great outlet for longer short fiction, and I was really pleased to see it emerge, because it does sometimes feel like many of the Irish competitions and journals encourage stories of 3,000 words or fewer. Which is totally understandable, and which presents its own challenge to the writer – but it's important to have spaces for more expansive work, too.

My own lit journal track record is not particularly long. The first proper short story I ever wrote was published in the *Stinging Fly*, but that piece was more of a fluke than a trick that could be easily repeated. So I've had to stay away from the subbing game for a while in order to get a lot better at the craft (this I of course learned after lots of rejections), and it's probably fair to say that my energies over the last couple of years have been largely focused on putting together *End of Days*, which is a collection of linked fictions that are mostly not suitable for standalone publication. But I'm definitely keen to get back into writing and subbing short fiction in the next little while.

How did you find the collaboration of putting together a collection with an editor when the writing of the stories, I presume, is more solitary?

It was great. The writing takes place out in the cold, on your own, for years, and then all of a sudden somebody wants to publish it and have meetings about it over coffee and gradually it all starts feeling *legitimate*. It was a bit stressful sending off my manuscript, because although other people had seen some of the stories, nobody had seen the manuscript as a whole or how the individual pieces interacted with each other. (Mostly because it wasn't finished and I was still figuring all that out). On a developmental level, once publication had been agreed, the editors were actually pretty hands-off with the 'direction' of the book, and just left it up to me to get the whole thing done. Closer to publication, there was of course the usual tussling over the proofs, but this kind of intensive collaborative line-editing was business as usual for me because my day job is technical writing – an industry in which the normal state of affairs is to obsess over text on a line-by-line basis (with others, and against the clock). But if that kind of collaboration wasn't a new experience for me, the feeling of being taken seriously as a writer certainly was.

Do you have someone you use as a sounding board when you have finished a new piece?

Yes. I don't necessarily approach them automatically once I've finished a new piece, but I do have two or three readers who are my first call of port whenever I'm having difficulty solving a particular problem. These readers know my work and know what I'm trying to do so they help me achieve it and tell me when something's not working. Some readers won't want to hurt your feelings and will come back with a vague 'yeah, great, I liked it' – which is of no use to anyone. And others will turn it into a pissing contest or make you feel like you've committed some kind of crime if you get it wrong. So it's a valuable thing indeed to have the right readers in your corner.

What are your thoughts and experiences of reading your work in public?

It is always a big honour to be asked to read your work in public, to the public! People are giving up a part of their day to sit and listen to you. So you don't want to mumble your way through it. It can be hard for some writers – we're not all natural performers. There's a delay as well in the reading aloud, a certain loss of colour, of texture, the way things look on the page. Maybe you need at least a little bit of dialogue in the piece you're reading out, just to keep things on track, just to keep the audience from falling asleep. I'm not great at being in front of a microphone, but I do try to remind myself that people don't actually care about me all that much – at most they have an interest (benign or malign), but they've also got their own stuff going on, where they're going after the reading, what they'll drink, etc. etc. Remembering that helps me to relax and enjoy it.

I've read that you are a fan of Alice Munro. Is there a particular story of hers that is (dare I say) the one you find most inspiring? And why?

Well, Alice Munro is famously incapable of writing a bad story, so even her lesser stories are among the best you'll read. I own several of her collections, but her first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, means a lot to me. Maybe it's because I like to think of her as a young woman, working on this first collection for years, eking out the hours on it when she was 'supposed' to be doing housework or cooking meals.

All of the stories in this collection are superb, but there's one story that's particularly tickling me at the moment. That story is 'The Office', which tells the story of a young mother, a writer, who secures for herself (after much internal debate) an office in town in which to write freely, away from her husband and children. It's such a simple solution: a room of her own. The writer recognises that she needs a concentration of focus if she is to achieve the results she craves. But of course the reality can't be that simple, because she is a woman, and therefore her energies must be dispersed in the service of other people, not concentrated for her own selfish gain. So she is still trapped into providing succour to others – not to her husband or children, this time, but to the man who is leasing her the office. He appears genial and supportive at first, but soon becomes intrigued by what she's doing in there, in her own office. And, despite her every attempt to set boundaries, he continues to appropriate and control her mental and physical space through a series of manipulations

that wilfully intrude on her privacy. The absurdist wrangling that ensues between the landlord and the writer is superbly played out in this short piece of work.

How do you keep up the momentum when you are at the editing stage? Is there a particular process or does it vary for each story?

I think that it doesn't really vary that much, although when I'm working on a story each one feels different. When I'm about three-quarters of the way through a story, I hit a wall of – not doubt, something stronger than doubt – frustration? Regret? *Loneliness?* I say I can't do it, it won't lift off the page. The story has a particular form and colour in my mind, but it's not yet firm, I can't get hold of it. I am aware of piece of work as something like a picture in a child's colouring book: and to bring it into relief I'm supposed to be colouring within the lines of the story. But when I'm three-quarters of the way through, my pencil veers off in a different direction, and I start wildly looping outside the lines in the hope that it will effect some breakthrough. I change loads of it at this point. Loads! Think I've solved it. Realise that all of the changes are wrong and that there's no getting away from the basic building blocks of the story.

So, I return, try to rein in the loops until I'm more or less back where I started. And then, I don't really know how it gets finished. If I'm lucky, there does come a time where a small lift-off occurs, and I can usually work a bit more quickly nearer the end.

How has the last two years changed for you as a writer since becoming highly commended in Doire Press Fiction Chapbook Competition?

Life in general has become a lot more routine-based. The competition commendation (and subsequent interest from Doire) coincided with the birth of my daughter, and, some months later, a new job. So in many ways it's been a hard and hectic two years. But my writing life has necessarily become more compartmentalised and structured, which is a good thing, I think. I used to write in the afternoons because I had a slot of spare time then. Now I don't always have that slot anymore, so I try to write in the early morning, although it's difficult in winter because my body still craves the circadian regularity and I just feel *so much better* on

the days that I do sleep through the alarm. So my writing routines change according to the time I have on any given day, but the main thing is I have them. And I think that the act of finishing one book has been very good for me because I haven't always been great at finishing work in the past. I don't let myself off the hook so easily now.

Where do you 'incubate' your ideas; do you have a notebook with all those little nuggets?

I have multiple notebooks. I long to have just the one notebook where everything gets meticulously recorded and then transferred to the computer when the time is right. I love this idea. But the truth is it's all over the place. I was looking for a particular notebook recently – I was at an impasse and I felt that there might be something in this particular notebook that would jumpstart me. But I couldn't find it anywhere. I couldn't even remember what it looked like. It was my daughter who found it in the end – she likes to rifle through my things and empty out my bedside lockers. I am always coming up with new schemes for storage so that everything can be kept perfectly in its place, taken out and examined on a need-to basis, and then securely put back. I have become quite seduced by ideas of efficiency, I think, of playing by the rules of how we *should* be in terms of self-discipline and physical effort expended for future reward and output. Unfortunately, when it comes to creative work, I have a feeling that a lot of the good stuff still just happens in those moments when you're loafing about, feeling an incredible guilt about your incredible laziness, standing in the middle of an untidy room. So, although an efficient mental storage solution sounds ideal, I think that the work just gets incubated somewhere inside. Every experience, every book that is read is nutrition, it gets stored somewhere, it's eventually put to some use. Notes do help, though.

Is there a character from End of Days that you plan to, or indeed have, revisited?

That's an interesting question! There was a time when I wanted to write a second volume of *End of Days*, but now I am 95% sure that I'm done with them all. Sometimes I think about revisiting Steven ('Medjugorje') and JP ('Medjugorje'/ 'Before Google') – but I think that what I am not yet done with is the particular quality of their relationship and it's more likely

that I will end up taking this over into the project I'm currently working on – which is quite different.

Do the names of characters and stories come first, or do you end up changing them as the story develops?

They do change all the time. I know that some writers are very fierce about not changing their characters' names, but mine often get changed for very particular reasons in the lifespan of the story-writing process, as the requirements of the story in question reveal themselves. I might need a character with a one-syllable name, for example, to fit it in with the tone and sentence style of a particular story. If I change a character's name, everything about him or her changes slightly – the colour, the shades of the personality. So I don't do it lightly, I only do it if I'm prepared to deal with it. But it depends on the character. Some characters have never changed their names – Karen from 'End of Days', for example, was Karen even in the very earliest versions of that story, which go back years and years. Story titles change too, though some are very clear from the start.

Finally - as I'm sure you get asked all the time - what are you working on at the moment?

A novel. It's set in Ireland in the Tail End of the Celtic Tiger and it's sort of a mix of the old and the new. I'd better not say any more or it will surely come back and haunt me.

Aileen was interviewed by Kelly Creighton

End of Days is published by Doire Press.

review: Stefan Totterdell

on Not Lost: A Story About Leaving Home by Sarah Maria Griffin

SARAH MARIA GRIFFIN'S *NOT LOST* CHRONICLES A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF AN IRISH EMIGRANT. One expects a certain social consciousness in a story about exile, and one gets it – sort of. The memoir acts primarily, however, as a conversation between the author and the reader. Griffin establishes a sense of intimacy from the outset, beginning with a list of points for the reader to bear in mind, and with a chapter written in the second person – used here to greater effect than Paul Auster's recent attempt. Its charm lies in its brevity, and she wisely switches to first person for the remainder of the memoir - periodically addressing the reader as *you*, therefore retaining a sense of intimacy.

Griffin asserts her identity as an immigrant in America, and her social conscience is looming behind every sentence. Unfortunately it is rarely given a voice. Griffin eschews her obvious passions and opinions on feminism, internship culture, America's healthcare system, her experience as a white immigrant – all in favour of the perhaps more relatable everyday experiences of finding a new local restaurant, struggling to establish oneself in the neighbourhood, her cat. Joyce remarked that in the particular is contained the universal, and Griffin uses this insight to good effect here. She has a quirky sense of humour and peppers her everyday experiences with references to *Back to the Future*, *Twin Peaks,* her Nintendo 64, *Doctor Who;* her passions are endless. There's a wonderful moment in which she loses her way and asks a bartender for directions: 'You're in the West Portal.' Where is that? I wanted to ask. Portal? What portal? Portal to the underworld? Portal to another dimension? *Near Twin Peaks.*

There is a sense of disappointment, however, that she doesn't engage with her passions on a more overt level. Rather than hearing about her quest for a hairdryer – which I did enjoy –

I'd be far more interested in hearing more of her insights into being a white immigrant. Perhaps out of a fear of alienating the apolitical reader she keeps these thoughts brief, but I'd like to see Griffin shrug this fear off in the future and go for the jugular a little more. These trivialities do make for a good read, though, and this lightness of touch pulls the memoir up out of its genre – a genre so often filled with pain – into something more joyful. When she calls her newfound hairdryer the Celestial Hairdryer of Glory one gets a sense of her mission: to imbue the everyday with a joy and significance beyond what we normally gift it with. It's similar in this sense to the work of Tao Lin or Karl Ove Knausgaard – perhaps these are the signs of a literary movement?

Griffin's prose style flows in a similarly pleasant manner. It's got the remnants of an overly tidy MFA style and this works to good effect, but I'd like to see her branch out and go for something a little dirtier, more broken, more personal in the future. Her sentences are like hands clasped to the reader's, pulling us along with her on her journey. She has a great eye for nuance and finding the joy in life, and I found myself rooting for her – I just wish the stakes were a little higher.

Not Lost is an engaging read, and a good first book. All the seeds of an important writer are here, and I'm looking forward to seeing Griffin develop – it's refreshing to read an Irish writer who can reference *Twin Peaks* before the dreary moors.

Not Lost is published by New Island.

memoir

Anne Caughey

The One that Got Away

TRAVELLING BY TRAIN AT NIGHT THROUGH UNKNOWN COUNTRY WAS DISORIENTATING; the journey through tunnels burrowing under the Japanese Alps or black countryside with barely a light visible. A few minutes before my stop, the lights of the city came into view. After almost two hours racing through the darkness, there seemed no good reason to get off the train in this place. Only than the piece of paper telling me that, by random chance, this was the city where I was to live. A neon bubble in a galaxy of darkness. But now, after a few days of company orientation in Tokyo, my real adventure in Japan was about to begin.

I loved Nagaoka. It was small but it had all I needed and no more. Surrounded by mountains, it was a sugar bowl of a city which filled with snow in winter. In summer, the mountains held the thunder storms overhead and they lasted all night, crashing from one side of the valley to the other and back again.

As I could tell from my night time arrival, the city was surrounded by miles and miles of countryside. Tiny old ladies prowled the streets, backs bent parallel to the ground through years of working in rice fields. There were bicycles everywhere, essential to get around the compact city; the perfect antidote to my life in London.

All I needed was a friend. And then I met you. My colleague introduced us and we all went to the cinema. I told you how much I loved the city, and life in Japan, but how much I hated the shared company apartment. You told me that you would act as guarantor if I wanted to find my own place. In fact, you knew a letting agent and would get in touch with them in the morning if I wanted.

Our friendship started from there. You helped me find an apartment, and took me to buy furniture and all the essentials. We were both off work on Wednesday and that became 'our' day, initially for shopping and then, as I got settled, for trips around Niigata. You hadn't been driving for very long, and weren't very confident, so you loved having a reason to drive. It was always fun when you picked me up on a Wednesday morning, asking, 'Where are we going today?' You would have somewhere picked out and show me the map. Despite my poor Japanese reading skills I would be navigator, and we always reached our destination eventually. Perfect summer days out.

We would stop for lunch and you would have to read the menu for me, like I was a child. I'd usually pick one of the first few things on the menu to save you the trouble. You laughed at how often I had chicken Caesar salad.

On Sunday evenings, when I finished work at seven, I would cycle the five minutes to your apartment where you would have dinner ready. When I had terrible flu, you brought me groceries, medicine and homemade chicken soup. You helped me with so many things. I had never been treated with such kindness in my life.

And yet, this sounds like the benefits streamed solely in my direction. You got plenty out of it too. You had a companion on your day off. Now you had motivation to drive and visit many places you had never seen, even though you had lived your whole life in Niigata. You were an avid Anglophile, you loved everything English; music, films, tea. Friends, boyfriends. Now you had someone to speak English with. And perhaps this was the bottom line. You had a foreign pet project, and that made you happy.

You told me that you wanted me to find a nice Japanese boyfriend because you thought that was the best way to ensure I stayed in the city. You had had foreign friends before, but the nature of the place and the employment opportunities meant that most people only stayed a year or two.

My friend, Jayne, from home came to visit and you told her that it would be perfect if we were lesbians because we were so compatible. I thought she was going to choke. You told

me that you could picture us as two old ladies, wandering round the streets of Nagaoka sharing a lifetime of friendship.

Of course, the perfect summer had to come to an end. I met a Japanese man. He was beautiful, and intelligent, and funny. You hated him. I never understood why, because your only explanation was that I couldn't understand because I wasn't Japanese. A water tight argument. He left after six months to go and study in America; I was heartbroken, you were delighted. That was the first crack in our friendship.

Not that there weren't other warning signs. I saw how you erased another friend from your life for some perceived misdemeanour. You deleted her number from your phone and blocked her calls and emails. I thought it was cold, and yet you seemed to take real pleasure in it.

Then there was Sam. After Sam nothing should have surprised me. Sam worked in Nagaoka and you dated him for a couple of months. He was pretty cute, and - the main attraction for you - he was English. He was also, as I tried to explain, a player and a skeevy one at that, but you wouldn't listen. Then you and Sam broke up and his contract ended and he went home. I couldn't say I would miss him. I had heard a lot of rumours about him before he left, and I knew that you had too.

Then you told me that you were going on holiday to England. To visit Sam and meet his family. This was nothing compared to the news when you returned. Sam was looking for a job in Nagaoka and would be back as soon as he could, to live with you in your apartment. I held my tongue because, by now, I realised that you weren't open to critical opinion. The day came when Sam returned. You travelled to Tokyo to meet him at the airport and brought him back to Nagaoka. You spent the night together in your apartment and in the morning you told him that it wasn't going to work. He needed to move out and find somewhere else to live as soon as possible. You didn't want to have a relationship with him. Much as I disliked Sam, I felt bad for him; travelling half way round the world to be dumped within 24 hours. You didn't even seem sorry.

Around this time I started to tire of small town Japan. What had been cosy became claustrophobic, what was simple became mundane, and what was comfortable became restricting. I began planning my departure, but one of the things which worried me most was telling you. When one of my friends accidently let it slip, you reacted as badly as I feared. From that day forward you made it clear that I was no longer of any interest to you. I needed your help with some practical matters, ending the lease on my apartment, closing utilities' accounts; you did what you were asked and no more.

On my last day when the letting agent came to inspect the apartment and collect my keys you were barely civil. As soon as she left, you walked down the stairs and never turned around, never said goodbye. It was the last time I ever saw you.

We were never going to grow into those two old ladies who had shared a lifetime of friendship. The time and friendship we shared, you threw away too easily. I returned to Nagaoka a couple of years later on holiday and met up with many friends. But not you; the person I had spent most time with, the friend who shared most memories with me. It made me sad, but not as sad as I might have imagined; because when I thought of you, I was glad that I had got away.

Dylan Brennan

My Hair was a Gift; That Tree is a Woman.

CAN I SIT HERE? SURE. ARE YOU HAPPY? YES. DO YOU SPEAK SPANISH? WE'RE SPEAKING Spanish now. Oh yes! Of course. Are you with those three ladies? No, I don't know them. I think they're American. Ah, so they're with you. No they aren't, as I just said, I don't know them. What language are they speaking? English. Do they speak Spanish? I don't know. Do you think they might? I tried to speak to them but they didn't understand me. I have no idea, I do not know those women and I don't know if they speak Spanish. You see that tree? Which one? The big one. Yes, of course. Well, that tree is 538 years old and it's a woman. Do you see? I see the tree. Do you see that it's a woman? No. Keep looking, look at its shape, look at its form. Now do you see that that tree is a 538-year-old woman? Not really, I thought, but that's not what I said. Ah, yes, I see it now, thank you. Yes, that tree is even older than I am! And I'm an old lady.

She didn't look that old. I mean, she looked like she might be sixty. She didn't look like a tree. She sat down beside me on the steps of the courtyard in the almost silent Ex-Convento de San Gabriel. The sun was just beginning to hide behind the trees and shade was becoming more abundant. The porticoes of the three-church-complex were being lightly toasted now instead of the earlier pulverizing they'd suffered at the hands of a bored midday. Scorched bits of yellowy plaster clung for dear life to the old walls and probably wouldn't last another day's wallop of sunlight. I'd come across her before. Once she'd just kind of nodded and smiled at me. The previous week she'd actually stooped down to whisper in my ear that the chapel was open and that I could visit it whenever I wanted instead of sitting outside on the steps reading a book. I'd told her thank you and that I knew that I could visit the chapel whenever I wanted but that I was quite happy to sit and read in the courtyard. That afternoon I was just finishing As I lay Dying so that, when she sat down beside me to talk and put her hand on mine, I thought she might be a ghost. Her skin felt

like that of a plucked goose flung upon a heap of crushed ice in the market. Cold and dead, that's how she felt. But she wasn't a ghost and she spoke to me with a living voice that seemed to coax her own corpse back to life with the warmth of a honeyed vapour. Her clothes were black and ill-fitting and her hair was black and looked fake.

I wonder what she's selling I thought to myself. Cholula was and is full of people selling things, especially to people whose skin turns pink in the sun. We're all American or German of course. Even when I tell them I'm Irish they seem to think that I'm mistaken, that I'm confused, that I must be an Irish American. Boston or Chicago? Dublin. They sell plastic jewellery and wooden toys. I've bought toys from them but never jewellery. They sell blackberries when they're in season and I buy them to eat at home. I smash them with a molcajete which is a pestle and mortar made from volcanic rock that young women still get as a wedding present. A heavy and useful domestic anchor. I smash them with almonds, chia, flax, sunflower seeds and mix in a bit of agave honey and natural yoghurt. I didn't ask her what she was selling. I just listened to her telling me that the tree was a woman. I started to wonder whether this was an old legend like the legend of the volcanoes that still lie in wait just over there on the horizon. One of them is a snow capped woman reclining on eternity and the other is a warrior that slumps in a heap making smoke signals to let her know he's still alive. That's one version anyway, the one that I heard or made up. Their love still smells of sulphur and snow. You see that it's a woman? That snow-tipped volcano is a woman. That tree is a fresno and it's a woman too and she's 538 years old.

I have cancer and I make my living selling these little trinkets. She opened a little metallic coloured plastic case and showed me some plastic hair clips that were all shaped like butterflies except one that was a moth. I picked up the moth and told her it was very nice and placed it carefully back in the case. Then she grabbed my wrist and placed two minuscule metal circles in the palm of my hand. They're already blessed, you don't need to find a priest to bless these medals. I've already taken care of it. You see, you don't need anything else. That's San Benito. He can protect you. He protects me every day and tries his best to stop the cancer. He tries his best and I love him for that. San Benito loves us both, did you know that? Yes, of course. How much do you want for these? Oh, I'm not selling them. I just give them out free to people and people sometimes offer me something in return. Like these clothes, these aren't mine, they were a present in exchange for San Benito and some butterflies. I gave her twenty pesos. Ten for each.

So you're from Ireland. Just like Saint Oliver Plunkett, right? He was Irish wasn't he? Jesus, yeah, I think so. I've heard his name anyway, I think someone tried to steal him from a church a while back. Who would try to steal a saint? Everyone wants a piece of a saint to carry round with them don't they? I suppose so, ha! She repeated that her clothes were given to her as a present. You see my hair? It's fake, I thought. Well, my hair was a gift too, it's not mine. Like everything in this world it's been lent to me and I can't take it with me when I go. Oh well, it certainly looks real, I told her. I have cancer of the lungs and I've never smoked in my life. Maybe you should start. I bowed my head and my face blushed, that wasn't funny. Yeah, a nice lady gave me my hair for free. Look. Touch. I raised my eyes to see that she'd pulled back her fake scalp and hair to reveal what was beneath. She moved my hand over the surface of her head and I looked up to see the curvature of raw flesh as bald as a sausage. Then she said goodbye and walked off and, as she disappeared behind that female tree, I felt something fluttering in my trouser pocket. It can't be a moth, it can't be a moth. My phone vibrating against some coins and the San Benitos. Hello? Yes. Who's this?

I didn't last long after she'd left. One by one, three amateur photographers appeared and seemed to like the idea of a loner reading on the steps, the elongated shadows of twilight. One of them actually sat beside me and pointed his camera to the side and snapped away, trying to act all nonchalant. I turned and stared at him. I stared at him and made him uneasy and he got up and left. He ran to join a friend that stood under the 538-year-old woman watching his white rabbit. I'd seen that guy before. He brings a rabbit out to pasture in the courtyard. He watches it eating the grass while his friend takes photos of people reading on the steps.

Paul Anthony

I Remember Belfast City in the Rare Ould Times

BELFAST HAS LONG BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE "T" WORD. TITANIC, THE TROUBLES AND Teatime with Tommy. There will be no mention of the first two here but there *will* be reference to the latter!

The early Sixties was a simple time. John Fitzgerald Kennedy had just been elected President of the USA, the Twist was the latest dance craze and we watched Gunsmoke and Candid Camera on television. Van Morrison was probably making love to his brown eyed girl behind the Stadium. It was the year Bono was born and the year Ernest Hemingway died. I look back on that time with feelings of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is the basis of all memoir. It is a commercial commodity nowadays. Many radio stations in the USA solely play what is cleverly rebranded as "Classic Rock". It wouldn't sound so cool if it was called "Silly Old Farts Reminiscing Music" would it? "Dreamboats and Petticoats" - a musical about life in the Fifties - sells out wherever it plays.

For me, nostalgia is a comfort blanket, a place to go when the going gets tough, a cache of valuable memories. How many of you have finished convivial evenings in the pub with a "Do You Remember?" session when it is fondly recalled how great aunt Rosie used to spit tobacco a distance of twenty feet or that the Honeycombs were famous because they had a girl drummer.

Others, however, say that people seem to get nostalgic about a lot of things they weren't so crazy about the first time around. They may be right. How can *anyone* remember, with any fondness, outdoor toilets with the wind whistling around your southern bits as you groped for a square of newspaper and stopped pre-wipe to read that Russia had invaded Hungary

and when you pulled off a few more sheets to follow the story, all you got were the Greyhound results from Dunmore Stadium.

Andersonstown, where I had just moved from Princess Dock Street, was a builders' wasteland and a joy for any child. Complete and inhabited houses stood next to half built ones, which in turn stood next to those which had simply rows of breeze blocks marked out over concrete foundations. Wheelbarrows, mini diggers and spades were everywhere. There was a constant smell of wet cement and plaster. It was the smell of innocence.

I remember with fondness my first tricycle, a gleaming red and yellow Triang with pneumatic tyres and a chain which left me with permanent oils stains on my legs. For years it was bigger than me. Like my clothes, my mother said I would grow into it.

It could be anything I wanted it to be. Sometimes I was Donald Campbell, breaking the world land speed record in Bluebird or Zip Nolan, Highway Patrolman in the Lion comic. Sometimes I was a train driver and I would use the top of my mother's singing kettle as a whistle.

My tricycle was my trusty steed. It never let me down! I went everywhere on it, even as far as the Falls Park while my mother walked beside me. I was fascinated by the lady who sold ice cream from a bigger tricycle at the entrance near the City Cemetery. I would talk to her at length about the merits of different tricycles. I must have bored her stupid, but she would always give me a free ice cream with raspberry sauce. I would devour it as quickly as I could to get a "brain melt".

Like all housewives of the time, my Mother was a canny shopper. She used to buy her fruit and vegetables from "Fuzzy" Conway who had a barrow near Smithfield Market. At the end of each transaction, he would quietly whisper, "Fancy some frying tomatoes? On the house as you are a regular," and with all the deftness of a magician he would throw half a dozen into a brown paper bag and wink. He knew she did not have the money for fresh tomatoes and these were ones which were split and he could not sell.

She accepted them as if she was doing *him* a favour and would beetle quickly away in case anyone had seen the 'hand-out'. Occasionally he would throw me a chocolate banana, again one which was over ripe and could not be sold.

One of the delights of winter evenings at home was making toast over the open fire. Normally it would be made under the grill but on special occasions and usually just before I would go to bed, my father would produce the toasting fork which he had fashioned in the shipyard and he would make round after round. He would then smother it in butter, not margarine of the Stork or Echo variety as my mother thought it was beneath us.

Then she would get a bag of Tate and Lyle sugar, put it on some brown paper and roll a hot poker over it to make me a couple of sweets for bed. Sucking on the pure caramelised sugar, I would happily drift off not realising the dangers of choking in mid-dream or the fact that the sticky stuff was already working on the fragile enamel of my baby teeth.

Another delight, usually on a Friday evening, was that my Mother would make fudge from a can of Ideal Condensed Milk. She would go to the shop, buy it and announce to the world that it was for "Making fudge you know!" aware that some people who were finding it had to make ends meet, would use it sparingly in their tea.

Play was a veritable social occasion. Streets resounded with hoops, whoops and rhymes. Social Anthropologists could have had a field day! You found your friends outside. You did not meet them on the Internet. Sadly, much of this has gone the way of all good things.

Playing with your mates was only temporarily suspended for Children's Hour on the television when the streets would empty for shows like Deputy Dawg and the Flintstones. Well, not quite empty. I was left sitting outside because we only had BBC on our television and there was only so much Belle and Sebastian you could watch. All the exciting shows were on the newly commissioned UTV.
And UTV had adverts – just like American television……

"*You wonder where the yellow went*
When you brush your teeth with Pepsodent"

and

“Oh the Esso sign means happy motoring,
The Esso sign means happy motoring,
The Esso sign means happy motoring,
Call at the Esso sign, For Esso Extra!”

I would sit outside selected windows and look as forlorn as possible in the hope of getting invited in to see Popeye or Tom and Jerry. Sometimes it worked but most times it did not. It was the same with the advent of colour television. My family spectacularly succeeded in being the last to get everything. In order - a television, UTV, colour television. I knew it was a question of pure economics but it did not make me feel any less resentful towards my parents.

George Best, declared Cookstown to be "the best family sausages" in a major TV and newspaper advertising campaign in the late 1960s. One of the later ones was to have been Ulster Television's first colour television ad. Plans were made for George to wear a loud hippy type shirt and tie but instead he turned up in a black polo neck sweater, so with the chef wearing all white, it was little more than a black and white commercial. The ad however, put Cookstown on the map and the District Council got Paddy Crerand, his one-time mentor at Manchester United, to unveil a commemorative plaque of him as a way of thanking the sporting legend for the additional income and fame he brought to the town.

But enough of adverts, what about the rest of television in those years? UTV began broadcasting on October 31st 1959. The opening welcome was by Sir Laurence Olivier reading from the Book of Genesis and the first programme was Robin Hood, with Richard Green in the leading role. The news was read by Brian Durkin. It was later read by Ivor Mills who eventually went to ITV in London and remarkably lost his Northern Ireland accent within days. Brian Baird, and Gordon Burns, who went on to front the Krypton Factor, also had spells doing the same.

Romper Room and Teatime with Tommy were popular shows.

"Romper Bomper Stomper Boo
Tell me, tell me, tell me do
Magic mirror tell me today,
Did all my friends have fun at play?"

were the opening words to this lovely little programme which involved young children in a sort of nursery setting. Miss Adrienne (and later Miss Helen) looked directly into the camera and, with a mixture of sultriness and maternal caring, told her audience that she could see James, Robert, Mary etc. I was in love with both of them.

One of my mother's friends had a cherub who, when confronted with the cameras, went absolute ape-shit, pulling the girls hair and nipping the backsides of the boys. He must have been removed by the equivalent of Jeremy Kyle type bouncers because his lack of presence was noted after about five minutes. His mother never mentioned it again and neither did mine.

Tommy James was a pianist and also had a small orchestra/band. He showcased local talent who were hoping to make the big time – a sort of Simon Cowell, better looking but without the personality. He actually gave the South African folk singer Roger Whittaker his first break and also appeared on the aforesaid Romper Room. If memory serves, he liked children as much as I like Marmite.

Unlike Graham Greene's Henry Pulling who travelled the length and breadth of Europe with his aunt, travels with my parents in my youth were much more curtailed. From our base in Princess Dock Street we would set out on a Saturday morning, they on foot, me on my trusty tricycle. Sometimes it was just a short hop to see the Harbour Master at the other end of the docks, but more often it would be somewhere like the Waterworks.

The two ponds of the Waterworks Park were originally constructed in the 19th century, as reservoirs to serve the population of Belfast, but they ceased operating as working reservoirs as the city expanded. They had been mistaken for the docks in WW2 by a couple

of myopic Germans and were bombed, as were some of the houses and surrounding businesses in the area.

The area became a public park in the 1950s. We would bring bread to feed the ducks and the swans and we would watch model yachts and motor boats being sailed by their proud owners.

Sadly the park is not as elegant as it was once was and it is inhabited by the drink trolls at night but it is still a pleasant place for a stroll on a sunny afternoon. The upper lake is now stocked with fish for local anglers to catch and return.

As we both grew older, my father and I developed a passion for trolley buses and would take random journeys on Saturdays and Sundays. There was not much I did not know about these silent monsters. They were introduced in 1938 and operated jointly with the trams for many years until the latter were taken off the tracks. Originally they had a blue and cream livery but this was changed to red and cream in 1958. Each bus carried adverts between the lower and upper deck encouraging us to “Drinka Pinta Milka Day” or Piper Export if you were old enough to allow adult refreshment to pass your lips and smoke Gallagher’s Reds, Greens or Blues. They were eventually withdrawn in 1968.

When the family moved from the Docks to Andersonstown, I thought my parents had made the move just for me so that I could be close to the Falls Road Bus Depot which I frequented on a daily basis to talk to the drivers and compare the different models of buses. I think they were impressed when I asked them how they found the 9641T/Harkness H36/32R compared to the earlier version although I must have caught one of them on a bad day when, trying to engage him in conversation he told me:
“It’s only a fucking bus laddie, now fuck off!”

I used to do a lot of bus spotting and quickly found out that if I went down to the Broadway Cinema I could get the registration number and the individual bus number of those not only on the Falls Road, but the Glen Road, Falls Park *and* Whiterock Road as well!

- 2206 OI number 246, Glen Road Route 13,

- GZ 7244 number 255, Falls Road Route 12, if memory serves.

They were copied down religiously into an old schoolbook with times and dates. If a bus was late I noted this down in red with my multi colored, four- in-one pen. I got to know the inspectors. I could have been one. Not for the first time my father called me strange.

One of them loaned me his hat one day and suggested that I could go to his house and we could talk more about buses. I asked my mother. She said, no. Probably it was best on hindsight.

My father and I went to places such as Bellevue Amusement Park and Stormont Buildings but mostly we would just “ride the bus”. Not as exotic as Boxcar Willie riding the rails but it was a world of wonderment for a young boy. The excitement was added to when the trolley arms would become disconnected from the overhead cables and the conductor would have to get out a long bamboo pole from the undercarriage and reconnect them.

A friend of mine recalls his own capers on the Whitewell Road involving the buses. He and another friend would stand at the turning circle outside the Throne Hospital, one would climb on the other’s shoulders and change the “points” which meant that the driver approaching the hospital would expect to make a left hand turn into the circle but instead would carry on up the road towards the terminus.

Travels further afield were made using the green Ulster Transport Authority buses and trains. We would go to Carrickfergus and Ballywalter by bus and Bangor by train.

Occasionally my mother would bring me to Dublin on the Enterprise train to see her relatives. This was always a big adventure and it is interesting to note that the journey time has changed little in nearly sixty years.

My aunts and uncles were scattered all over the City - a goodly number of them - and my palm was always crossed with silver on each visit but the big treat was to go to visit my cousin in Saggart, in the Dublin hills to the south of the city. If tin shacks can be picture postcard, then the one she lived in was. Kathy Meagan would be called a slow learner in

today's PC world. Then she was just called simple. She lived by herself in the most sublime of settings. A little stream ran behind the house. An abundance of wild flowers fought for notice all around, in colours only a LSD trip could describe. Bees lazily sipped the nectar and collected pollen and free range hens foraged between the sapling trees laying eggs wherever the notion took them.

I am convinced that the hens laid their eggs just for Kathy. Whenever they really wanted to produce offspring, they would simply wander off to the woods for three weeks than arrive back with a brood of multicoloured chicks.

The inside of the house was like an auctioneer's showroom. Nothing matched - it would have spoiled everything if it had. I imagine the small cabin in the Lake Isle of Inishfree poem would have been something similar. It had a delicious smell of damp which would be replaced by sizzling bacon and eggs on a Sunday morning when the relations came to check on her. A cock robin always invited himself to dine. He would rudely accept scraps without even a tweet of thanks. I spent some of the happiest days of my life there. A mobile phone mast now stands where her simple dwelling was. Thankfully the memories escaped before it was concreted over.

When my mother got married in 1948, she went to Dublin for her honeymoon. She arrived back at the borders of our little country only to be stopped by the Customs men who stripped her of every last wedding gift she was given – bed linen, a canteen of cutlery, a kettle, a china tea set and strangely enough a teddy bear. They presumed she was a smuggler trying to undermine the economy of the North. To her dying day she waged war on them and this explains what happened next.

Every time we crossed the border, she would stuff my pockets, socks and sleeves with *Sweet Afton* and *Martha Major* cigarettes knowing that they would not stop and search a child. I was packed so much I looked like an Al Qaeda suicide bomber in a fat suit. I was a drug mule in short trousers. She would sail past the customs flashing open her coat like an Amelia Street hooker shouting "Nothing to declare," with me trotting behind in her wake with the contraband insulating every part of my body.

I normally got a sixpence as a pay-off. Once she forgot to give it to me. So the next time we crossed and we were stopped, I decided it was payback time.

“Any cigarettes?” asked the uniform.

“No!” lied my mother.

“*I have,*” I said, smiling sweetly as I pulled out packet after packet out from my innards. My mother was mortified.

Halcyon days!

Phil Young

Rosemary for Remembrance

LONG, HOT, SUNNY DAYS. EVERYWHERE THE SCENT OF HAY. I SIT IN THE AIRLESS classroom, the sun making the dust motes dance, and chalk clouds filling the room. The hands of the clock in the hall crawl towards three o'clock. Freedom is imminent and the river beckons. The river Bandon runs clear and silvery, tumbling over stones and rocks from the shallows where little children paddle and search for minnows with their jam jars, to the mysterious deeps where only the brave will venture. I struggle, modestly, into my seersucker swimsuit, and join my friends in the girls' section of the river. We are careful not to cross the divide to where the boys swim, the nuns' warnings powerful inhibitors. The water feels silky. Afterwards I climb up the bank and run across the grassy area to the shelter of the gorse bushes. Here I wrap myself in my towel, and pull my clothes on to my still damp body. Speed is everything. Prying eyes are everywhere.

July. Hot sultry days. Bursts of sunshine interspersed with downpours of blinding rain. Rainbows bending over the horizon. Clouds of steam rising from roads and roofs.
Lazy mornings in bed, planning my day to the accompaniment of familiar sounds. If I stay here long enough Peggy might relent and bring me breakfast in bed - she will want to clear the kitchen. I creep to the top of the stairs, and peer down through the banisters into the kitchen, checking progress. Kettle steaming on the freshly blacked stove. Toast burning under the grill. Peggy grabs the toast and scrapes it into the sink. The black bits will be disguised with butter when she brings it to me, but I don't mind. I like burnt toast. I dash back to bed, as Peggy wets the tea and places the toast on a tray.
"Would you get out of that bed!" she yells at me, as she pushes open the bedroom door.

I stretch, and look surprised.
"I was just getting up, Peggy - you shouldn't have bothered."
"You were in your eye!" she retorts, as she plonks the tray down on my knees. She then relates the happenings of the morning to me. Who she saw at the early Mass, how the

priest was late again, how long it took her to get the fire going in the range. And all the while keeping a watchful eye on the goings on in the street outside the window. I like having Peggy here with me. Her companionship is restful and undemanding, but she never stays very long.

The bed is big and comfortable. A double bed, which over the years has sunk in the middle to form a saucer shape. It is high off the ground. Brass rails, tarnished with age, hold the frame in place, and with the gentlest of motions I can make it rock. It can be a boat, a carriage, a tent...anything I want it to be. A trunk, filled with books, stands at the end of the bed. One of my mother's auction finds. Bought in a moment of madness, without knowing its contents, but proving to have been well worth the risk. Books of every description. Dickens, Thackery, Scott, Beverly Nichols, Enid Blyton, Annie M.P. Smithson, Canon Sheehan, Patricia Lynch, The Girls of the Chalet School, even old medical books. I can dip in and explore so many different worlds.

The front door bangs. Peggy on her way to the shops. The five minute walk will take at least half an hour each way - many people to stop and chat to. She will come back full of 'news', which will be imparted to us over dinner. My father will tut tut and sigh - but he will listen!

I swing my legs out on to the floor. The lino is cool to the touch. A welcoming coolness. I search among the fluff balls beneath the bed for my sandals, and pull on my crumpled clothes. Sometimes I make my bed, more often I don't bother. The big kitchen is empty when I come down. I slope out the back door, scattering the hens as I run across the yard. The yard is big and messy, and full of potential. Two sheds run the full length of one side of the yard, one of which we grandly call the garage. We don't own a car, but bicycles lean drunkenly against the walls. The hens perch on the rafters, and my father curses the mess they make all over the floor. Swallows nest in the corners. The second shed is a paradise of rubbish and scrap. Empty tea chests, old mattresses, discarded prams and cots - and of course the dogs' beds. Sally the red coated mongrel, and Sandy the handsome labrador. They are deliriously happy at seeing me, smothering me in licks and kisses. Later, I will take them for their favourite walk through the woods.

Gateless pillars lead from the yard to the garden. Half an acre, tended by my father for his vegetables, and fringed by my personal plot. My apple tree, grown from a seedling, is flourishing. Blackcurrant bushes are heavy with fruit. Clumps of pansies and sweet william make splashes of colour. And in the centre, my beautiful rosemary bush. Planted from a

slip brought back by Peggy from one of her trips to her old home, and stuck into the ground with childish carelessness, it has now grown into a magnificent bush. Long, pungent, shimmery leaves, topped with vivid blue flowers, its powerful scent filling the air and lingering in my senses. Rosemary for remembrance. All through my life that scent will draw me back, always placing me in that childhood garden.

I pull up a few weeds, and then head along the overgrown path that leads to the giant elm tree, from which my swing hangs like a snake. A single rope tied to a sturdy branch, and holding a smooth piece of wood. Straddling this wood, I am oblivious to the chaffing of the rope on my thighs, as I swing, slowly at first, then gathering speed and height. Swishing through the air, high enough to touch the tallest branches, briars scraping my legs as I descend. I can see the roof of our school. The steady movement is almost hypnotic, and Peggy's shrill voice calling me to dinner intrudes like a persistent bell. She will keep yelling until I answer, so I shout 'Coming!', and let my body fall limp against the rope until the movement stops and I am spinning slowly, my legs dangling above the yellow scutch grass.

I walk back to the house, and in to the kitchen, where the rest of the family is already seated. Peggy, her face red from the stove, is piling flowery potatoes into a bowl on the table. My father looks on proudly.

"Did you ever see the likes of them?" he asks.

Nobody answers.

"By god, you'd travel a long way before you'd get spuds like that! Eat up now, girl." He jabs his fork at me.

I put a potato on my side plate. The jacket falls off in its entirety, and the dry, fluffy spud looks like the pom-pom on the top of my best beret. I hate the dryness of potatoes. They stick to the roof of my mouth, and form lumps in my throat. But I don't say that. I know that those potatoes are his expression of love for his family, so I force myself to eat one, washing it down with a glass of milk.

After everyone has eaten, the skins are gathered up, to be mashed with meal for the hens, and the scraps of meat are fed to the dogs.

....

Summer slides effortlessly into August. My mother insists that we need a blast of sea air before facing the long winter. My father puts on his grim face - far from holidays he was reared - but she wins him over. We are on our way to Youghal, where we will be urged to

appreciate how fortunate we are. Excitement mounts. The train journey seems endless. Soon the rocky fields of West Cork are replaced by green, well drained land, and nearer the coast the grass takes on a coarse appearance, as hillocks become veined with white. And then … our first glimpse of the sea. A sheen in the distance, light and shade playing on glassy surface. A whistle from the train announces our arrival, and great puffs of white smoke billow along the carriages as a final jerk throws us back into our seats.

Our cases are piled up on to the carrier's pony and trap for transportation to the guest house. We gaze over the wall, scanning the strand for signs of change. Down below clusters of families stake their pitch with foxford rugs and circles of sand castles. Mothers sit watchfully as children in rucked, bubbly bathing suits or cotton underpants shovel sand into heaps and run up and down to the distant sea to fill their buckets. Fathers, hankies on heads, shirts open to waist, trousers rolled up on mottled legs, hover near the rocks, billowing newspapers in front of them. Soon we will be one of those clusters, oblivious to the cold Atlantic winds, enjoying ourselves if it kills us.

It is a long walk to the guesthouse. Down the hill, past the lighthouse, through the park with its red and white seats, its tiny putting green and its elegant bandstand where bands never played, and finally our guesthouse. Being the youngest, I have to share my parents' room. Down at the end of the gloomy corridor is the bathroom, with its claw-legged bath, green patterns running down from each tap, and floral decorated lavatory with chain and looped wire handle.

Excitement makes me alert to all the morning sounds. Gulls shrieking, dogs barking, my father padding across the wooden floor. He peeks out the door to check on the availability of the bathroom, then unwinds the leather strop for his razor and clunks the cut-throat down on the dressing table while he roots in the case for his towel. Silence. Half an hour later he is back, fresh and scrubbed and smelling of soap. He wears his suit, his shirt and tie and his heavy shoes. I race to the bathroom before someone else takes over, and then it is my mother's turn. After breakfast we walk down to the harbour to watch the fishermen unload their catches, nets weighed down with mackerel, twitching and flashing and glistening. We sit on the long bench facing the sea. A warm wind blows in from the Atlantic. The air is filled with the pong of fish and seaweed and salt. At eleven o'clock precisely my father removes his watch from his top pocket, and we know that this is the signal to move on to Power's Lounge. Here we are greeted as if we had never left. Our table is the same, Joe Power is the same, the conversation is the same - the weather, the

government, the business, and how tall my brother and I have grown. My father gets his pint, my mother her pot of tea, and my brother and I long glasses of cold lemonade, smooth on the tongue, then sending fizzy bubbles up the backs of our noses. We savour each gulp. Afterwards we explore the town, renew acquaintance with our favourite shops, climb the steep steps to the Clock Tower and visit Walter Raleigh's house. The afternoon is for the strand. It is part of the bargain that we embrace the sea whatever the weather. I stand shivering at the water's edge, goose pimples big as blackberries out all over me. I feel the icy coldness swirl around my toes, my ankles, my knees. I move further in, letting the waves dash off my bottom. Then I am submerged, salt in my eyes, water up my nose and the frightening immensity of the sea all around me. Ordeal over, I race back up the smooth sand, bits of seaweed clinging to my ankles and floating from my tangled hair. I splatter water across the pages of the book my mother is immersed in, as I struggle to remove the wet swimsuit and pull on my vest and knickers, and now, duty done, I am free to explore the rock pools, climb the sand dunes or frog leap the breakwaters.

After our tea of ham salad and brown bread in the guesthouse we reach the high point of our day - two or three hours at Perks' Funfair and Amusement Park. Hobby horses, chair-o-planes, swing-boats, wall of death ... colour, noise, music, a sense of wildness and recklessness. The screams of girls on the chair-o-planes as they swish through the air, skirts billowing around them. Sedate older people being transformed before our eyes into wild, laughing paradoxes, caught up in the thrill and magic of the ride. Inside the big hall my mother sits, eyes glued to her bingo card. My brother loses all his money on the roulette wheel. My father surprises us with his skills at the rifle range. And I measure out my pennies between the slot machines and the roll-a-penny. Pockets empty, we join the now subdued groups drifting back to various lodgings. Away from the frenetic noise of Perks we are aware of the swish of the sea as it licks and sucks among the rocks. The beam of the lighthouse across the dark sea sends pangs of unexplained longings through me. I want to laugh and to cry ... to be alone, and yet be part of this new world. Here I feel anything can happen, and maybe something wonderful will happen, and my vague dreams will become a cohesive reality. And maybe that in itself is the real magic of our holiday in Youghal.

Childhood drifts inexorably into adolescence. Social mores change, and the cocoon of life in a small rural town in the forties cannot last for ever. Sheltered from the mainstream, from city life, from change itself, we are barely aware of an outside world beyond the mountains

and river surrounding us. But the stagnant Ireland of the forties merges slowly into the poverty and emigration of the fifties. Suddenly whole families are moving away. Parents scraping an existence on small farms or labourers' wages become aware of the hopelessness of it all. They want something more for their children. My friends - boys and girls who had moved up through the ranks with me, from Miss Crowley's babies' class to sixth class and Sister Agnes, are soon following their older siblings and taking the boat to England. They return at Christmas time, flaunting new found wealth and viewing us with critical eyes. Now we are caught up in the trailing ends of different lives, and contentment with our lot is gone forever. We listen to tales of exciting lives in cities throbbing with speed and glamour. We hear of modern buildings, central heating, easy transport, beautiful clothes and money to spend. Our life now appears drab and dull and empty. So, for me, childhood is over - a blur of memories of a house full of movement and love, a garden rampant with weeds and rubbish and the pervading scent of rosemary. Rosemary for remembrance.

Change is galloping towards us, and for me, the baby of the family - the one left behind when all the other fledglings have fled the nest, the transition is a difficult one. Security and certainty give way to fears and doubts, and hope becomes trapped in a backwater of memory.

Perhaps we should never look back. Never try to retrace footsteps long since smudged. But we are what our childhood has made us, and no matter how much we progress, or how little, the child within cannot be denied. We are shaped and carved and nurtured by our past, and what we have become can never deny that. Nor should it wish to.

flash fiction

Ruth McKee

A Swift Half

HE HAS A MUCH SMALLER HEAD THAN I REMEMBER. THIS IS A BIZARRE THOUGHT ABOUT someone who has reached mythological status in the narrative of my own life.

He is an intellectual, searching for new stuff to say about some old stuff before someone else says it first. This gives us something neutral to talk about for the first half an hour, the personal information leaking out in between, where I find out he's moving to Austria, with a girl who is half Russian and half his age and who I hate to the last Slavonic syllable.

He must, sometimes, take fantasy leave to the days of our late teens, to the smell of rubber and sweat and old clothes and sunshine through closed curtains on a weekday, the noise on the streets outside not to do with us, not part of us. Ordinary life lets us forget about these things, with its responsible parenting and v-neck sweaters, hands that stray to hips in a parody of a parody we once performed, years ago.

He's got me turning on the charm; I preen mentally, chucking him my best lines about death and time. He talks about his travels, which is interesting at first, but soon becomes wearisome, as he is keen to point out that he has not gone to the *obvious* places. I am too embarrassed to tell him that the last place I visited was through a supermarket token deal, and that the coolest thing about it was the barely functioning sauna. I feel like I have crawled away and rotted for the most fruitful period of a life.

On the third beer we recall the city where we once lived, my room where we spent most of our time.

"I would have liked it more if we had done something, anything but stay in your room for months," he says.

"I didn't hear you complaining at the time." I try not to sound defensive.

“No. But we never really did anything. I never even went up the mountain,” he says.

“You didn’t miss much.” This is true; it’s not much of a mountain.

“That’s not the point,” he says, looking right into my eyes.

We sip our beers.

“Did I stop you from doing stuff?” I ask him.

“We stopped each other, maybe,” he says, looking up and I gulp down his eyes, “but then, that’s love for you.”

I'm inebriated, open ended, pricking with sensation. Of all the roads not taken, the one I watched him go down alone reappears from time to time, leafy, strange, vanishing, seen from the window of a speeding car.

“One for the road?” he says.

The alcohol washes in memories of fumbling sex, amateur and sweet, and not at all like sex becomes when it becomes just sex. I can’t stop thinking about it; my hand is shaking and I feel sick, I need a cigarette.

It’s hailing; the smoking shelter is battered with tiny zombies blasting their brains out, sliding down the plastic. I inhale. The smell on my hands is reassuring. The man inside is the only man I ever loved. I laugh at my little drama, as this is simply not true. I never loved him in a real sense, or in the real world. I loved him with the ease and adventure of a first attempt, without boundaries or consequences.

My hands are numb as I touch the chair backs on my way back inside. We return to the past, and the present. Turns out, he says, he hasn’t been living his life, which is a lot to swallow considering his life experience reads like the biopic of a nineteenth century explorer.

“I’ve been watching myself living a life for over thirty years,” he says.

We sip, examining this sentence.

"Well," I say, "I guess I've been watching other people watching themselves living a life – ''

We giggle, losing the thread.

"You never wonder, if – ?" he asks.

We hold a gaze for a second, tick tock.

Oh god, he is about to kiss me. Is this my second chance? Will this kiss open up worlds to me – the Himalayas, the Patagonian desert, stars in the Arctic Circle? Will it teach me all the tongues of Europe, all the music of the southern hemisphere?

"Back in a sec," I say, killing the moment, as things are spinny, and I go to the loo.

The universe is giving me a second roll of the dice. I hold on to the wall and put my head down, trying to think. Adrenaline should be coming out my pores. What will I do? There is an old gleeful me who can hear the singing bird, see the rainbow - but only for a drunk instant. The real me gets up and goes back, pounding, heavier, worried.

His glasses and book are on the table, so I sit down. I discuss the possibilities with myself. I stand up again, uncertain. I look at our two coats lying comfortably together on the back of the chair. I see more evenings like this, I see his face become ordinary over time – or would it? Would it fall victim to the same deadening passions as every love affair since? Or, as the eternal lover in us all believes, would it be transforming?

I stand looking on, just as all these years I have stood behind glass, under water, hidden behind the faces of my children, and I start to walk towards the door. I turn into the hail and I walk, jagged little lines at first. I walk – and then I run.

James Claffey

The Memory Bird

CORDS AND KNOTS AND TANGLED MEMORIES, THE PACKAGE CONTAINED A SEVERED tongue, a harbinger of silence. She was in my arms when the breath stopped short and the jazzy diminuendo of machines and palliative nurses worked in unison as the last bagel sat uneaten on the TV tray, her faithful companion for decades. As the nurse folded arms across chest and shone a light into sightless eyes, the doors of the warehouse creaked open, and the lemon verbena soap waited in a bowl by the foot of the bed. My tongueless mouth opened to allow the memory bird access as it made the journey from her still heart to mine still beating.

Out of Range

A GOOSE FLIES AWAY FROM THE ''V'' OF ITS FELLOWS AND DROPS DOWN TOWARD THE dark lake water. The tent is beneath a stand of fir trees, guy ropes secured by narrow metal pegs. You wanted the freedom of being out of range of technology, away from the simmer of wireless signals and the constant beep of the inbox and the extension requests from your intro to Lit class. Dried lentils and homemade granola with crispy pieces of sesame seed and blackened cranberries are your chosen diet for our retreat. Mute for most of the long drive, we speak in whispers, despite being miles from anyone else. By the entrance to the tent I hold you, arms about your waist, the crooked ears of a nearby rabbit twitch as the goose veers closer. They must have excellent night vision, you say, as your fingers scratch my arms and the sky blues to black.

Clodagh O'Brien

Little Pieces

HICKORY, DICKORY, DOCK. THE MOUSE RAN UP THE CLOCK. REMEMBERED THINGS GO from back to front, front to back, time being pulled away by greedy hands. Every day it comes; little pieces of me. Lost and now found, patches with dips and edges.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I had a mother, never without an apron and a handful of raisins. I had a father who smelt of burnt peat with scaly hands. They died where they were born and I don't know who visits them. I have a sister who sits with me, her perfume clinging to my nose. It's sickly sweet, just like her.

Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho, it's home from work we go. Why yes I can work evenings, weekends too if you like. My boss had hair plugs and a balloon paunch. We screwed on his desk while the hoover rubbed outside. I watched the waxy faces of his kids in a flowery frame and listened to the tap-tap-tap of the metal balls on his desk swing.

Swing low, sweet chariot. Comin' forth to carry me home. I once lived in sand, acres and miles and horizons that stretched out in a coat of camel hides. It smelt of lemons and pistachios that we ate together; him the nuts, me the salt on the shells. He left me for a pair of skyscraper legs and a more agreeable face.

There once was an ugly duckling. With feathers all stubby and brown. I went to get my boobs done, in a clinic brighter than the sun. As big as you can get doctor, as big as skin will allow. He stuffed in beanbags, one nipple higher than the other that disliked the cold. Double D. Double fucking D.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. My head started waking up in strange places; on the table in restaurants, over the steering wheel, across my desk. Dizzy. I'm not dizzy. Those headaches are because I have too much to do. Pop the packet and swallow. Nurofen, Nurofen make me better. Nurofen, Nurofen help me see.

Jingle bells. Jingle bells. Jingle all the way. My niece is only four, a pretty one, plump with dolls and frills and all things pink. She talks with a lisp and calls me Sa-wah. I bought her things her parents couldn't afford and liked to see the irritation in their eyes. Were you jealous of me sis? Were you jealous once upon a time before the little pieces and the songs?

Oompa Loompa do-ba-dee-doo. I've got a perfect puzzle for you. Clients are complaining. Clients are saying that deadlines are being missed. Clients are not happy. Clients can go screw themselves. I took their enforced break and sat in parks. Watched kids slide, whirl, swing, snot, scream, run, whack, bang, munch, slap, pout and fall. Mother is a word I'll never know.

There were ten in the bed and the little one said roll over, roll over. I'm in a tiny room, with a window full of cheap vases that vomit hollow petals. My bed is small, single and cold. It creaks and squeaks and chatters. It's not like my one at home with thread counts and silk. You look like a princess Sa-wah. Can I be a princess too?

Twinkle, Twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky. They've given me a handful of days and a drip-drip-drip. It's fine little sis, it's fine. Their words are pillows stuffed with comfortable and painless. Don't cry little sis, don't cry. I lie back, my sky now the ceiling; the songs closing in.

Karl Parkinson

Small Business

THEY CALLED HIM THE ICE-CREAM MAN. BECAUSE HE WAS AN ICE-CREAM MAN.
He was also a Heroin dealer. A Junkie. A fucked up fuckup.
When he gave out 99's, cornets and screwballs the kids said he was scabby.
No chewing gum at the bottom, a dribble of red syrup.
When he gave out deals the junkies said he was a mean cunt.
More bag than gear, ya need to bang two bags before ya get a decent turn on.
The Ice-cream man drove a white van. Called himself Mr. Soft.
He ate like a fly, loved sugar, loved his own Ice-cream and loved his own gear.
He mixed the brown with the white.
Stayed up all night to watch box-sets of The Wire.
Dreamed about becoming like Stringer Bell.
His girlfriend was older then him, had 2 kids for another man and one for Ice.
She teased him sometimes when he couldn't get it up "Mr. Fucking soft is right."
He called her a skinny bitch and said, "How could ya get it up for a yoke like you?"
It was love alright. It was the stuff of dreams. It was all they ever wished for.
For their wishes were hacked into by the chemicals in the brain, by the darkness in the burned foil, by the fist and boots of the past. The Ice-cream man was full of Indian ink and prison tattoos. He drank Druids Glen cider and smoked everything he could:
John Players, Bensons and Hedges, Silk Cut, Samson, Skunk, Smack, Crack, he even tried crushed up spiders once for the buzz. His favourite bands were The Rolling Stones and Pearl Jam. When he was Fourteen he fucked his neighbours' black mongrel street dog.
He never knew his father. He was his mother's only child, her little pet, he broke her heart continually and robbed her many times.
The Ice-cream man called himself soft, acted hard. Thought he was big time.
He wasn't hard or big. He was a fucking fly buzzing in a room full of swats.

Ice-cream man, ya fucking dope yea. Thought ya could just go around bragging that
Ya get gear on tick off eh me and don't pay. Off eh me, ME, Tony Kelly. Ya little prick yea.
Time te find out what happens to an Ice-Cream man when ya turn the heat up what dya think boy's will he melt?

The Ice-cream man's flesh sizzled and spit like pork on a barbecue when the flame from the blowtorch hit it.
The hair singed, the screams bounced off the warehouse walls like comets full of fear.
The Ice-cream man started to melt from the chair. It was July. It was hot. It was the perfect day for selling Ice-cream and gear. The screams and smells got louder and more noxious when the flame hit his balls and the razor fizzed his nose away like a bit of grizzle from a cheap cut of meat. One of the boys played the tune from the Ice-cream van to drown out the Sonics of the torture. It was *Mary had a little lamb*.
The Ice-cream man's mind went looking for his mother and the time when he was nine and she and him went to Funderland to ride the rollercoaster and he won a teddy bear for her on the darts game. Then he melted all the way down when Tony poured the petrol on and threw the match at him Hollywood style. The Ice-cream man in flames and *Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb; its face was white as snow.*

Tony took over the van after that got it all done up, new paint job, the works.
He keeps a Glock handgun hidden in a compartment under the seat. He called round to Mr. Soft's woman with 200 euro and 5 bags of H and told her that softy done a bunk and won't be coming back, not ever. She said she was glad because he was a prick anyway. Tony and her fucked each other in the kitchen that night, on the floor like two wild filthy beasts. Tony didn't think she was very good looking at all but she could really fuck a man good. He made her get of the gear, now she just drinks and snorts a bit of sniff. Soon Tony was living with the Ice-cream man's woman and the kids, sitting on the sofa, watching The Wire. Now they call Tony the Ice-cream Man, they say he's a mean cunt, but never to his face.
He changed the tune in the van to *Popeye the sailor man*, he thought it was more masculine and changed the name on the van to Mr. Frosty.
It's not meant to be ironic. Tony doesn't do ironic. Tony is cold.
Tony is hard. Tony is The Ice-cream man. Tony won't melt until the sun hurls down. Tony's gonna expand the business and get another van, get one of the boys to drive it for him.

Tony’s the best fucking Ice-cream man in Dublin and don’t you forget it.

A. Joseph Black

Tsunami

IT'S SUPPOSED TO HIT YOU LIKE A TSUNAMI, ISN'T IT? INSTANTANEOUS AND ENORMOUS – BOOM! Done. A switch flicked: a binary distinction. You were childless, now you are a father. You're handed the child, and this is it: the moment. *That* moment.

"In that moment I knew..."
"From that moment on…"
"That was the moment..."

But how had you felt, then? Tired? Relieved? Concerned about your wife? All of these things, inter alia. And the alia? Did they include an overwhelming, all-consuming, and unconditional love? A love above and beyond all other love, for the miracle you hold so tentatively in your arms? They did not. The alia did not include that. So is the switch broken, then? Is there something wrong with the switch? Is there something wrong with you? Because, where is the tsunami? What happened to that?

* * *

And now it's a week later and you're home, all three of you. It's hard work, being a father. Day is night, night is day. Neither means much. And there's science involved: one corner of the kitchen has been transformed into a laboratory in miniature. You have sterilising equipment, measuring spoons and cups, powders, potions, salts. The parental alchemy of transforming crying into sleep. It's hard work.

Because he does cry. The baby cries a lot. At first it's little more than a mewl, tiny and distant. Over time, however, it develops and grows. Into something fuller, richer, louder. But here's the thing: the thing you didn't know, that no one told you. He cries out, but he doesn't cry. There are no tears. He can't cry. His little tear ducts remain underdeveloped. Or clogged with amniotic fluid. Or both, possibly. Most babies don't cry actual tears until they're 3-12 weeks old. Your book tells you that. Some don't cry tears until they're two years old. You think this is odd. Odd that it happens, and odd that you didn't know.

You're not sure now what you feel. You love the child, of course you do. But you also love your wife, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, some friends. So that's not unique for you, loving him. That's not special or extraordinary. You love lots of people. But isn't this love supposed to be different? More…intense? Unqualified? That's not what it feels like. That's not what you feel.

Are you worried about this? You're not sure. You think you should be, but there are so many demands on your emotions right now that you find it hard to become too concerned. It'll come, you think, although the actual basis for this presumption does not make itself apparent. Things change, you think. Tides turn.

You feel disengaged, somehow. Adrift. You tend to the baby, try to meet his needs, insofar as you can discern them. But it's as if it's someone else doing that, not you. There's a remoteness there and you can't seem to break through it: to reach out, touch, be touched.

* * *

The baby was one month old yesterday. Your wife still doesn't seem to notice. How could she? She can't see inside you. She can't see what you feel, can't know. You're not hiding it from her. You're open to challenge on this: you may even welcome the opportunity to talk about it. But your wife doesn't seem to notice.

And the baby? Do you think the baby knows something is amiss? They're supposed to be super-intuitive. What is the baby thinking when he looks up into your blank face? Is he confused by your disinterest? Grieved by your apathy? Apparently not. He smiled for the

first time yesterday. You felt...gratified. Pleased. You did not feel proud. You did not melt. You just watched.

* * *

Seven weeks, four days. It happened this morning: the turning point which, in truth, you had begun to suspect may never arrive. That moment. It was 4.23 am. Or possibly 3.42, or 2.34. One of them. The baby wakes and shortly thereafter so do you. You follow the sound of the crying as your eyes adjust to the gloom. An empty bottle by the Moses basket indicates your wife has been awake when you were not, and that the baby could not be hungry. The bedroom floorboards are chill under your feet. Unusually, your wife continues to sleep deeply. You lift the baby from the basket and hoist him onto your shoulder. The crying abates but soon returns, louder and more urgent. Faster, sorer. You cradle him in your arms and move to the little pool of soft light thrown out by the nightlight. His face is contorted and red. His eyes are darkened slits as his mouth gapes and a raw rasping cry fills the bedroom air.

"Shush now wee man, shush now. Daddy's here. There, there. Daddy's here."

You know he doesn't understand, you just want him to hear. To pick up on the soothing tone, the calming cadence, to breathe in your scent. Recognise you. Daddy's here.

And then you see it, sparkling amber in the nightlight. Slowly rolling from his eye, leaving a glistening trail on his fleshy cheek. A tear. His first tear. It is extraordinary. You feel your own eyes prickle, a gorgeous ache, until you feel upon your own cheek the same thing. This is the moment: the moment you learned that two tears can be a tsunami.

Elaine Donnelly

The Writer's Woman

BEHIND THE WRITER WALKS A WOMAN. SHE IS HIS SHADOW, BUT SHE IS NOT A MIRROR image of him. She has her own shape. She is a shadow of his talent, a figure that lurks behind him catching metaphors or couplets which she can work into a sonnet.

The woman's shoulders point forward to the extent of beginning to meet at her chest. She is folding in on herself. She is becoming a cylinder, long and lean and filled to the five litre mark with creative influences, mostly those of the Writer.

Her feet are narrow and she balances herself on an invisible beam of light emanating from the Writer causing her to take small steps, one foot precisely behind the other.

And every day the Writer's Woman puts on her mask. A solemn face, painted in white across her cheeks, her forehead, her eyes and lips stopping in a line under her jawbone. Almond shaped, grey eyes glimpse under the makeup. Like a Geisha girl her mouth is almost expressionless, a circlet of wonder or angst created by her non-mouth.

She is clothed in attire suited to a woman of her standing, in garments long and black, though it is difficult to know if they are coats or skirts or dresses. And, on certain special occasions when, for instance the Writer is appearing at an event such as a poetry reading or book signing the woman may be seen to wear a scarf of crimson or coral or thin shoes of gold.

And thus, she will exist until the white makeup begins to sink into her wrinkled face, her hands liver spotted and her tiny feet wavering on the fine beam of light. In his shadow she will walk, the Writer's Woman.

Nandí Jola

I am a Man

(SHOUTING) NDIYINDODA "I AM A MAN," JABU SHOUTED AS SOON AS HIS FORESKIN dropped to the ground (silence) surrounded by the elders of the village, the circumcision now was complete, to be a man – off course he had to heal and a month was going to put his manhood to test…

Jabu had to be blindfolded and had to take the only manhood journey at 5am, walking for miles on his bare feet, he would have entered the jungle in the crack of dawn – the only sound you hear at that time would be of birds and the curious sun looking through the trees…this is a sacred journey, many boys would have walked it, but not many returned home and those who do come back as proud man.

No tales are told – what happens in there stays there – boys have died on their quest into manhood and many mothers have mourned, but Jabu, had made it; after a month of eating food with no salt, sleeping in a plastic shelter and overcoming the sounds of Africa by night. He had passed the ultimate test.

To what was to be the journey back home, Jabu was up before the crack of dawn by the excitement of going back home (sound of a stream) he walked to the river to have his last bath and brushed his teeth with the ashes from last night's fire and prepared himself for the journey home to his mother and father there the village would be welcoming him with the sound of drum and song – with home brewed alcohol they would have been up all night… slaughtered animals and cleaned their intestines all night for tripe stew whilst frying the fresh blood with the most beautiful taste in your mouth all this was making Jabu even more

excited as he pictured himself having the barbequed leg of lamb to himself (he pauses) but before all that he had to wrap himself in a blanket for only there he will receive clothes – not just any clothes, new clothes, best clothes – so he wrapped himself and just a white stick above his head and his bare feet were showing, nothing else.

The sounds of drums signalled ahead and the stick fighting of men displaying the calibre and their culture for all to see would fill the streets as he walks closer and closer to home, facing down by instruction only seeing with his ears as the sounds and screams gets louder and louder he knows he has arrived home identifying his family by their voices he is led to a room where no women are allowed in and men dress him in his fine clothes and the elders talk to him (bemyala) not to be in contact with a woman for another six months at least then when all is said and done and he sits in the corner for everyone to greet him including his mother, they flock in with gifts of money and hugs until such time they are instructed that he needs to be escorted to go to the toilet or needs fed.

The same could not be said at Dumisani's house, the clothes still new, at the top of his coffin they placed them and the mother passes out with grief for a son and the screams said it all about the journey to manhood. (Song – Thula Mama – Vusi Mahlasela)

Naomi Elster

Make a Wish that Matters

THEY WALKED HAND IN HAND ACROSS THE HA'PENNY BRIDGE, STOPPING AT THE TOP TO look down at its graceful white arches and the life and bustle of Dublin reflected in the black river that was their city's namesake. They dropped a coin into the Liffey and each made a wish. He wished for Ireland's freedom. She had only been able to think of how her child sister had spent the whole morning coughing into a white handkerchief, and how when that handkerchief had come away from her mouth it had been stained with red. He said her wish was selfish. She thought the same about his, but she was the kind of woman who kept her opinions to herself. When they kissed goodbye, she didn't realise it would be their last goodbye. They thought their love could survive anything.

The next Monday, Easter Monday, he marched in to Dublin town with a band of other men like himself. Idealists. Martyrs. Heroes. Fools. He had on an old military jacket that someone had donated to him, and no weapon. Few of the men had uniform or weapons. They thought their bravery was enough to change the world, that dreams would protect them from heavy artillery, and ideals would stop them bleeding.

She had heard their leader talk. He was no military strategist, this poet who kept a school. He would often talk of "the ultimate sacrifice," breathing those words with a respect the devout save for the name of Jesus. He set out for battle not to win victory, but to make martyrs. Perhaps there was honour in the sacrifice of one's own blood for a cause, but to lead a group of foolish young men to certain death for an ideal, an ideal that would still leave her hungry and her sister coughing red death into a white handkerchief and improve no one's lot – there was no nobility in that. Padraig Pearse was no hero to her.

She would live to see Great Brunswick Street, where the poet was born, renamed in his memory. She watched as the rebels became heroes, and as the Irish people rewrote history. She wept when she heard that her daughter's schoolteacher had sang the praises of the poem that Pearse had written while he awaited execution in Kilmainham Jail. The poem was called "The Mother."

"I do not grudge them: Lord, I do not grudge
My two strong sons that I have seen go out
To break their strength and die"

Any mother who has ever loved a child would know that poem for the lie it was. No mother celebrated the sacrifice of her sons in the Easter of 1916, not even Margaret Pearse.

Every year a few days before Easter she would leave her husband and children and cross the Ha'Penny Bridge. She would drop a coin into the Liffey and remember her dead martyr. Then she would make a wish.

She would wish for food for her children, a neighbour's return to good health, an end to a friend's troubles. If he had been alive he would have told her she was selfish. But she knew her wishes were worth fighting for.

Jonathan O'Brien

Saint Perpetua

I AM BORN IN PAIN AND SHIT AND BLOOD. I SCREAM AND MY MOTHER SCREAMS. A difficult labour. It goes on for hours. We have reason to scream. The cell is filthy but it's safer in here than outside. I am born in chains.

Three Roman soldiers stand by the door laughing and jeering. Their sweaty faces and hands disgust me. They stare at us. Eyes popping out. I see them leering as I head out into the world.

'You made a fine bed there, Christian,' the first says.

'See what happens when you lie down with pagans, do you?' says the second.

'You're not loving it now though are you Pet?' laughs the third. They mock as I make my way into the world. A fine beginning you'll agree.

Felicitas does her best to clean me up but there is not much she can do here to make it clean. Even the rats refuse to stay. She wraps me up and holds me close. I can hear her heart beating. I like her face. She has a gentle smile. She won't have it for long though.

My mother is nearly worn out. Her work is done for now. She has more to face too. But for now she can rest. I take to her breast without any argument. I am made for suckling. I enjoy it while it lasts. I know what is to come. My mother has made her choice. I am no fool. She chose *Him* over me. I heard it all inside her belly. The prayers and chants. The splash of water. My grandfather pleading with her to recant. To return to the gods of *her* birth.

But did she listen? No, but she has always been stubborn. She wasn't thinking of me though. Instead of me she chose the martyrs' road. But no one thought of me did they? No one asked me if I wanted to convert.

I suck the milk from my mother's breast but not for long. Not for long.

review: Claire Savage

on The Shelter of Neighbours

by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

THE LIFE OF A WRITER IS ONE WROUGHT WITH MANY CHALLENGES… HOW TO CREATE convincing and memorable characters and storylines, how to fund a flourishing career when everyone knows 'writing doesn't pay', how to seek inspiration amidst the busyness of everyday life and… how to keep going when, at times, it seems almost impossible to move forward.

What better collection of short stories to review then, for this first edition of The Incubator, than a book which encapsulates all of these frustrations and more - and serves them up with some tantalising twists.

'The Shelter of Neighbours' by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, was published by Blackstaff Press in 2012 and features 14 stories in which the key characters are faced with individual moments of crisis. The book's backbone is literary, as a fair few of the people we meet in Ní Dhuibhne's tales are wordsmiths – an added enticement, in my opinion, for writers to devour her work and derive a little wry understanding from it.

The writing itself flows beautifully. As Edna O'Brien put it – *'her prose shimmers like poetry'* – so much so, that you could quite easily get carried away by the exquisite writing and stray away from the stories. Such is Ní Dhuibhne's talent, however, that this never happens, as the stories' particulars are as entrancing as the prose.

And that's no small feat, when you consider the fact one of them essentially deals with the dilemma of substituting a familiar and much-loved open fire with a more modern stove. Like myself, when I began reading this particular story, you may find yourself thinking – how interesting can this possibly be? That, however, is the mark of an incredibly gifted writer –

one who can turn even the most seemingly mundane into suitable fodder for readers. Of course, it's never just about buying a stove, or filing tax-returns (as in another story), but rather, the minutiae of each character's life is simply the scaffolding around which the rest of the story is built. They are about the trials and crises experienced by each person and how they deal with them and, as a result, the reader develops his or her own mini dilemma – how would we respond to someone who carried out that action in that set of circumstances? How do we think we would react in the same situation?

Essentially, the stories make us reflect on much more than is at hand and, together with the preciseness of the writing, it is a winning formula.

As a means of enticing would-be readers to the collection, but without revealing too many spoilers, suffice it to say that, against a backdrop which is predominately the south of Ireland, The Shelter of Neighbours presents a mixture of individual stories which bleed into each other as a result. The collection draws upon the Irish proverb that 'people live in one another's shelter or shadow', and subsequently juxtaposes various characters within the book by sketching them into each other's stories.

The initial tone is set with Finn, our struggling writer/creative writing tutor who, ironically, has lost his inspiration for writing anything - despite his profession. He muses, 'get a life. And use your imagination', yet it's something he can't seem to do himself. The distractions of his own life get in the way, something sure to be familiar to many…

So too, is the story which deals with funding in the arts – for novelists who could perhaps hit 'the big time', if only somebody would believe in them and offer a little financial respite for them to grow their talent. The ending to this is a more extreme way of dealing with rejection than I'd like to think anyone would actually resort to, but in its unexpectedness, was therefore utterly refreshing. It might make you look over your shoulder though, if you're in the line of bestowing grants upon authors…

The pensive writer's retreat also features in 'Illumination' – the central character here drawn into the secluded world of a group of strangers who add yet more layers to the inherent search for meaning that is sought.

Indeed, running throughout the collection, the reader should also catch the thread of fairytale expertly woven into the background. 'The man who had no story' recalls a tale where fairies inspired incredible stories in a character, and, in 'Illumination', the writer seeking to discover the essence and indeed, the point of writing itself, is seduced by a secret abode where nothing is quite what it seems and where the hostess exudes more than an air

of mystery. The wood within which the house lies, oozes magical intent – the description of the route she takes to visit her newfound acquaintances, full of folklore connotations.

The latter part of the collection focuses more on suburbia and the multi-faceted lives which unfold there daily. Here are people who support one another, spy on one another, gossip about one another - offer moral support with one hand, whilst the other is stealthily plotting something a little less savoury. There are unexpected encounters, love and loss, yearning and desire – regret, desperation and moments of fury. It is a melting pot of chaos concealed within a leafy, suburban suitcase. The only thing about suburbia is – it goes nowhere, and has nowhere to go.

Meanwhile, 'The shortcut through Ikea' and 'Bikes I have lost' conjure up memories and gift us, respectively, with snapshots of their character's earlier lives - through a chance meeting and via remembrances of pivotal events linked to the bicycles owned over the years.

It is a diverse collection in many ways. Ní Dhuibhne paints myriad pictures of everyday life with a beautifully simple palette, but subsequently mixes her colours to create short stories which are each mini masterpieces of perfectly crafted prose. To simplify, it could be said the collection is of two parts: one, dealing with writers and one with suburbia, but to do so would risk putting readers off what is an incredibly eclectic body of work and one which this reviewer thoroughly recommends.

The Shelter of Neighbours is published by Blackstaff Press.

short story

Sinéad O'Hart

The Monument

YOU COULD SEE IT, JUST ABOUT, FROM OUR BATHROOM WINDOW, IF YOU LEANED OUT just far enough. It stood at the top of the hill just up the road from our house, a big stone memorial to some rebellion or battle or other; I never really cared. I just knew it was a huge, ugly-looking cross, glaring down at our town, and we called it the Monument because we couldn't think of anything better.

The only use it'd ever had, as far as I could see, was as a meeting-place for 'go-boys', as my mother liked to call them. I was never allowed near it unless I was with her. The occasional Sunday we'd take a stroll up to it, knowing what we'd find - patches of blackened, flattened earth covered in cigarette ends, cans and plastic bottles. Occasionally, there'd be dregs of discarded clothing, and once in a while a misplaced shoe, usually a high heel of some sort. Mam and me would do our best to clean it up and restore some semblance of respectability to the place, but the next time we'd go, it'd be worse.

'It's a disgrace,' my mother would mutter, picking filthy, wet plastic off the ground with the tips of her fingers. I'd hold open the rubbish sack for her as she bustled around, collecting the detritus like a hedgehog collects leaves. 'They've no respect for anyone or anything, so they don't.' Sometimes as she worked there'd be tears in her eyes, and sometimes anger.

'If I ever catch you up here, doing anything like this, I'll kill you,' she'd warn me. 'Gurriers, that's all they are. Gurriers and go-boys. You're not that sort, so you're not. You're better than that.' When I didn't respond straight away, she'd start barking at me. 'Well? Are you a little cur, or aren't you?'

'No, mam,' I'd say, hoping she'd leave it alone.

‘You’re right you’re not,’ she’d sniff, and then she’d go back to accumulating rubbish, bending and creaking and sighing under her breath.

‘Are ya goin’ up?’ Paudie said to me, one day in school. I hadn’t a clue what he was on about.

‘Goin’ up where?’ I said. He laughed, but I just looked at him, and he gave me a slap across the top of the arm.

‘What sort of a thick are ya?’ he asked. ‘Up to the Monument, of course. Tonight. There’s a party, so I hear.’

‘But sure they wouldn’t want the likes of us to go up.’ My throat flickered. ‘Would they?’

‘Well, we’re not exactly invited,’ Paudie conceded. ‘But sure what does that matter? Isn’t it a free country?’ I didn’t have an answer to that.

‘Good man yourself,’ said Paudie. ‘Try and bring a few cans, will ya?’

‘Where in the name of God am I going to find cans?’

‘Just do your best,’ he said.

Paudie called about half ten that night, and I was ready at the back door, plastic bag in hand. Four cans nestled inside it, no two the same. As soon as I heard the low whistle from the dark lane behind the house, I stepped out into the night with practised, smooth movements. I carefully locked the back door, pulling slightly on the handle so that the key wouldn’t click as I drove it home. Paudie amused himself by examining the contents of the bag as I did this. I noticed he’d come empty-handed.

‘Pick and mix, is it?’ said Paudie, once we were up the lane and out of earshot, handing me back the bag of cans with a snort.

‘Nicked them out of my uncle’s fridge,’ I said, like it was nothing. ‘Had to take what I could get.’ I didn’t mention that my first plan had been to drop into my da’s local, armed with

nothing but a smile, to buy a carry-out 'for the oul fella'; of course, I'd been chased off the premises, forcing me to resort to Plan B. I was already feeling the flat of my father's hand across my head. I hoped the thrashing would be worth it.

'Good man yourself,' grinned Paudie. 'Jesus, I can't wait for this.' We neared the top of the road. Just another hundred yards or so, and we'd be there. Already, the glow of a campfire called down to us, and the bulk of the Monument loomed out of the light like a demon standing up out of Hell. 'There'll be girls here, and everything,' he added, in a voice that sounded strangled.

I thought, then, of all the shoes my mother and me had found, over the years. The height of them, the straps and buckles. The undoing of laces and buttons. The stretching out of toes.

'Come on, will ya,' I said, gasping as the hill took a bite out of my muscles. 'It's freezing.' I shot ahead, Paudie skittering in my wake.

My throat felt fat as we drew near. The plastic bag whished and crackled at my knee, and the cans inside it thunked dully, one against the other. I felt like I was wearing the wrong clothes, the wrong hair. I heard a girl laugh, and my nerve buckled.

Paudie wasn't having it.

'Will you give up?' he hissed. 'We're here, now. We have drink. It'll be grand.' Still, we hovered on the edge of the light-pool, our toes aglow, just watching.

Then, one of the girls spotted us.

'Josie?' she shouted, her voice unsteady. 'Is that you?' Paudie grabbed a painful, careless handful of my jacket and shoved me forward. I almost fell, the bag of cans swinging like a pendulum from my sweaty fist. Swearing, and laughter, greeted me.

'Who the hell are *you?*' asked a voice. I shielded my eyes against the light, but everything was still a blur.

'I – I've cans…' I began.

‘Get t’hell!’ came the reply. Someone threw something, and I turned away. It clattered to the ground not far from my foot – a clunky heel, its straps undone.

‘Leave the cans, though!’ shouted another voice, to uproarious laughter. I ignored that.

‘Bloody muppet,’ snapped Paudie as I passed him. ‘Give us a can, at least.’

‘No way!’ I said. ‘Come on, let’s just go. I don’t know what planet you were on, thinking they’d just let us join in because we brought drink.’

‘Sorry,’ mumbled Paudie. ‘I thought it’d work.’

‘Yeah. Well.’ I pulled up the collar of my thin jacket as we started to pick our way down the hill. ‘Hurry up.’

We’d only gone a few yards when we heard it – a tiny noise, a breath going in and being held. A fizz of whispering followed it, and I saw a flash of bright skin in the inky darkness beside the rocky pathway. A pale, curving thigh. We stopped like we’d walked into a wall.

A face turned towards us like the full moon coming out from behind clouds. Fire flashed out of a pair of liquid eyes. I saw flesh, soft and white and billowy, and I thought of a ship in full sail.

Then, a gasp and a muffled curse. A strong-fingered hand pulled something down over her nakedness, and Paudie and me scrambled down the hill, fear and shame and the thrill of it mingling in our veins.

I woke up the next morning expecting the axe to fall any second. The cans languished in a warming heap beneath my bed, and part of me hoped my mother would just walk in and find them. I knew, too, that as soon as my dad set foot into the pub for his usual Saturday evening pint, the first thing he’d be told was that I’d been looking for cans for him the day before. My father didn’t even drink cans.

But everything seemed totally normal. Mam was her usual self over breakfast, the smoke from her cigarette spiralling gently in the air as she pretended to eat her toast. Da was long

gone, out for his usual prowl around the town. I busied myself trying to gauge whether I'd be able to sneak the cans back to my uncle's house, or whether I should just come clean, give them back, and beg him to say nothing.

'I'm going to head down to Mass now shortly. I've a special intention to pray for,' said Mam, snapping me out of my own head. 'Will you look after the washing up for me?'

'Ah, Ma!' The pile of washing up that was sitting staring at me would take an hour or more to do. By the time I was finished, she'd be long back, and God knew when I'd have another chance to go with the cans.

'Ah, Ma what?' she snapped, slamming the palm of her hand down on the table. 'Ah, Ma! Where's me dinner? Ah, Ma! Will you give us a few pound to spend down the town? Ah, Ma, Ah, Ma!' She stubbed out her cigarette like she hated it with a passion. 'Do what you like, you ungrateful little pup. Just don't be here looking at me like a cow looking over a ditch when I get up from Mass. I'm warning you.'

'I just wanted to go across to Mattie's -' I began, but she wouldn't let me finish.

'I don't give a shite what you do,' she said. 'Not one shite.'

It only took ten minutes to get to my uncle's house. I prayed to God he'd be out of it as I let myself in the back door. The air in the hall smelled like puke, and I took that as a good sign.

'Matt!' I shouted. 'Mattie!' No reply. 'Yoohoo!' The silent house echoed my voice back to me.

I took my chance, and tiptoed to the fridge. Quickly, with trembling fingers, I replaced his cans. I was sorely tempted to keep one – surely he wouldn't miss one? – but figured I wouldn't push my luck.

'Well, you little fecker,' came the voice, out of nowhere. I practically choked, dropping one of the cans with a *clunk*.

'Mattie!' I turned to face him, the sweats already starting. 'How are ya?'

‘Not a bother, now I have me cans back,’ he replied. I tried to smile as I fumbled behind me to close the fridge door.

‘I’m sorry, man. It was an emergency, like,’ I said.

‘Up at the Monument last night, were ya?’ he asked, scratching at his head. He wore a t-shirt out of a multipack Mam had bought him one Christmas. It had been white, then. He hadn’t shaved in a few days, and the rollup he clutched between two browned fingers looked like he’d dropped it in the toilet and then fished it back out again. He sucked in a rancid lungful, and then let it out through his nose, his breath humming as it went.

‘Look, say nothing, will ya?’ I asked. ‘About the cans, I mean, and me being at the Monument. I was only there for a minute. The cans never even left the bag.’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘There might be a problem with that, now you mention it.’

Then, as I looked at him, it hit me. Sometimes, once in a blue moon, Ma would drop in to visit her brother on her way to Mass on a Saturday morning. No wonder my uncle was grinning.

I swore under my breath.

I ran home and got stuck into the washing up. I’d only barely started it by the time Mam came back. I heard her open the front door and step softly into the hall, but she didn’t call out a greeting, like she normally did; I heard the gentle slithering hiss of her nylon-lined coat being added to the pile already adorning the coat-stand, and then total silence. She must have come down the hall like a ninja, because before I knew it she was standing in the kitchen behind me.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘Here you are.’

‘How are ya, Mam,’ I said as I carefully placed a dish onto the drainer. ‘Sit down and I’ll make you a cup of tea. How was Mass?’

I turned to flick the kettle on, and my ear exploded. Then, it started ringing. My cheek burned. I hadn't even heard or felt her move.

'What the *fuck* was that for?' I said, putting a wet, soapy hand up to my face.

'You little *bastard*,' she hissed. 'Not alone do you go up to the Monument, against everything I've asked you,' she paused, licking her lips, 'but then you go and involve yourself in *carousing*… Dancing, drinking, and worse…' She wasn't able to continue. Her face clenched up like a fist and she turned away from me. Her shoulders shook.

'Mam!' I protested. 'I didn't!'

'Oh!' she said, facing me again, staring me down. 'I wonder why I could be told then, in Mass, as I'm trying to pray, that you'd been seen up there? Doing God knows what with God knows who?' She paused for breath, her nostrils flaring. 'And your uncle's cans drank themselves?'

My chest felt like someone was driving a spike through it. 'I didn't do anything! Are you not going to believe me?'

'Ah, how can I believe anything?' she said. 'You're a liar!' Her eyes glittered, and her lips were tight and trembling. 'I thought you were *better* than the rest of them. I really did.'

'I am -' I started to say.

'No, you're not,' she spat. 'You're not. You're the very same. You're all the same, under the skin. Every one of you.'

'Ma, what are you talking about?' I said. She was going on like I'd murdered someone. Sorrow mingled with the unfairness of it deep inside me, rumbling around in my belly like indigestion.

'What am I talking about?' she said. 'What am I *talking* about, you ask?' She laughed, needle-sharp. Then she looked at me and fell silent, her eyes searching my face. As I watched her she stumbled, banging her hip off the kitchen cupboard, but I reached out and caught her before she fell. She blinked, and when she opened her eyes again they were

unfocused and watery. Her face looked like she was watching something sad on telly, an old movie or a love story with an unhappy ending.

'I didn't do anything up at the Monument, Mam,' I said. 'I wouldn't. Please, Mam. I'm sorry.'

She didn't answer me for so long that I wondered if she'd heard. Just as I was going to ask if she was all right, she closed her eyes again, slumping against me like she'd lost the use of her legs.

'I don't know where she is,' said my mother, suddenly. 'Jesus, Jimmy. I don't know where I put her.'

'Mam?' Fear and confusion laced my heart up tight. I could feel my mother trembling under my hand, like a beaten pup.

'She came too early, y'see, and she was only a mess, really. Only a scrap. And I was too young. I didn't know what else to do.' Her voice faltered for a moment, but then her words came flowing like water from a broken pipe. 'It didn't take long to dig a little grave for her. Up there. Somewhere. I wrapped her up, warm.' She licked her lips, her eyes blinking open. 'There was no way she could've gone into the graveyard, so the Monument was the next best thing. It had a cross, at least. I could pretend she'd be all right.'

My breaths were coming hard and fast, and my heart was a trapped animal.

'But I don't know where she is. Not now. It's been too long,' said Mam. Then, she looked up at me without seeing me, her eyes two sinkholes into a pit. 'I can't remember where I buried my own baby. What sort of a mother does that, tell me?'

I gripped the edge of the sink, trying not to think of pillowed flesh, soft and glowing in the darkness. A pair of gleaming eyes. Shoes unbuckled, slipping off curved and tender feet.

Whispers between lovers turning to the hissings of the dead.

The red glow of firelight flowing over the hillside like blood.

Jan Carson

East

IN OCTOBER 2013 I BEGAN A LOVE AFFAIR WITH A MAN NAMED EITHER JOHN OR PAUL. We met once a week on Tuesdays by arranged accident in Knocknagoney Tesco. (It would have been more convenient to meet in the Connswater store but, at the time, they did not have a cafe and dinner was the only active element in our relationship).

We were careful to arrive alone; he first, and I, three to five minutes later, clutching a handful of carrier bags like the ghost of a crumpled alibi. We sat at a table by the condiment station and ate our dinner off plastic trays, still sweating from the dishwasher steam. I was a vegetarian by birth, yet in his company, rode a rare carnivorous streak through steaks and sausage rolls and reconstituted chicken products. At the time I enjoyed the sensation of flesh resisting teeth in that string-some, sinewy fashion rarely found in vegetables. Afterwards, I vomited in the car park, quietly by the trolley station. The colour of it was brown and red and burgundy brown as it pooled on the greasy tarmac. Poking through this muck-toned mess, I discovered evil things had grown inside me and were leaking out: doubts, lies, premeditated lust and an almost insatiable appetite for cocktail sausages. On the drive home I picked the last of it from between my teeth with the corner of my Tesco loyalty card. The taste persisted, requiring the attention of toothpaste and medicated mouthwash.

Our love affair lasted for approximately eight months, petering out and finally ending towards the middle of May 2014 just as the city was beginning her annual attempt at good weather. (This detail is nothing if not significant).

Though I did not feel particularly guilty from one Tuesday to the next, I found myself wondering about the contents of his fridge every time I opened my own. Medium cheddar, I

presumed, for I'd watched him buy it, every week, by the half pound; tomatoes on the vine and iceberg lettuce; three litres of semi-skimmed- cold, wet monument to an unmentioned other, waiting at home with a bowl of dehydrated muesli.

We did not talk about our other lives. We did not talk or even look directly at each other. We hoped the other diners would ignore the very many empty tables circling the walls of the cafe and suppose us thrown together by chance and spatial limitations. Traditionally I took the North East corner of the table, he, the South West; compass points straining for a good sense separation. Even after a month we did not talk and seldom broke the silence which sat between us like a second cousin, once removed.

"Is this seat taken?" I asked the first time I saw him. He was the only person eating alone in the café at Knocknagoney Tesco. At first I felt sorry for him and thought we might talk about the rain or the road works on the Sydenham Bypass, but then I became attracted to his sweater and the way he held his fork, high and adamant, like a film star American. When he spoke his accent was almost entirely East Belfast and I was disappointed and also reassured. It was a relief of sorts to find we spoke the same, dough dull language.

"John," he said, or perhaps, "Paul," (distracted by the ring on his last but one finger I could never remember his name but retained a vague awareness that it was a Beatle, and not a minor one).

I offered my name and asked what he did. He never replied. I presumed him a teacher or a civil servant. He had the shoes for it, also a nervous habit of running his hands through the back of his hair in erratic tugs and spurts as if subject to a series of small electric shocks. He was not a handsome man but he knew how to wear a sweater.

"Do you want to have a love affair with me?" he asked. In all my years of shopping at Knocknagoney Tesco, I had never once been asked this question. It felt impolite to refuse. I might never have been asked again.

"I only come here on Tuesdays," I replied. "Wouldn't you like someone more committed?"

“Tuesdays suit me fine,” he answered, “I can get the groceries while we’re having our love affair.”

It was a perfect storm. We shook on it, our hands forming architecture across the table top. Though I did not realise it at the time, it was to be the longest and most intimate conversation of our love affair.

We always began with dinner in the café. Anxious not to raise suspicions I ate before leaving home and ate again in his presence, the second dinner sitting like a beached beluga in the pit of my belly. I was almost always bloated in his company and on Tuesdays wore loose fitting shirts and jumpers, hoping he would not presume me pregnant. An unplanned pregnancy was the last thing our love affair needed. I bought my own dinner. He bought his. We were, in this and other matters, terribly modern. Later, when we’d grown accustomed to one another and familiarity made us daring, we used vouchers- two for one on fish and chips or cardboard-crusted quiche- splitting the cost of a single meal concisely and alternating on the leftover penny.

We were just as frugal with our affections.

“I find you almost as attractive as my wife,” he said on our second date.

“You have slightly better legs than her,” on our third.

Words were cheap. We rarely touched.

After dinner we walked the aisles of the supermarket, colliding surreptitiously on every other corner. It was a joy and a horror of sorts to round the vegetable aisle and find him lingering by the close cap mushrooms, daring me to drive my trolley hard into his ankles.

“Sorry,” we said and neither party was sorry, only thrilled and slightly frustrated by the anoraks, the cardigans and weekday underwear which conspired against us and could not be removed in a supermarket setting. There were other ways to collide, of course. We bought the same kind of marmalade and the same kind of bread and agreed to think lustful

thoughts over our individual slices of breakfast toast. (I could not bring myself to tell him that marmalade was ugly to me and the only thing I could bear on toast was margarine. I ate my toast dry for a week and felt like an unfaithful lover). The situation escalated. Marmalade was not enough to keep us together.

“I want to do things to you,” I whispered over the magazine racks one evening.

“Me too,” he replied, “but I’ve also got to get the shopping done.”

We came to a very practical compromise; an austere kind of give and take which was better than marmalade but far from best.

I placed individual items in his trolley. He placed different items in mine. Little bits of each other breaching the sanctity of personal space like the stray socks and hair slides which slip down the side of a lover’s bed. We left it longer and longer before removing these items, often stacking them on the side of the check out, too shit-scared, terrified to risk the questions which would come from carrying home an uncharacteristic pineapple or hair care product.

“It seems odd that we never touch,” I finally admitted and he pointed out that this was my first supermarket love affair and perhaps I was confusing it with a more pedestrian kind of arrangement. I had to agree that he was right though my fingers and my knees and the small of my back throbbed in protest.

“It’s not that we can’t touch,” he explained, “it’s just that there are different rules in supermarkets.”

And so we allowed our hands to brush and linger in the dairy aisle. It was easiest in the dairy aisle for everyone buys milk and butter and at least one kind of cheese. Reaching, through the early evening crush, for a strawberry yogurt or half pint of cream, even the most intimate gesture, could pass as accidental. We fell into each other when the aisles were quiet and, on all other occasions, feigned clumsiness. He could hesitate between one brand of butter and another for almost a minute, fingers darting backwards and forwards across

the shelf, so our elbows clashed and separated and met again like the fickle undulations of an evening tide. I rolled my sleeves to the elbow and always went for the milk at the back of the shelf. And if my reward was a two second rush of forearm freckling against chilled forearm, I paid for it in next day use-bys and wasted milk.

We never forgot, even for one heady second, that the shopping came first. It would have been ludicrous to return home without the hand soap or the Mandarin oranges we'd set out for. Questions would have been asked. We brought shopping lists to guard against distraction; his slightly longer than mine, so I suspected children, at least two, possibly three. On the best Tuesdays- when he wore the red pullover and I chanced heels- the lists were the only thing which kept us anchored to the supermarket floor.

Towards the end of May 2014, when our love affair was approaching its seventh shy month he said, "let's go crazy tonight. It's too hot for good sense."

I thought he might kiss me. I had yet to see the inside of his mouth.

Instead he ordered salad in the café and soft drinks in lieu of our usual coffees. After dinner he tidied our trays away, careful to recycle the recyclable elements. He reminded me of my father or, perhaps my father's father and this was a nervous shrug of a feeling, not so far removed from a common cold. He wasn't even wearing the red sweater and, in light of this and other, dull decisions I felt inclined to draw a line under the whole love affair.

"Things need to change," I said, as we collected our trolleys, "this isn't working for me."

"Things can change," he said and when we arrived in the frozen desserts aisle took leave of himself and grabbed me by the wrists, forcefully. He left marks; four red lines and a dot, circling each arm in semaphore code. I studied my wrists for a week, watching as the red bruised into blue and finally brown. It was the only thing he'd ever given me and, for days after, I prodded the marks with a blunt pencil hoping to get another week out of the bruises. It was a giddy thing to be grabbed by him in full view of the Arctic Rolls. I forgot that we were a modern couple and that my arms were my own to fold and withdraw. I forgot about the groceries and the shopping list and the carefully clipped vouchers tucked inside my

purse. My wrists said, “boy, oh boy it’s really happening now,” for he’d never grabbed at any part of me before. My ankles were keen to get in on the action. I leant backwards and forwards at both times, anticipating any amount of craziness.

“Watch this,” he said, and opening the freezer door, selected a box of milk chocolate Magnum ice creams, “let’s be spontaneous. We’ll eat them right here in the aisle.”

“But they’re not even on the shopping list,” I gasped, thrilled by the way he was ripping the cardboard wrapper off.

“I know,” he said, “and we haven’t paid for them yet.”

“But we will, won’t we?”

“Of course we will. We may be crazy, but we’re not degenerates. I’ll keep the box.”

He turned the box upside down and emptied the contents into his hands. There were three ice creams in total. It was like first communion. He passed one to me, took one for himself and seemed unsure what to do with the third.

“I didn’t think there would be three,” he said.

“There’s always three Magnums in a pack,” I replied “We usually have one each and put one in the ice box for later.”

It was entirely the wrong thing to say. “We” was not the once a week on Tuesdays exception but rather the rule; my pronoun of habit and ten years next spring. He looked at the extra Magnum, still white with freezer fur and he thought about his own ice box and his wife, and his two, or possibly three children. I could see these thoughts as they folded into his forehead forming train tracks and telephone wires from one sad conclusion to the next. All the craziness drained out of him. Under the strip lights, with a handful of thawing ice creams he was no longer dangerous or remarkable. He was a civil servant in a BHS pullover, getting the groceries in. He was somebody’s husband, much like my own, but thinner.

“I need to pick up some washing powder,” he said and we both knew that the washing powder aisle was on the other side of the building, as far removed as the supermarket would allow. It was the last thing he ever said to me. The following Tuesday I made my excuses and began buying our groceries at Asda.

(Things were cheaper in Asda and there was little chance of seeing him but the vegetables never lasted as long).

After he’d left I lingered in the frozen desserts’ aisle. It seemed appropriate. I ate my Magnum slowly, peeling the chocolate off with the edge of a fingernail and took small pleasure in the fact that the box was in his trolley. As he approached the check out and paid for his washing powder and medium Cheddar, he’d find himself for the first, and last time, buying me dinner; the only concrete sin in an otherwise sinless love affair.

Ann Field

Blue Curacao

PINK FUCHSIA HEADS CAST SHADOWS ACROSS HER FLAT BELLY. DARK BLOOD IS congealing around her head forming the outline of Italy as it glistens in the sun; death was recent. Her bikini is dry; her legs, bent at the knees, dangle in the swimming pool and move slightly with the waves. The technical crew have started on the crime scene because that's what it is. A gunshot wound to the side of her head being a dead giveaway. Judging by the size of the hole, it's a 9mm leaving me to guess the shell is lodged in her brain.

A tall glass sits on a low white table containing the blue liquid she'll never finish. If it held ice at one time, it's long gone. The July sun is cruel even at this time of day, baking everything in its path. Pot-plants are blooming yet one glance at her nails and I doubt they ever got dirty poking about in soil. Around the garden CCTV cameras are in full view on top of the high brick wall, all operational and not just a deterrent.

'Are you the Detective?' a uniformed officer stands beside me. I nod and flash my badge, Detective John Arnold, LAPD imprinted on the shield. Satisfied, he continues, 'Dead woman is a Mrs. Dee-Dee Grainger, died from a bullet wound to the right temple approximately 30 minutes ago. That makes time of death 9.30am, still to be confirmed. Most likely it's a 9mm, with the absence of a gun near the body.' He continued with a flick of his notebook. '36 married and lives here with her husband, a Michael Grainger. He's listed as out of the state, therefore not a suspect, as yet.' I nod again and move inside the open veranda doors to the

cool interior. The 911 call has been traced back to the house phone which is sitting on the glass coffee table, waiting to be bagged and taken to the lab. I lift the receiver and tap buttons and it gives out a dial tone.

The officer with the supply of information is Mitchell. He continues providing details like he is listing a take-away menu. 'All the tapes were removed from the terminal over there', he points to an open cabinet in the wall and six blank screens. 'Security cameras aren't going to be much help. I'd say this guy knew his way round, looks like that lock was opened with a key.' He shifts his gum to the other side of his mouth. 'Husband is that successful screenwriter, known for his wild temper.'

An absence of hovering helicopters overhead assured me the media hasn't got hold of this one yet. I lean on the arm of an over-stuffed armchair and look about the room which gives nothing away, not a thing out of place. Top of the range furniture, a thick beige carpet you could make love on and not worry about carpet burns. Further back the white kitchen shines spotless and unused. I guess she wasn't the baking type. A selection of wines and expensive Champagnes are displayed on a metal rack. The fridge reveals two cartons of fruit juice and wilted salad ingredients. A half-empty bottle of the Blue Curacao sits cooling on the door.

Upstairs reveals more of the same. A show house, lacking that lived-in feeling. The huge bed is made up and I pull back the covers but the sheets are fresh. The tech team are waiting to take samples. From my experience no-one is so tidy as to leave no trace. I'd seen all I needed here and give a nod to Officer Mitchell who stands in the doorway. He follows me like a puppy and writes down my every move. Guess we all started out that way, young eager-beavers, full of enthusiasm.

Back at the pool, I lean across and examine her hands, shake my head at the finality of it all. I chat to the unlucky guys working on the body in the heat while one technician erects a temporary canopy.

The lady definitely liked that uncluttered look my wife dreams of. Nags me to hell over the untidy house we live in. I tell her kids are supposed to make a mess, it's a sign they're happy. I smile at the thought of my family with white carpet and cream furniture. Ironic that she left such an awful mess on her white patio. Ducking under the yellow tape, I turn my car and head to the station, passing the waiting morgue removal van as I leave. I phone my wife and tell her I'll be late again. I want to tell her I like our families' clutter but resist the temptation. I don't think she'd get it. I phone my partner, Joe to let him know I'm headed in.

Chief Brown waves us into his office and shuts the door himself. Joe smirked and I raised an eyebrow as the Chief rarely ventured from the black leather chair behind his desk. He is Hispanic with a receding hairline which appears to have migrated to his bushy eyebrows. His voice sounds tired and gravelly, same as usual.

'John, Joe.' He gives us a nod each. 'You guys need to sit down.' So we sat. 'This murder you caught up on Brant Hills, a Mrs. Dee-Dee Grainger? I got a call from above regarding that one. It seems she had a few habits her husband is not aware of and is not about to find out either. You get me?'

'Or pretended he didn't know about,' interrupted Joe, 'a lot of these 'old-money' men prefer to ignore what's under their noses.'

'Well, that's it precisely, Joe,' continued the Chief. 'Because it appears she had herself an expensive taste in cocaine, which means there's a dealer out there somewhere. She also enjoyed a lover of the muscular variety which suggests a personal trainer or gym instructor. To cap it all she had a thirst for alcoholic beverages and frequented a bar downtown.'

Leaning back in the chair and clasping both hands behind his head, he shut his eyes. But dreams are for bed and I doubt I'd see mine any time soon. 'You got anything else, Chief?'

'You want me to tie it up in a bow for you, John? You're the detectives, now get detecting.' Guess those guys from above weighed heavy on his back. 'Here's a preliminary report I've just been sent from the Crime Scene Investigators, it's not much but gives you both somewhere to start the investigation. The husband is on a flight from Florida. Have him picked up at the airport away from those vultures, they're circling already.' His head inclined to the sky as the phutt-phutt of a helicopter droned above. 'I need a quick and tidy finish to this one guys. Grainger has connections to people that go higher than I could ever hope to clink glasses with, so don't forget the kid gloves on your way out.' He swung his chair toward his view of the advertising hoarding on a building across the street. It changed electronically every few minutes and drove him crazy.

Once at our desks we divide the contents of the file between us. Having pulled our team together, we throw around ideas all the while filling the whiteboard with the crime details. Photographs of the house, in joint ownership, have been taken at every angle. Joe places three on the whiteboard and writes the address underneath in black felt-tip. With no sign of a break-in we feel it is safe to assume entrance had been granted when the murderer called to visit. The big question is, which murderer? Husband? Lover? Cocaine dealer? Unknown? They understood the security system well enough to put it out of action.

Joe feels whoever called hadn't taken a drink with her. Only one glass suggested it may have been too early for him or one wasn't offered. I mention he could have washed his glass to make it appear that way. Having a key for the cabinet and taking the tapes showed good prior knowledge. They had a maid in twice a week, a Maria Gonzales which was not going to inspire the Chief with pleasant feelings but despite his grievances about Hispanics being put-upon, she had to be brought in for questioning.

I request Officer Mitchell to join our team as he impressed me at the crime scene by having his head screwed on. As soon as he arrives I link him with our Detective Ambrose to collect Michael Grainger from LAX. Joe has the phone records and we eat lunch listening to the panicky voice on the 911 call. Hard to say if it was a throaty female or a very scared male but one thing it did say was, 'Dee-Dee's shot, get here quick,' followed by the address with no heed to the operator's questions. An ambulance and a squad car arrived within ten minutes meaning the caller may have had wheels. Either way they weren't staying to talk things through with our counsellors. I wondered why people ask for help to arrive quickly to an obviously dead person.

Joe writes as I pace the room as that's the way it works for us. St. Anthony's was a good school but it proves that no amount of whacking on the knuckles helps create good penmanship. The bullet had indeed been a 9mm and after a more comprehensive search of the area there is no trace of the gun. Joe continues filling the whiteboard in his neat black print while the clock shoved both hands around its face at full speed. A search of the trashcan gives the name of the liqueur store as Flanagan's on the corner of Jackson and Hanford streets. We both know the place and are about to head across to meet the proprietor, Mickey Flanagan when Detective Ambrose and Officer Mitchell arrive back at the station. Loud profanities drift over. Myself and Joe rise to meet and greet Mr. Michael Grainger, who appears devastated with grief over his wife's demise but maybe not as much as I'd have expected.

It's difficult telling a man that he cannot see his dead wife's body without mentioning it is because at that very moment, she lay in pieces on a slab in the morgue.

'Mr. Grainger it is regrettable but believe me, the sooner you answer our questions, the sooner you get to leave.' Joe raises his palm to stave off the objections. 'No, you are not under arrest and yes, you are being taped and filmed, as you were informed. No, you cannot

speak to the District Attorney and No, you do not need a lawyer at this moment in time, unless you think there is a specific reason you require one.' Joe gets all this out in one long breath. I add there is no smoking in the building when he pulls a pack from inside his jacket. I remember him as one of the outspoken lobbyists which succeeded in banning the habit from all public buildings. The thought crosses my mind how things often come back to bite you on the ass in the most unexpected circumstances.

The evenly tanned Mr. Grainger eventually gets the message that he should at least attempt to answer our questions. This earns him a cup of coffee from Starbucks next door as opposed to our vending machine. Not realising how lucky he is, his face twists as he takes a sip. We find out he'd left for Florida on Friday August 5th, due to return on Tuesday August 9th which by no coincidence is today. Suspicious minds that we have also inform us that he had time to make a return trip and arrive again a second time to keep within that timeframe. He also didn't need to be present for an arranged killing. Most people who have their spouses meet their maker decide not to be around at the time, either to watch or take a chance on finding themselves implicated. Best to be somewhere far away where an alibi was easier to provide.

Having learned the C.S.I. is finished with the house, we let him return to collect a few belongings as he plans to stay at a nearby hotel. He gets the usual warnings not to leave town, be ready for more questions from us and be prepared for the media bombardment. We have him accompanied by Officer Mitchell and met at the scene by the officers on guard duty. I don't envy him the collateral damage he is about to encounter inside his house left behind by our technicians. Or the view through the yellow-taped patio doors that overlook the murder site, which although cordoned off would be upsetting. Joe places Grainger's photo alongside the house and neatly writes his details underneath.

A quick car ride takes us to Mickey Flanagan, who is polishing glasses behind his bar which has five customers. I put my hand up and one look at my badge lets him know we are on official business.

'S'up?' he whispers, checking his customers are out of earshot. 'You guys look even more suspicious if you sit at my bar without drinks.' We could understand he had a clientele to think of so we order two colas on the rocks as he shakes his head in disbelief. His belly keeps him a foot away from leaning close as I place a picture of Dee-Dee Grainger on the bar-top and examine his facial expression. His jaw tightens. It's covered with dark bristles which accompanies a lack of shaving for more than two days in a row.

'Yeah, I know her. She comes in here when her old man is away. What's she done?' He looks like a saint, which makes him a little guilty in my book. As she is being broadcast on every news channel for the past two hours, we aren't falling for the present tense angle.

'She's dead, Mickey, murdered in cold blood.' I give it to him straight, gauge his reaction. He is shocked but says nothing. 'Surprised you haven't heard anything because it's practically old news now.' He mutters about the TV turned off all morning and taking a delivery in the cellar.

'You hear or see anything, Mickey? Who'd she upset lately?' His face has paled slightly and his mouth hangs open as if to speak but finding he has lost the ability. We wait.

'She wouldn't hurt a fly. Who'd murder Dee-Dee? She was nice, people liked her in here and she could be herself, relax. What happened, guys?' He did seem genuinely upset and fond of her too, I notice. 'You know her well, Mickey? Anyone from this bar get too close to her?'

'A working-class girl originally, she fit in with the clientele. Funny too, could tell a joke and let her hair down. Got the feeling she didn't like the people up there in those fancy mansions. Could be she wasn't 'In' with the 'In Crowd', y'know? You got anyone for it?'

We want to ask the questions so Joe interrupts him. ‘Mickey, if we had the murderer we wouldn’t be here. Was she overly fond of anyone, yes or no? And how well did you know her? Elaborate.’ We both lift our drinks at the same time giving him space to answer.

‘She came in probably once a week, sometimes three nights on the trot if that bastard was on one of his trips and couldn’t stop her. He was the jealous possessive type. Told her she wasn’t to socialise in these parts. But she was young and a stunner and she liked it here.’ He shakily pours a shot for himself from the Irish whiskey hanging upside down behind him. ‘She talked to guys mostly, they gravitated to her. There was one guy she maybe got a little touchy-feely with. Comes in around seven most nights and if Dee-Dee was here, you could spot fireworks between them. They left within minutes of each other over the last three weeks. I’m not saying there was anything in it but a guy can’t help noticing when his battle is lost before it begins. Yeah, I liked her a lot but that’s life, nearly every guy in here had a thing for Dee-Dee.’ Shrugging his large shoulders with resignation he knocks his drink back and begins polishing glasses until he places them down, hands shaking a bit, not trusting them anymore with the task.

‘You got the name of this guy, Mickey? Also any others she spoke regularly to.’ Joe shoves paper and pencil over to him and he begins to write three names, underlying the top one and tapping the pencil on it. ‘Henry is a gentle giant, works at the building game. He should be in at seven, same as usual.’

We move along the bar to discuss our next move. No point waiting for this Henry guy, he may not come in tonight, especially knowing Dee-Dee will never be back. I slip into the Gents. Checking my teeth and the back of my tongue in the mirror for traces of that bloody Blue Curacao she liked, I find it is all clear. I slip the bureau key into the cistern and check my face in the mirror. Dee-Dee shouldn’t have tried bribery. She’d known I was a married cop and left me with no choice. The surveillance tapes were destroyed in a charcoal fire lit by a

down and out up a nearby alleyway. Henry didn't pose a problem. She'd been smart enough not to tell her cocaine dealer she dated a police detective. Back at the bar we warn Mickey to call if Henry makes an appearance. Next stop is the morgue. Certain things are best done before dinner.

Eóin Murphy

Waking the Mammy

THE MAMMY WAS DYING.

That's what we were told anyway but by the time we got to the house the wake was already in full swing, the McAllister horde and their friends gathered in the front room. We were ushered in to join them.

One of the good china cups from on top of the dresser was pressed into my hand and last year's mince pies waved under my nose by wee Imelda. Around us people chatted and laughed in low tones, gathered in huddles around the room.

Amongst the throng was the Mammy herself, propped up on a mass of pillows on a borrowed hospital bed. She was oblivious to the noise and heat, eyes turned up in her head, her chest rising and falling like a newborns, fast shallow breathes rattling her thin frame.

The head of the bed was crowned by a halo of mourners. The daughter who had flown in from England and her husband, the barrister, and the red-eyed grandson who was the favourite.

Jack nodded a greeting over at the sister he hadn't seen in three years, ignored the niece in front of him altogether and sat down. I sighed. Left to do the talking again.

"How are you doing Imelda?"

She sniffed. The skin under her nose was dry, rubbed raw from blowing her nose. "I just..." her voice broke and she descended into soft, huffing sobs. I lifted the tray of mince pies from her hands, passed them to Jack and gathered the girl into a hug. She sobbed against my shoulder.

"It's alright," I said, "you cry as much as you want."

Magda, the prodigal daughter, appeared, abandoning her vigil over her mother.

"Leave her to me," she said, putting a hand on my shoulder and shifting me out of the way.

I stepped back and said nothing. I'd gotten used to the McAllister approach to manners over the last fifteen years. Magda pulled a wad of tissues out of her sleeve and scrubbed the girl's face dry.

"There," she said, picking up the plate of mince pies and shoving it into Imelda's hands. "Now stop making a show of yourself and see if anyone's hungry."

Magda sauntered back to her seat, leaving me and the girl watching her open-mouthed.

"Well, she's just as lovely as she was the last time I saw her," I said.

Imelda laughed. Jack ignored the girl and reached across me, grabbing a handful of mince pies.

"Best get something into you now." He shoved a whole one into his gob. "You don't know when you'll be eating again." Dry puffs of pastry took to the air as he spoke.

I grimaced. I'm partial to a mince pie, but the Mammy was prone to making a massive batch, freezing them and defrosting them every Christmas. The ones in Jack's hands had probably been in the freezer since 1986. I waved wee Imelda and the plate away.

"You best get back to it or your one will be at you again."

She nodded and slunk back into the crowd, angling past the bed and pausing by her Grandmother. She stroked the old woman's hand before offering the tray to a stranger.

I turned back to Jack. "I'll be grand," I said, taking a sip of tea. It was standard Wake tea - boiling hot, weak as a day old kitten and full of sugar I never wanted. The skin peeled from the roof of my mouth and I spat the tea back into the cup in as ladylike a manner as I could muster. I tucked the cup behind a chair leg where it couldn't hurt me.

Jack, unmoved by my pain, continued to chew and watch the crowd.

"Here she is." He nodded his bullock head towards the hall door.

Sarah swept into the room, grasping outstretched hands and nodding her thanks like the Queen as people expressed their sorrow about her soon to be dead mother.

Her voice cut through the gathering. "The funeral will be on Tuesday," she said to auld Paddy Winters.

I nudged Jack with my elbow. "Do you think she's told your mother when she'll be buried or is she leaving it as a surprise?"

Jack took his time chewing on the mince pie. He swallowed.

"Don't you be starting trouble now." A damp crumb clung to the side of his mouth. "We don't need trouble when we're in mourning."

"Mourning?" I pointed at the woman lying six feet from us. "She's not even dead yet."

Jack snagged a biscuit from another passing grandchild with a tray and shoved it into his mouth. "But she will be."

I rolled my eyes and prepared a retort when Sarah arrived, arms out for the traditional wake hug.

Jack stood, still chewing and stepped into his big sisters arms.

"Ach Jesus, what'll we do without her?" Sarah said.

I stole a glance at the Mammy. I was tempted to say you could ask her but decided to leave it for now. There's a way to behave at a wake, with or without someone actually being dead.

I stood up and received my own weak attempt of a hug. Silver bracelets chimed together as Sarah's arms met briefly behind my back.

She was the glamorous one of the family. Whilst Jack had stayed to work on the farm and Magda had gone off to exotic Hull to have a solicitor's brood, Sarah had been the one to get a job in Belfast, in an office no less.

Her long honey toned hair tickled my nose. It smelt of vanilla. Mine was cut short and smelt like a Friday evening after a day on the farm.

"It's good of you to come, Moira," she said, pushing me out of the hug.

"We live a hundred yards away," I said. "It's no trouble." We beamed false smiles at each other.

"Well, I still appreciate you making the effort." She looked me up and down.

I was still in the ratty tracksuit bottoms I had thrown on me when I'd gotten home that evening. "I didn't have time to change, I was here all afternoon," I said. "I changed your mother's bed clothes and gave her a sponge bath when you were getting a manicure."

From over his sister's shoulder, Jack raised an eyebrow at me and shook his head. I gritted my teeth. Sarah ignored me anyway, eyes drifting over a cluster of neighbours and offering them a long suffering smile.

"I'll just go out to the kitchen and see if they need a hand."

Sarah squeezed my forearm. "Don't be worrying about that," she said. "You just take a seat." She flashed her perfect white teeth at me. "Sure the family has it all in hand."

She stepped around me, taking an old man's hand and shaking it. "Bernard, it's awful good of you to come."

"It's a dreadful thing," said Bernard, voice rattling. Sarah wrapped an arm around him and led him off towards the bed. She nudged Imelda out of the way, directing her towards the

kitchen. Her whisper carried through the crowd. "Quit moping, there's plenty of time for crying when she's dead."

I waited until Sarah's daughter had passed us by, tears tracing down her round cheeks as she squeezed through the indifferent crowd.

"That bitch," I said, voice low so only Jack could hear me. "Did you hear what she said?"

"Aye," Jack said, sitting back down and reaching for his abandoned cup. "She said you could relax and not worry about spending the next three days washing dishes and making sandwiches."

I glared at him. "She said I wasn't family."

"But you're not," Jack said. "You're an in-law."

I'll say this for my husband, he may have the table manners of a pig, smell like straw and have the common sense of a puppy, but he caught on fast. The colour drained from his face.

"I'm not family, am I?" I said, hissing like a kettle on the boil.

"Now love, I didn't mean it like that."

"And what did you mean?"

His eyes darted left to right, looking for a way out. The cup rattled in his hand. A distant light went on somewhere in the empty warehouse that passed for his brain.

"I meant that she wanted to save you the trouble of lifting and cleaning after them."

He struggled onwards, the light getting brighter as he went. "So you could look after me."

He looked over at the bed. "I mean, my Mammy is dying."

The heat left me. I sat down beside him and patted his arm.

"You're right," I said. "There are more important things going on than me being thick with your sister."

I leaned my head against his shoulder and took his hand. "I'm sorry about your mother."

He kissed my forehead. "Thanks."

We stayed like that for a few moments. It was nice.

"Moira," he said, "could you get us another biscuit?"

The evening drained into night, taking the bubble of pre-emptive mourners with it.

The family was gathered around the battered kitchen table staring into their cups.

Sarah held court.

"She should be dead by morning."

"That's good," said Magda. "I've wasted three days of leave already."

"Sure it wouldn't be like her to be awkward," Sarah said.

Beside her Imelda pushed back her chair and walked out of the room, sniffing back tears.

"Melodramatic child," Sarah said, slurping down a mouthful of tea. A smear of lipstick clung to the lip of the cup.

"When she does go we'll need the parking sorted." She looked at Jack. "We'll use the front field."

Jack nodded. I didn't.

"We've got wheat growing in there, Sarah. Having dozens of cars parked on it won't be doing it much good." I took a drink of lukewarm tea and wished it was wine. "Would the house field not be better?"

Sarah shook her head. "We have the diggers arriving Wednesday to start on the extension and it's all lined out," she said. "Besides, wheat'll grow back."

I looked to Jack for support. He took quick glances at both of us and buried his face in his cup. He took a long gulp and stood. "I have to get the cattle in." He patted the back of my chair. "See you back in the house."

He threw me a worried shrug from the hall and walked out the front door.

I glared at Sarah, ready for the fight.

"Sure we can sort it in the morning," she said. "Once we get talking to the priest."

"Indeed," I said.

I stood up. "I'll be heading home then."

"If you can't stay," Sarah said. She turned to Magda and began to discuss what flowers her mother would like on the grave.

"I'll just go in and see her before I go," I said. Neither woman looked at me as I left.

The living room was dark, a single table lamp on in the far corner. Wee Imelda was leaning over the head of the bed, her back to me.

"Well, Imelda."

The girl jumped and threw something over the head of the bed. It caught the head board. A pillow flumped onto the ground.

"What are you up to?" I covered the distance in three long strides and looked at the Mammy.

She wasn't breathing. Imelda was shivering, a single tear tracking its way down her red blushed cheek.

"I'm sorry." A sob wracked her.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't want her to hear them talking about her like that anymore."

I put my fingers against her neck, like you see in the films. Her skin was warm. I couldn't feel anything but she could have been dancing a jig in front of me and I still wouldn't be able to find a pulse. I'm no nurse; still, I know what a dead body looks like.

I turned to the girl.

"So you thought the best thing to do was suffocate your Granny?"

The teenager nodded. "They said she was dying, I was just helping her along."

"You did that alright."

Imelda stepped in closer and looked at her Granny's face. "Do you think they'll know?"

Would they know? I looked at the corpse. A light ring of foam lined her thin lips and bloody spider legs crawled across the whites of her eyes.

I decided lying was the way to go. "No, it'll be fine."

Raised voices, arguing over whether she would have wanted lilies or begonias echoed into the room.

"Will you tell on me?" the girl asked.

The look on Sarah's face alone would be worth it. Reputation ruined, life shattered. It'd be the talk of the country. I suppressed a grin. It might even make the news.

God forgive me, I was tempted.

"And what are you two up to, gawping there like a pair of crows?" Sarah stomped into the room, Magda skulking behind her.

She scowled at us, hands on her hips. I looked from her to Imelda. The moon faced teenager stared at me with lost eyes, searching for some sign of mercy. She was nothing like her mother.

"Well," I said, "it's like this."

Amos Greig

Triptych

I

THE FIRST KILL, WHEN IT CAME, WAS THE WORK OF A CARELESS SELFISH SHOVE, ONE human brattling, pushing another amongst the nettles trapped within his boring world. There are worlds beyond the green and grey. The searing agony sent nerve endings into overdrive the mind, body and soul locked down as infant is washed away on a tsunami of bile.

Washed ashore on a beach of sun baked glass shards pierced young flesh lacerations left a trail as the stranger lurched inland, lost, alone beneath the baleful gaze of an uncaring sun. Far away a father punches an overzealous soldier who tries to search the dying child for explosives. Hours turned into days in a land with no direction, no shelter a stranger in a strange land the silent observers perched on sand sculpted pillars observe his final move as he approaches.

Sun blistered heads turn as he staggered into their midst vultures with human faces they observe and taunt. Shelter lurks just beyond them a cave from which foetid air belches several degrees cooler than outside. A jackal headed youth approaches blocks the way feebly at first he resists then driven by rage he wrings its neck, tears loose the jaws of entropy and chases the vultures away. They take to the air where they explode in a shower of gore spraying the land with corrosive slime.

II

When they died the world went mad, established communities tore themselves apart. Friends, neighbours and siblings became rivals. The court jester's seized the thrones of burned out paradise. The bedraggled stragglers sought shelter behind invisible walls territory emblazoned with colours tall to frighten, poison and control.

The stranger found himself in one such isolated community while imaginary wolves circled the walls seeking entrance babes in arms cried succour to the waxing moon. “One of us or one of them” no in-between, no fence sitting here. Over time imaginary walls became solid fortifications while vulture headed demagogues’ bellowed to the desperate herd, “Follow me! No Surrender! Our Day will come!” it mattered not they poisoned the wells.

When strength returned to arms he struggled forth beyond the walls while ignorance hid in plain sight. He bore his strength, his burden on his back as he stepped forth along the path of shattered dreams. Perhaps in red boughs he’d find some peace a token to change the past, bring down the walls.

III

Armed only with a staff and the jaws of entropy he left the lands of men behind. The streets clogged with arterial red brick clogged and broke the will. Here in the dreamland he was free, beneath the uncaring sun. The stranger’s feet calloused and scarred kicked up the dust of aeons as he crossed plains of bone. Walked the spines of nations bent he approached the fields of razor stone flaked, baked tumble down walls.

Beyond the hills stone pillars stabbed the sky each a shelter of hermits too afraid to fly, to crawl, to walk. Beneath their contemptuous gaze he strode forth across the bloodied fields where corpses grew each arm stretched pleaded for mercy. His skin crawled with ancient notes an IOU from some absent minded demiurge. His mouth dried lips parched to painful to smile the gallows gaunt strode on.

In the depths of a dust bowl he found the riddles end, the hanged tree clung wickedly to boulders each branch a red bough. Decorated with the corpses of laughing God’s they pointed to the unbeliever. Who made me? He cried…no one answered. Climbed the branches of the hanging tree he flung himself upon jagged fears. The truth pierced the flesh as it revealed we made ourselves.

IV

The second death went unnoticed the gaunt figure ungrown into itself awkwardly collapsed on the basketball court. The stranger woke in a world gone mad like termites

driven to compete, touch the darkened corpse of a languid God. They built needled pinnacles to pierce the sky. Slowly the slaughtered masses provided gothic architecture. The air was stretched thin between petulant hands neither wanting to share (sirens, medics fought to provide air, as rigour set in). A colossus stood watch across fetid harbours as the stranger walked on ignored by all his skin taut recorded every deed. The words of truth ran down his spine a guide for those who wanted to know. Yet none could read.
His martial prowess was for naught in a land were deeds were soon forgot. The children rocked in sun baked streets no more games the air stifled any that tried. Jackal headed youths blocked the path he stood his ground. No one breathed, blistered skin cracked at his death's head grin. Armed with the staff of destiny and jaws of entropy he knew the proper way.

V

Sulphuric fumes clouded the world, choked the land, caked the streets with yellowed dust.
Only the bravest of souls went outside when the eldritch martyrs belched their fumes poisoned the hapless masses cowered in the gutter bowed beneath the chains of mockery. Witch doctors struck down the weak and ineffectual leaving only the strong to survive.
With rags wrapped around his face the stranger approached the charnel pits his tattered feet kicked the powdered misery, gas masked trenchcoats turned to stare. The constant beat of a feeble heart plucks at nerve endings slowly driving the stranger deeper into despair. (I bet you twenty quid he dies tonight) – Callous whispers on the wind.
He stopped his shoulders bared tattooed with scars and ancient script the twisted word a map for the wise. Anger pulsed in his veins as he approached the servants of martyrs past with truth and entropy he smashed their masks. Choked on the toxic fumes of their masters they proved no match freedom, unwanted his gift went unaccepted.

VI

His journey neared its end he climbed the precipice and using truth he cantilevered death unto the heads of eldritch martyrs. The rubble trapped the sulphuric fumes in time

the toxic wastes would heal (his breathing is stronger today), his doorway into the world each death. The huddled masses watched caked in the dust of oppression, the sky darkened and rains washed it all away.

He knew the path a stone's throw across a lake of fire where vulture circled and jackals devoured the unwary. Each step agony as the ground seared his flesh truth demanded his pilgrimage to heal the land, acid rain threatened to strip the flesh from his bones. He sought shelter until the rains passed, beneath the collapsed corpse of a godhead calcified because of lack of belief.

Days passed and still the rain showed no signs of reprieve in despair he carved a cloak from the godhead's hide. Covered in the skin he stepped forth galvanized into action, the jackals circled afraid of entropy hunger goaded them on. His goal so close he refused to submit sent the pack running their shadows unravelled as he approached the battered portal.

Claire Savage

Locked in

I BLINK ONCE FOR 'YES' AND TWICE FOR 'NO'. SOMETIMES THE EFFORT OF BLINKING 'YES' takes too long and they think I mean 'no'.

Not everyone waits to be certain of my answer, so sometimes, they misunderstand, and there's nothing I can do about it but keep blinking. This confuses them and then we start again – if they can be bothered. By that time though, I'm usually tired and just close my eyes. On other occasions, the urge to communicate outweighs the heavy ache of fatigue, however, and I summon up all the strength in my weakened eyelids and will those filmy pieces of skin to do my bidding and talk to them.
It doesn't always work, but at least I try.

Today, the clock has stopped at half-past three. It must have happened in the early hours of the morning, as it was fine yesterday and we haven't made it to the afternoon yet. Unless I've missed something - which is unlikely.

I have appointments and the speech therapist is due soon. It feels like it's her day to come – or someone's. There's always a person in the afternoon and no-one has come yet, so the clock must have stopped at half-past three this morning. I wonder if anyone will notice, and if they do – will they take it down and re-start it? It will mean dragging the black padded chair over from against the wall to my left - where the window is - standing on it, reaching for the clock, unhooking it from the nail I suppose it's hanging from, removing the old battery and inserting a new one. Setting the correct time and then putting it all back again. Tidying the chair away where it belongs.
I doubt they'll bother, but I like to know the time. The steady tick-tocking of the clock doesn't drive me insane as it would some people – I like to hear every second struck and

measure my life against the steady sound. It's a sign that the world is still moving around me – time is in flux and that, at least, I can be a part of.

I hope they fix the clock – but they probably won't ask me about it.

Most of my life is reflected back at me in this room – I lie surrounded, saturated, by frozen moments of time, which laugh in the face of my moving clock. Photographs from last year, the year before – from sun-soaked days when the biggest worry was what to wear and whether I should wash my hair today, or would it do until tomorrow, as I had cross-country practice after school. Days when the lick of an ice-lolly wasn't meant to induce a lemon-flavoured gag or to refresh my buccal cavity, but rather, to allow explosions of strawberry and pear to tantalise my taste buds. When the ice took the time to melt on my tongue and when I could swallow it without fear of choking.

The cards I detest. They mock me with their gaudiness and cheerful remonstrations – their heartfelt messages decorated with exclamation marks and smiley faces and little drawn-on hearts. Their intentions are good but they don't deserve more than a day – why should they, when birthday cards and anniversary cards and congratulation cards seek only 24 hours to shout out their messages? These cards are on display all the time.

They don't ask me if I'd like them put away though. 'They cheer up the room,' my mum says and so, then, they must also cheer up me. But I don't care if the room is cheery.
The room is painted daffodil yellow. 'Cheery.' It has off-white cotton curtains which swing gaily by the window on a good day – when the weather allows it to be opened a fraction to let in the world and its intoxicating smell of fumes and grass and cigarette smoke and canteen cooking. They're not so good in the winter, when the cold cuts through the thin fabric, and in summer days, the sun blazes mercilessly through them – blinding my eyes and daring me to grab a towel and race out to the garden to lie in its lukewarm rays.

I don't know if there is a garden here, but I imagine not.

My bed is as comfy as any bed can ever be when you live in it, and my pillows have now reached an almost satisfactory level of moulding, which makes it likely that soon they will be

replaced by ‘better’ ones, which will push me up too far and have no comforting hollows to hide in. My bedside table has a glass of stagnant water, a pen, a box of tissues and a card – from whom, I have no idea. Someone who sends their wishes from afar but wouldn’t breach the confines of my home.

The clock on the wall before me is white and plastic, with black inked numbers – not numerals, thankfully – stamped around its circumference. When it works, its tick-tock is loud, but not overbearing.

My duvet is floral – aren’t they all? It’s ‘cheery’, but I’d prefer black – something to dampen the brightness of this carefree space and introduce a little drudgery into the room. Why does the room get what it wants?

Today is most likely Wednesday, so it’s the day of the speech therapist’s visit. Last week she brought a student with her. She looked scared stiff but hid it well - I just know what to look for. She glanced at me, not wishing to stare, but then kept glancing back. It’s rude to ignore someone like me you see. Rude though to stare.

They spoke to me in bright, breezy voices – the student’s more noticeably forced – and did some of their carefully planned-out exercises with me. Well, they’re always the same. I was tired – I mean, my mind is so busy and it’s such an effort to blink – but I squeezed out a few ‘yeses’ and ‘nos’ and they seemed happy with it, so it earned me some rest.

I think the girl was a little spooked by my pictures. I’d have told her to put them away but then, they’re there to cheer the place up.

When I think back to last year – was it only last year, it seems a lifetime ago – I still don’t know what happened. No-one has ever really explained to me the reason that I’m here, or if they did, I’ve blocked it out.

I was 24 years old. I was just finishing university – I had actually passed my exams and was all set to become a marine biologist. The sea fascinates me, but they seem to have forgotten

that, as I never see anything remotely related to my chosen career anymore. I wish they'd put pictures of the ocean on the walls.

My hair was freshly cut and layered – just a hint of a blond highlight woven through my naturally fair auburn colour – nothing like what it is now – lank, no matter how they wash it, and darkened to a mousy brown. Lack of sun I suppose.

I was on my way home from the city – driving that route for the very last time before I set off on a well-earned holiday with my sister to celebrate graduation success and the real start of adult life – but I never got there.

I woke up in hospital and then I woke up here and I think they explained to me quite a few times why, but my brain won't accept their stories or let me access them and so, I still don't know what I'm doing here, or why I can move nothing but my eyes – why I can no longer talk or laugh or shout or walk or run or write or feed myself or wash myself or go to the bathroom. Why I can't ever get up from this bed and go home, or ask who's to blame for all of this and where they are now and if they feel guilty.

I live in this 'cheery' room, in this 'comfy' bed, in this over-heated residential unit, with its squeaky-clean floors and worn-out staff, and I think I'm going to be here for the rest of my life.

I have no body now. I'm the essence of me, but there's nothing attached.
Except my eyes. They, at least, haven't given up. They let me blink and answer 'yes' or 'no', but sometimes they get tired of being the only functioning body part and just want to sleep.
How can you exist as a thought? I feel like I'm a thought. I'm my mind and nothing else. My mind has so much to say and to do and it's trapped and all I can do is let it be trapped.
They come and go – my mum, my dad, my sister, my aunts and uncles. My friends are too busy living their new lives. It makes them uncomfortable to see me. I know that. It would have made me uncomfortable if I'd had to go and see someone like me when I was 'normal'.
I feel sorry for my family but I need them to come and remind me I'm more than a thought.

They try and I can see it's hard for them too. They always said I lived in my head when I was younger – 'Gemma, your head's in the clouds! You live in your own wee world!' - and I guess now I really do.

I just hope they don't get bored with me. I have so much more to say. I have so much I want to do.

The nurse is here at last. "Mornin' Gemma – how are ye today?"
I tell her I'm ok – I had quite a good night actually – slept right through. I didn't dream, which was a relief and today, I'm a little refreshed. Oh, but the clock's stopped working so – could you please fix it?"

I can tell by the look in her eyes that she hasn't translated my silent stare. I blink – once, twice. 'Yes'. Dammit – it's all I can say. I smile at her with my eyes, but she looks away and fusses round the bed. I don't remember her name.
"Yes, well, we'll get you washed and cleaned up and all ready for your mum. She's coming in this morning for a wee bit and then the speech therapist will be along later. You've a busy day ahead of you!"

I wonder if she'll notice the clock. It's stopped and I want them to fix it. I want to hear time tick on. I want to see it move.
I wonder if they'll notice?

contributors

Paul Anthony is a retired university lecturer presently finding his feet as a writer. He is working on a book of short stories and a novel about the *Book of Kells*. He toggles between homes in Belfast in the North of Ireland and Clonmellon in the Republic.

Aileen Armstrong lives in Galway. *End of Days*, her first collection of short fiction, was published by Doire Press in 2013. http://aileenarmstrong.com/

A. Joseph Black is from Carnlough, County Antrim. He can be read online on several websites if you're prepared to hunt. His work has also appeared in print and in translation in *HESA Inprint magazine* (Finland). He was shortlisted for the 2012 and 2013 Worcestershire Literary Festival Flash Fiction Award and was the 2011 Limerick Writers' Centre (Ireland) Flash Fiction Champion. Twitter: @Gram_is_God_TB

Dylan Brennan's poetry and prose have been published in a range of Irish and international journals, in English and Spanish. *Atoll*, a mini collection of poetry, will soon be available as a free download from Smithereens Press and his first full collection, *Blood Oranges*, will be published in 2015 by The Penny Dreadful Press. His work is forthcoming in the second edition of *gorse* and recent publications include *The Penny Dreadful*, *The Pickled Body* & *Burning Bush 2*.

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts development officer based in Belfast. She is the current recipient of the Arts Council NI Artists' Career Enhancement scholarship. Her first novel, "Malcolm Orange Disappears" is published this month by *Liberties Press*.

Anne Caughey (Assistant Editor) lives near Belfast and has lived in England and Japan. Last year she began writing and was awarded a full bursary to attend the John Hewitt Summer School. Her first story was long-listed for this year's Fish Short Story Prize.

James Claffey grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA, with his wife, the writer and artist, Maureen Foley, their daughter, Maisie, and Australian cattle-dog, Rua. He is the author of the collection of fiction, *Blood a Cold Blue* and his website is at www.jamesclaffey.com. @534mu5 facebook: jamesclaffey

Kelly Creighton (Editor) was awarded 2nd place in the Abroad Writers' Conference flash fiction contest, shortlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize, highly commended for Write4Autism and long-listed for RTE Guide/ Penguin Ireland. *Lapwing Publications* published her poetry book 'Three Primes'. She is published in *The Stinging Fly, Cyphers* and elsewhere. @KellyCreighton

Elaine Donnelly writes mainly very short fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in a number of anthologies and competition short and long lists, but mainly remains in notebooks in her handbag. In 2014, she was awarded a bursary to attend the John Hewitt Summer School.

Naomi Elster is a writer and scientist. She is currently completing a PhD, with the focus of her research being improving treatment for aggressive breast cancer. She is an active member of the Dublin Writers Forum. Her work appears in *HeadSpace Magazine, Geek Force Five Horror/Sci-Fi Anthology, Transcendence Magazine*, and *Sentinel Literary Quarterly.*

Ann Field's first published short story, 'Time for a Date' appeared in January 2013 in *Woman's Way* magazine. In July 2013, they published another story called 'Battle of Wounded Knee'. She has a poem, 'Shooting Star' due for publication in the September 2014 edition of *Boyne Berries* magazine. @Ann1Field. blog: Ann1Field.wordpress.com

Amos Greig is a graduate from Queen's, he also studied at the John Hewitt Summer School in 2001. Amos's artwork has been used by *Lapwing Publications*, provided paintings for charity, portraits and created a children's mural. Amos's work has appeared in several anthologies including *Speech Therapy, Papergirl Belfast, The Bone Orchard, Solstice Poetry, Austrian P.E.N.* He edits a literary and arts magazine called A New Ulster. @Somaticon

Nandi Jola, poet, storyteller and women's activist; she has exhibited in the Long Gallery – Stormont, and in Falls Road library, 'Somewhere between Belfast and Africa'. As a motivational speaker Nandi gives talks and lectures on apartheid, women trafficking and domestic violence. She is published by *Fourxfour* and in *Poetry in Motion's* Community anthology 'Still'. facebook Nandi.Jola @nandijproject www.nandijproject.com

Ruth McKee writes copy for money, fiction for pleasure and edits spontaneity.org for fun. Published online, in print and on *RTÉ Radio One*, she was previously shortlisted for the *Francis McManus Prize*. She has a PhD in literature from Trinity College Dublin and is writing a novel, *The Jealous Wall*. @spontaneity_art @ruthmckee

Eóin Murphy has been writing for as long as he can remember and one day hopes to be good at it. He is married to a wonderful wife and has a three year old son who doubles as an engine of destruction. He tweets as @rage_monki

Clodagh O'Brien has been published in many interesting places. A Dublin resident, she prefers to write in bed, and realises there are too many books in the world to read before she dies. She is Assistant Editor at the online literary journal, *The Bohemyth*. Her website is www.clodaghobrien.com and she tweets @wordcurio.

Jonathan O'Brien is a young writer from Carlow. He writes flash-fiction, short stories and is currently working on a novella. Jonathan also writes a blog where he posts some stories, poems and occasional opinions on writing, www.writerjobrien.wordpress.com @writerjobrien

Sinéad O'Hart is passionate about fiction in all its forms, and is currently working on a children's novel. Her stories have appeared in *Number Eleven Magazine, Synaesthesia Magazine, wordlegs* and *Daily Science Fiction*, among others. She blogs daily at http://sjohart.wordpress.com, and is on Twitter @SJOHart.

Karl Parkinson's debut collection of poetry *Litany of The City & Other Poems* was published in 2013 by *Wurmpress*. His work has been published in the *If ever you go* and *New Planet Cabaret* anthologies, *The Stinging Fly, The Pickled Body, Penduline, Can can* and many more. You can find Karl on *facebook* and Twitter

Claire Savage is a journalist/sub-editor from Northern Ireland's north coast, who writes poetry, prose and short stories and loves reading. Her poetry has been published in arts ezine, *A New Ulster*, and in a *Community Arts Partnership NI* anthology. She has also had work published on the *Blackstaff Press* website. http://clairesavagewriting.wordpress.com

Stefan Totterdell has published stories in *The Runt, This is Not Where I Belong, The Bohemyth,* and *wordlegs.* At present he is searching for the perfect moment of Schadenfreude in southern Germany. @StephenChinaski

Phil Young is a native of Dunmanway in West Cork, and now lives in Dublin. She graduated from Trinity College, Dublin with an MPhil in Anglo-Irish literature, author of the first ever biography of children's writer, Patricia Lynch, which was launched in Cork as part of Cork European City of Culture celebrations 2005. Her novel, IN A PLACE APART, was published in September 2009, **www.libertiespress.com/Patricia_Lynch.** Phil won the *Doolin Short Story Competition* 2013.

the incubator journal

issue 1. June 2014.

interview: Aileen Armstrong.

reviews: Stefan Totterdell on Not Lost, by Sarah Maria Griffin.

Claire Savage on The Shelter of Neighbours, by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne.

memoir: Anne Caughey. Dylan Brennan. Paul Anthony. Phil Young.

fiction: Ruth McKee. James Claffey. Clodagh O'Brien. Karl Parkinson. A. Joseph Black. Elaine Donnelly. Nandi Jola. Naomi Elster. Jonathan O'Brien. Sinéad O'Hart. Jan Carson. Ann Field. Eóin Murphy. Amos Greig. Claire Savage.