

A black and white photograph of a large flock of birds, possibly pigeons, flying against a cloudy sky. The birds are silhouetted against the lighter sky, creating a dense pattern of dark shapes. The clouds are soft and diffused, adding texture to the background.

the incubator

issue 10 | fiction | plays



the incubator journal
home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(September 2016)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 11

(due to be published in December 2016)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories**
and **essays** (2500 words max.)*

Guidelines are at

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editorial

WELCOME TO THE TENTH ISSUE OF *THE INCUBATOR*. WE ARE DELIGHTED TO HAVE AN IN-
depth interview with Carlo Gébler, in which Claire Savage gleans the inspiration for Carlo's
short story collection *The Wing Orderly's Tales*, and also the ingredients that every short
story needs. We have a superb medley of flash, each piece singing with voice and exactness.
This issue sees a return of one scene plays, with striking works from James Meredith and
Stewart Roche; the fiction contained showcases fittingly where the contemporary Irish short
story has arrived, ranging from Louise Kennedy's *Pieds-Noirs*, to P. Kearney Byrne's *Every
Cloud*, and everything else in between.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Carlo Gébler

author of The Wing Orderly's Tales

THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR WRITING A SHORT STORY. SOME AUTHORS LIKE TO USE the brevity of this particular type of fiction to distil a key message for their readers. Some have the view that short stories must be used to reflect the state of the society they live in. Yet others believe the short story form should be experimental, poetic, daring.

For Enniskillen-based author Carlo Gébler however, who published his collection *The Wing Orderly's Tales* back in March, he simply wants to entertain his readers enough so they keep on reading...

"My interest isn't the conversion of the reader to my point of view, but the entertainment and the engagement of the reader," he says. "So my focus for this book was on having a dozen stories of variety and of interest, which had some sort of sense of forwardness. I wanted it to be something that varied in such a way as to give the reader a sense of forward momentum – that would surprise, 'entertain', engage, nourish, divert and give pleasure to the reader."

With his last book (*The Projectionist: The Story of Ernest Gébler*) about his father, and the one previous (*Confessions of a Catastrophist: 1*) about his own writing life, Gébler has a penchant for biographies. However, *The Wing Orderly's Tales* sees him make a welcome return to fiction, gathering together stories inspired by his many years spent working in Northern Ireland's prisons as a creative writing tutor.

Keen to stress that these are fully fictional tales however, Gébler says he wanted to create a collection that had a natural flow, with each of the stories easily connecting with the others.

"It didn't seem to me that it would work if it was just a disparate collection of jail tales," he says. "I thought it needed to be somehow set inside a structure. In other words, the stories needed to be connected to each other. The characters needed to recur from story to story – not programmatically, or overzealously, but the stories needed to give you an accumulated sense of linked interconnectivity so that, when you put them together, they amount to an analysis of and description of the way imprisonment functions.

"But *The Wing Orderly's Tales* was actually very tricky to write, as it had to have a kind of novelistic integrity without novelistic content. There would be a tendency to fill in, amplify and 'novelize', and I had to keep reining myself in."

The twelve tales within the book, published by New Island Press, are subsequently narrated by the same character – Harold Chalkman, or Chalky as he's better known. Each one drops the reader into the minutiae of the inmates' lives, inviting us behind the bars to see what life is really like for these men.

"Our narrator's viewpoint is that imprisonment is inimical to rehabilitation – that punishment just on its own doesn't do any good," says Gébler. "But I didn't start out with a polemical ambition. These are simply stories about imprisonment and so they reflect the consequences of our current cultural fixation on punishment."

"My model when I started writing would have been stories like Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* – really simple and straightforward; often in the first person. It's one person telling you what's happening, without any literary frills. What I discovered when I got to the end was that, when you have all the stories together, they all tell you something about the criminal justice system in the world, and what happens when a system focuses on punishment."

One of the stories in the collection – the final tale in the book – is called *Christopher Jenkins*. It was originally written by Gébler in response to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that everyone is entitled to an education and that education 'shall be free'. It subsequently appeared in the Irish Times in 2008 and was included in a book published in association with Amnesty International to mark the 60th anniversary of the declaration. Entitled, *From the Republic of Conscience*, the anthology also featured work from Maeve Binchy, John Boyne, John Connolly, Seamus Heaney and various other writers.

"Roddy Doyle asked me to do the story," says Gébler. "And I picked the right of everyone to have an education for my theme. Then I had to go to an Amnesty event connected to the book. I read my story and Kevin Barry read my story and he said he would like to hear more from Christopher Jenkins."

"What he essentially reminded me was that there was more mileage to be wrung out of this character and this situation."

Having previously written about prison in his novel, *A Good Day for a Dog*, the Christopher Jenkins story wasn't Gébler's first time writing about prison life however. Indeed, the stories in his new collection were written over an extended period of time, as he was asked on several occasions over the years to write pieces for various outlets. It was always his intent though, to compile them into one volume and for this, he "had a model in mind."

The model in question was inspired by a film Gébler saw as a student at the National Film School in London, called *No Identifying Marks*. Shot using a broad range of directorial techniques and focusing on various subjects, the work still managed to connect everything in the end, combining the material "into a single cohesive whole."

"I thought to myself – there's something to be learned here about doing things which are discreet {in themselves} and which communicate to other discreet finished things," says Gébler. "It's the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The technique reflects our developing senses of what it's like to be alive in the early 21st century."

While Gébler can certainly weave a compelling narrative and draw his readers into the

worlds he creates, he points out that fiction is always just that. Whatever inspires it, the words remain a fictional reality created by the writer, which merely allude to but never truly represent, our own, real world.

“A story isn’t the truth,” he says. “It’s not the factual truth. It’s a virtual world which has a lot of similarities to our own actual live world, but all the proper nouns have been arranged to alert the reader that this is made up. You read it and draw your own conclusions about the world where you live.”

He’s therefore keen to stress that, while he spent almost 25 years working as a teacher and writer-in-residence in the Maze and Maghaberry Prisons, *The Wing Orderly’s Tales* are entirely fabricated. They aren’t about real people or events and the prison in which they play out in – HMP Loanend – doesn’t actually exist. His stories, which he describes as being “brusque and bleak” do however, reflect some of what he learnt in Maghaberry about the relationship between prisoners and the prison system.

With *The Wing Orderly’s Tales* now released into the literary world however, Gébler – never one to rest on his laurels – is busy with a number of new projects. Indeed, at the time of this interview he had just finished work on a play for the Ulster Museum called *The Box*. This told the story of a WW1 VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse from Newry who was also an amateur watercolourist.

He’d also just completed another play, *The Trial of Colonel Robert Lundy*, to show in Derry-Londonderry, and had penned a brief biography about the painter George Morrow, who was in the compounds at the Maze.

“I’m quite interested in pursuing biography,” he says. “I’m thinking about writing a book about the libel cases in Ireland – it’s just so interesting. One of my favourite books is *Eminent Victorians* by Lytton Strachey (one of the older members of the Bloomsbury Group).

“*Eminent Victorians* is four short biographies about four titans of the time – Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Gordon. It absolutely demolishes the reputations of these titans and I’m thinking of using that technique to get at characters involved in libel cases...”

A fan of biography he might be, but Gébler, who also led creative writing workshops at this year’s John Hewitt International Summer School, still likes to spin a tale of fiction or two. And when it comes to writing stories, it seems he always has the readers’ interests at heart.

“When you’re writing fiction, you can rearrange reality into a pattern that fulfills aesthetic and personal preferences,” he says. “I think a short story is a literary mechanism for delivering pleasure very quickly. It has character, event, colour, atmosphere – all those things are organised in such a way that your pleasure response as a reader comes almost instantly.”

Interview by Claire Savage.

The Wing Orderly’s Tales is published by New Island Press.

short story

Louise Kennedy

Pieds-Noirs

BRIGITTE OPENS HER FRONT DOOR AND STEPS ONTO HER GARDEN PATH. THE DAY IS GREY and she cannot see the ferry terminal clearly. Below, gulls scream above the dozens of bright blue tents and flecks of rubbish colouring the field near the waterside. Two doors up, Monsieur Hulot is already outside his house, clipboard in hand. He is dressed in khaki rain gear, though today is dry. Hassan is coming up the street, at his usual time, the girl with him again or, rather, behind him. Monsieur Hulot looks across at Brigitte and clicks his pen deliberately. He begins his daily log of visitors to her house.

Hassan props the blackboard he made beside the open door, the rules of the library written in his careful hand in French, English and Arabic.

‘They will all be able to read this. Written Arabic is the same across the world,’ he had told her, as he dragged a line of white under the final MERCI. Brigitte already knows this. She can still read some Arabic, had found the other day that she could still write her own name, and Maman, Papa, Nina. But to tell Hassan so might mean telling him everything so she says nothing. Hassan was inordinately happy with the sign, he said. His French is formal, almost archaic, and when he uses such words she has to try not to smile. Hassan told her that when he taught at the university he did not allow his students to use slang. He talks often about his time there, although recently his recollections have taken on a different timbre, as if he can scarcely believe he had a life before Calais.

The girl, Noor, has gone through to the kitchen. She is an odd little thing, Brigitte thinks, silent, yet deft, quick in her movements. Hassan scarcely acknowledges her, though she comes with him all the time now. Every few days she pushes a shopping list at him that he translates into French for Brigitte because he doesn’t know she can read it. Brigitte goes to the Halal shop behind the cathedral that the old Tunisian man runs, and buys bags of dried ful, bunches of moloukia, bottles of pomegranate molasses. Noor cooks lunch for them every day. Brigitte’s kitchen has never been so tidy.

Boxes of books arrive daily now. Hassan and the young English volunteers send appeals from their mobile phones and now there are books piled in every room of Brigitte's small house. They ask for English-Arabic dictionaries and phrase books, but it is rare that they get them. The boxes are full of thrillers and soft porn, the sort of books you would find in a charity shop on a shabby Kent High Street. In the beginning, they brought the books down to the camp, but the autumn has been so wet Brigitte keeps them in her house now. She hasn't been to the camp for weeks. The thick mud swallows the makeshift boardwalks almost as soon as they are laid and it is hard for her to trudge through it with her bad hip.

There are voices outside. Brigitte goes to the door. Hassan is already there, talking to five young men. She is surprised every day by their courtesy. She finds it hard to square these respectful young men with the reports of aggression and violence in the newspapers. They stand on the doorstep and wait their turn. It is uncomfortable in the narrow house with more than four visitors, but this morning she lets the five friends come in together. They leave their footwear in a box at the front door and lower their eyes as they pass her. At first the phrase books and dictionaries were available to borrow, but were seldom returned. These days she gives them away; if they ever manage to move on from Calais the refugees will need them. All the other books are available on loan. Sometimes they don't come back either. Hassan says there is a cleric in the camp who examines what they are reading, and that some books have been destroyed.

When she shows the first group out, another three men are waiting. Monsieur Hulot has been joined by the woman from the auberge off the motorway. They are standing very close, Hulot leafing through the sheets of paper attached to his clipboard. The previous week, the woman had organised a meeting in the square. Many of the townsfolk had attended and the 'Front Nationale' candidate had addressed it. Their ugly cheers had been battled about Brigitte's garden by the squally weather, and Noor had run out of the kitchen, wringing at a tea towel.

While the young men take their shoes off, Hassan carries a box of books into the kitchen and puts it on the table. Noor has put coffee on the stove, cardamom scented Café Najjar that Brigitte found in the Tunisian store. Hassan lingers for a moment and almost smiles. Brigitte remembers how the scent of shakshouka from the open window of an apartment had made her stop in the street in Marseille years before. The smell had brought

her back to the kitchen in Algiers, to Fatima bent over the pan adding the tiny needles of caraway that made her food taste like no one else's.

The delivery is a better haul than usual. There are a couple of hardbacks, manuals for car maintenance, first aid, growing vegetables, and the mandatory copy of the Da Vinci Code. There is a bundle of back issues of Elle Decoration; Noor leans over Brigitte's shoulder for a better look at an infinity pool overhung by giant succulents. Brigitte hands the magazines to her, watches her push them quickly into her thin backpack with the haste of one who has little, and doesn't expect to be allowed to keep it. Noor pours three coffees and Brigitte pulls out a chair for her. They sit at the table, the room cheered by the ochre floral print oilcloth, the warmth of the stove. The radio is on low, a Bach piece for harpsichord. Hassan comes in and sips his coffee. Noor has sweetened it heavily, just as he likes. He glances at the enamel clock above the window and takes his cup to the hall. It is nine fifteen and he has already dealt with eighteen people.

Brigitte flattens the cardboard box and brings it outside, tucking it into a wheelie bin. The queue is down to her gate. When Monsieur Hulot and the woman see her they start down his path. The woman overtakes Mr Hulot, and though the young men stand aside to let her pass, she holds her hands in front of her face, palms out, and sidles along the paving stones as though on the edge of a deep ravine.

'Henri? Madame?' Brigitte watches the woman clutch her camel coat about herself and flick her eyes towards the open door.

'This is Madame Girard. We need to talk about...' he pauses and looks around at the queue with a flutter of his squat hand 'this.'

'I see. I thought you had come to borrow a book.' Brigitte turns to Hassan, who is behind her. 'Let's keep the queue moving. There is rain coming later.' Hassan waves the next four men inside and Brigitte smiles at them as they pass. Madame Girard's eyes widen as a tall Sudanese man pulls off mud crusted boots, and wiggles long slim toes.

'We have not come to borrow a book. I don't have time to read books because I spend every waking hour trying to protect my livelihood from these...people coming over my wall like...' She stops, collects herself. Henri Hulot takes over.

'Brigitte, we have been neighbours for a long time. But this cannot continue. Yesterday 83 people visited this house. On Monday it was 106, and that doesn't count the vans pulling up outside with deliveries.'

'That many? Did you hear that, Hassan? 106. I told you it felt busy that day.'

'You cannot have this volume of traffic in a private dwelling. You must apply for change of use.'

'But I have heard nothing from the Municipality.'

'Oh, you will. Trust me. I have contacts. This has to stop. The town is overrun with them,' says Madame Girard, leaning in to Brigitte's face. She swings around, no longer afflicted by the terror that had gripped her a few minutes earlier, and the men in the queue have to lean back against the box hedging to let her pass, Henri Hulot a self-righteous step behind her. When they are back in Henri's garden, Brigitte turns to Hassan. He is in the hallway, re stacking a pile of books, putting the thickest on the bottom. He doesn't lift his head, though his shame is plain to her, in the stiff set of his shoulders. She has seen his sense of himself fade a little more with every day he spends in this place. For her, the worst day had been months earlier, when Hassan heard for the first time the camp being referred to as the 'The Jungle'. He knew the refugees themselves had given it that name, but said that it reminded him of how very far he had fallen. Brigitte tells him to take a break and waves the next four in. They glance at M Hulot's garden before entering.

She has gleaned Hassan's story piecemeal, in asides delivered when he is telling her other things. He left Aleppo with his brother, travelling by land and sea; their mother had stayed behind; he arrived in Calais alone. The camp fizzles with rumour and half-truth. In the queue at her door, young men frown and mutter at the endless trickle of tweets and videos streamed into their mobile phones. Hassan must know something of the fate of those he left behind. Brigitte doesn't ask questions; some burdens are hard to share.

When Hassan comes back he has gathered himself, but from time to time he looks uneasily up the street. Mr. Hulot is now sitting in a fold-up fishing chair, clipboard on his knee. Brigitte goes into her salon. She has tried to keep this room for herself, though there is a stack of books behind the sofa that may be valuable, which she plans to sell to fund the library for another few months. She sits in the wide armchair. It is covered in burgundy coloured velvet. The fabric looks wrong in the watery northern light, but it is in this room that she allows herself her past. Her own books are in a glass fronted oak case, wide heavy volumes of Islamic art, books by Derrida, Camus, Augustine of Hippo, her beloved Albertine Serrazin. On the mantelpiece, there are brass candlesticks engraved with an arabesque lattice pattern she bought at the flea market in Lille, because they reminded her of the ones her mother had kept on the long mosaic console in the hall. Beneath two watercolours of

the port of Algiers, a small cedar box inlaid with mother of pearl holds the stamps and coins she had grabbed the morning they left, the only treasures she could fit in her pockets. She closes her eyes and soon is twelve years old again, clinging to Nina on the crowded quayside, the smoke and ash from the 100,000 books that are burning in Algiers Library curling around them.

When Noor knocks the door to beckon her for lunch, Brigitte jolts awake. The smell of onions frying is all over the house. In the hallway, a young Afghan man closes his eyes and inhales deeply. Many of the borrowers must be hungry, she knows, but she cannot feed them. She had tried in the beginning, but there was never enough, and she couldn't bear to look along the row of faces and meet the eyes of the one she knew would get nothing when the pot was empty, and all the faces beyond his.

In the kitchen, Brigitte sets the table. It is barely twelve, though they always eat this early. Hassan and Noor always refuse breakfast, but seem to consider lunch a staff meal. Today, Noor has made a dish of spiced rice and white fish garnished with sticky, slow cooked onions and toasted pine nuts. Sayyadiéh, she tells Brigitte. She leaves it on the stove over a low light and puts a basket of flatbread on the table with a bowl of a thick reddish dip made from walnuts and charred peppers.

Hassan sits at the table. He fills their glasses with water. There is a place set for Noor but she stands by the stove, hands clasped in front of her, and waits. Hassan drops a spoonful of the dip onto his plate, leans over it. He tears a piece of bread and scoops up some of the dip. Noor's thin face is flushed as she watches him eat. Muhammara, he says, as if there is no one else there, then takes some more.

'Where did you find Aleppo pepper?' he asks.

'I got it from someone in the camp,' Noor replies in a quiet stammer, beaming, mortified. Brigitte clears the plates and listens to their sweet, excruciating attempts at conversation, Hassan's stiffly posed questions and Noor's earnest, halting answers. She can only understand parts of what they are saying, but is aware now that something has happened. Noor is scowling at the floor, and Hassan scrapes his chair back and leans forward, palms on the table, as if about to leave. Noor goes to the sink and begins to scrub at the cast iron pan she fried the onions in, while Brigitte pleads silently with Hassan. He shakes his head, but then pulls his chair back in and sits on in silence for a couple of minutes. When he has left, Noor takes one of the magazines from her bag and sits at the

table, pushing forkfuls of food into her mouth. Brigitte squeezes her shoulder lightly, and leaves her there looking at photographs of Yves Saint Laurent's former home in Marrakesh. Hassan doesn't look up as she passes. Outside, Monsieur Hulot is holding a ladder for a man who is attaching an election poster for the 'Front Nationale' to the lamp post in front of his house. The young men on Brigitte's path watch them. Back inside, she sits on the stairs for a few minutes.

'Let's just keep going,' she says to Hassan. He hesitates, then nods at her. For the rest of the afternoon she unpacks boxes while Hassan deals with the queue. Shoes and boots clomp into the crate, gentle thanks are murmured over books returned and borrowed, and in time they no longer look towards Monsieur Hulot's house. Soon, a scent of roasted almonds and custard is coming from the kitchen, a peace offering from Noor, Brigitte hopes.

At five Hassan takes the blackboard in and closes the front door.

'Why do you do this?' he asks. He sounds angry, but she knows he is tired, and disconcerted by the exchange with Noor and the visit earlier.

'Can you stay a little longer today?' she asks. He thinks for a few moments then agrees, though they both know he has nowhere better to go.

'Come and join me in the salon when you are ready. And please bring Noor.' A large atlas is open on the coffee table, an antique magnifying glass placed carefully over the city of Algiers. In a pouch in the back cover there are old photographs. She lays them out. In the first, a tall balding man is standing beside a blonde woman who has two little girls by the hand. In the next, a dark woman in Berber dress is kneeling in a courtyard looking shyly at the camera, the same two girls on her knee. In the third the girls are older and standing in front of a wide colonial building surrounded by palms; the taller girl is holding a book. Slowly, Brigitte opens out a yellowing newspaper cutting of the man, now in handcuffs, being taken from a black Citroen DS on a wet cobbled street, beneath the headline 'La Bombardier de la Bibliotheque', 'The Library Bomber'.

She is sitting in the velvet chair when the door opens. Hassan stands aside to let Noor in first, with her tray of café blanc and small sticky pastries. They have never properly looked around this room. Brigitte watches them take in the books in the case, the watercolours. Hassan and Noor lean over the table and look at the photographs. She hopes they will understand. They know more than anyone that you can be many miles from home but not have travelled very far at all.

* When Algeria achieved its independence from France in 1962, there were over a million non-Muslim civilians living in the country, the vast majority of whom had supported French colonial rule. About 800,000 of them were evacuated to France, a country with which many of them had no affiliation, being second or third generation settlers, some even from other countries around the Mediterranean. In France, they were largely unwelcome, and were referred to as the *pieds-noirs*, the 'black feet'.

Patrick Holloway

Circles

THERE WAS A LITTLE STREAM ON PRIVATE PROPERTY CLOSE TO MY HOUSE. THE FENCE SAID it. The gate said it. Even the barbed wire said it. At night I thought I could hear the trickling of the water, splitting itself among the smooth, mossy stones. So alive every second of every minute, whether I heard it or not. Separating and joining time and time again. I felt so clumsy, so awkward. I'd trip on curbs and stub my toe on the corner of the table. I was so solid.

It was the farmer's. The fat, growly farmer's. It was his property. He owned it. My father once bought a new car and I sat in the front seat on the way home. He put two books beneath my bum so I could see out of the windscreen as we drove through time in his new purchase. He seemed to smile all the way home, and pointed to different dials and buttons in the car and I smiled back at him. My bones felt sick. My mind was flooded. I wanted to scream at him, I wanted to cry so hard that my face would bruise and bloat. There's a stream only a few minutes away, I wanted to whimper, a stream that somebody can own, and you bought a stupid, metal, rocklike car. There's a stream that knows my name! Of course, I didn't think that at the time, I couldn't understand all that emotion, but I did think of the stream, how it whispered, how it sang.

Private property. No entry. Trespassers will be prosecuted. I was ten and hadn't grown in years. A shrimp, people called me. My brother used to push me around and trip me and call me a dwarf, a midget. Say things like, you're so short you'd drown before you realised it was even raining. He'd say a lot of things that I wouldn't even understand; it was only his tone that told me it was an insult. And I'd cry and run to Mum and cause all kinds of

drama. Secretly I loved it. I lay in bed at night and said my prayers and told Jesus Christ I'd do my homework and be nice but only if I stayed short forever.

I'd always fall asleep in my parents' bed. Before my dad got in. Cuddling up to Mum while she played with my hair. And if I wasn't asleep before Dad arrived I'd always pretend to be. I'd hear him sigh heavily and tut tut under his breath, and sometimes tell Mum that I was getting far too old, that she was spoiling me.

Then during the day, after school, I was free. I could simply climb over our wall in the back garden and walk along the middle of the trek. There were two muddy paths separated by a grassy line. Big tractor, tyre marks on either side. I'd tiptoe all along the grass avoiding the sludge, stepping on stones and hop-scotching my way to the stream. I'd follow her voice, soft like someone tickling the inside of your arm. It soothed me like gel on a burn; like a mother's kiss on a grazed knee. Soup and sleeping when you're not even that sick. She knew how to pronounce my name. Oisin. Oisin, like shushing me to sleep. Ohshhheen.

I remember how the other kids used to get excited before a soccer game or when we were invited to a birthday party, or going to see Toy Story in the cine-ma. As I approached the stream, as the signs started to warn me away from the one I loved, I felt the same excitement. A giddiness in my brain. I'd curl my toes and bite at my lips. Then I'd lay flat on the grass and roll my way under a fence, then climb over a gate and then my little feet fit perfectly between the cutting blades of the barbed wire. I'd balance myself like an acrobat, push down and spring forward until I landed like a gazelle on the other side.

A few steps down a little bank and then I could sit at the side and watch how the water fooled us all. How it seemed like one long, silvery snake, making its way to an unknown land. Then if you looked closer you could see the bubbles of its heart. Separate. Congealing and conjugating until it was hard to know where one started and the other ended. I'd stare at a rock in the middle of its path. How it could not stop the rush. How the water flowed freely. It did not matter where you put the rock. Wet feet, I tried to move it, shift it to see the effect. Only for the running water to chuckle lightly as it tickled by my toes.

I pinched at my skin. Punched at my thighs. Such friction. I could only ever be in one place, my two feet anchoring me to the ground. I'd try and stretch my thumb backwards. See how far I could turn my head, half expecting it to come around 360, orbiting.

One day, not long after my father had bought a new car and a fair bit after we had put my mother in the ground, I sat at the stream's edge. I sat on the dirt. The earth. I took my shoes off one by one and placed them side by side. I scrunched my socks into balls and buried them in my shoes. I rolled my jeans up as far as they would go, until they were tight around my knees. I looked at the white of my legs, they may as well have been made of metal, of lead. I placed my feet in the stream. The coldness reached my brain and I shivered, sending ripples through the water. There were few trees, and all were losing parts of themselves, letting little pieces float away. Soon they'd all be bare and they'd still be beautiful. The only sound was the water, the very first melody known to man. And my breath. Stolen from my mother. I wanted to silence it, to hear only the stream, its word-less words, but each time I held my breath my heart battered within my ears.

My feet were getting numb and beneath the water they had become someone else's. They reminded me of my mother. After she died. Her face, farcical, so un-real that I thought at any moment the adults would break out laughing at me; that it was all something that I couldn't understand. They'd say, no, Oisín, don't be silly, how could that dead, silent weight be your mum. You and your imagination, Oisín. Now go on outside and play. Ohsheen, she called me, trickling at my feet.

When I took my right foot out I was deceived. I thought my leg would remove itself of it, that it would sink below to the bottom of the stream. And the left foot came out, too, just as it had been but paler, the skin had aged. I used my nails to make moon shapes but felt nothing. My hands were busy moving the earth from side to side, making little piles, visiting grounds, as if I owned the hands of God. My fingernails were dirtied by life.

For a moment I thought of cleaning them in the river, or else Mum would heave out breath and flash those eyes to the ceiling and say, really Oisín, how many times do I have to tell you; can't you just for once do as you're told, Oisín. Ohsheen, calling me closer to her chest, to the heart of her.

I had asked my father not to bury her there. Next to strangers. I told him how she had hated the cinema, how she felt uncomfortable in a roomful of people she had never met. I had gotten angry, hit at his chest.

'She won't be happy there!'

‘Stop now, Oisin, stop with all that.’

‘There’s a stream, it has her voice, I’m not lying, it has her voice, she’ll be happy there!’

‘Now that’s enough, Oisin! And you stay the hell away from there, last thing I need is the farmer knocking on our door!’

He had said my name as if it were a cleaning product. Something to disinfect something else. When I said my name out loud it had lost all its meaning. It could have been in another language. I started to make bigger piles, scratching at the dirt, at the soil, pulling grass out to make space for more. All the while I could hear her, whispering everywhere. She had no starting point. Every time I thought the stream could end, it started up a few metres down the trek. Peeking from the curve of a rock; carrying leaves away. I soon joined all the piles, pushing the earth into a mound not bigger than a football.

I knew you’d be happier here, I said aloud, I think. I put my head on the mound, my left ear silenced by the earth, my right alive to the sound of her rock-ing me to sleep. And it is as if I have been sleeping for so long. And every time I open my eyes I expect to be back there, to look upon that stream. Until now.

Now I open my eyes and I am holding you in my arms, I think you must be the tiniest thing to ever exist. Your mouth is like a button hole. Your tongue al-most catlike. You suckle at life. I find myself staring at you, getting lost, and each time I look up the world has gone and changed, has spun around to show some-thing new. I catch myself holding my breath in order to hear yours. Like a leaf falling from a tree, I have to see it to hear it.

And we have just dipped your head, momentarily, in the water. I watch how those threadlike hairs thicken and dry. You did not cry. I think you smiled. And as we say your name, Saoirse, I hear that trickling return; feel the endlessness of it all. A hundred thousand circles. I hold your mother’s hand and hear her whis-per your name, Saoirse, as if she were shushing you to sleep, Searshhha. I think of all those leaves that the stream took, floating off into anonymity, nameless. I feel how light you are in my arms, yet how solid. I imagine water trickling over stones and catching at earth; flowing further away, always moving; it cannot be caught and if it is it just empties itself, falling through our fingers. Your eyes open and in the corner of one is the perfect shape of a tear ready to fall.

Louise McIvor

The Infanta of Castile

CLARE GOT OFF AT BAKER STREET AND FOLLOWED THE SIGNS FOR THE BAKERLOO LINE.

Her cousin had warned her that she must always stand to the right on the escalators. She did this, glad of the clipped advice as a stream of people rushed down the other side.

She had not been prepared for the crush of bodies and briefcases, suited women in high heels, and a tourist grazing her cheek with his rucksack.

She had to let the first train go as the crush of people on the platform was six deep. She felt a surge of panic at being late on her first day.

There was no chance of a seat on the next train and Clare stood, wedged in between a Canadian tourist's rucksack and a man reading *The Independent*.

Half the carriage got out at Oxford Circus and Clare found a seat. She checked the destination again on the map opposite her, the anxiety taking hold. She was on the right train and she couldn't fail to get off at the right place, as this was where the line ended.

At the Tube station with the stupid, fantastical name. Like something out of a fairy tale.

Clare found her way to the exit but then felt another surge of panic as she found herself in the middle of a massive subway tunnel.

The tunnel was a maze, like a quest in a medieval folk tale. She went down one corridor but the exit was marked with a road she didn't recognise and when she walked up the steps to daylight, it was to a building with Grecian columns with a sign saying "Metropolitan Tabernacle". She hurried back along that same corridor, with sweat starting to pool under her arms into her Etam blouse. She followed another corridor but that exit was labelled "Imperial War Museum".

Clare looked at her watch and realised she only had 10 minutes before her first class. The familiar fog of panic took over.

She couldn't remember the name of the tutor she was meant to ask for. All she could see were endless graffiti-ed tunnels, which smelt of urine.

She thought she would try to find the College above ground but she found herself in the middle of a spaghetti junction of roads with lorries and vans thundering by and a sign saying: "Use subway".

She retreated to the safety of the tunnel, still in the grip of the panic that meant she couldn't think straight. The panic had nearly derailed her finals, when the days had been coated with never-ending anxiety, so that she couldn't concentrate on the words of her revision notes, could barely cope with what to eat for breakfast, in her grimy shared house, and had ended up so cold that she wore layers of mismatched clothes in damp May and had lived on toast for days.

They had taken her aside and told her that applying for the Masters in medieval literature and all that studying may only derail her further. *Keep busy, eat well, get out with friends. Forget that medieval nonsense.* Hence the three month postgraduate journalism course instead.

There were still days where Clare felt she was hanging on by her fingernails, wondering why she wasn't normal like the man in front of her with his rucksack. Eventually, she had asked him if he could find the College on his map for her and he had said he was going that way too, so they had found it together, the exit clearly marked now that the fog had started to lift.

It was a group of 15 on the course. They were immediately grilled on the main story on the news that morning and when Clare said that she hadn't had time to listen to the radio, the tutor had said:

"That's your job. You're a journalist."

Clare wondered if she would even last the day. Then there was the shorthand and the sub-editing with complicated ways to do word counts by ruling a line vertically down the right hand side of the page.

"Go out and interview five people on what they think of this new Prime Minister John Major," the tutor said after lunch.

Clare wondered if she had heard him right. She looked round at her fellow students but they were all just getting out their reporter's notebooks.

I can't do this, she wanted to say. *I could hardly find my way here*. She thought of the nothing days of a few months ago, trying to struggle with an exam on *Moby Dick* and *Paradise Lost* in the same week and the way the words seemed to merge into one sea of black type, ink threatening to drown her.

Everyone else seemed to know exactly where they were going and what they were doing. Clare remembered the crowds of people from the tunnels and went back there.

People asked her if she was selling something and she said no. A man in a suit told her that all effing politicians did was effing sit in Parliament and they should be taken out and – she had stopped writing here, as her brand new shorthand wasn't up to it. A West Indian woman said she would answer Clare's questions if Clare would carry a couple of her shopping bags to the bus stop, which Clare did, and then the bus came and there was no quote.

However, by the end of the hour, Clare had managed to get five quotes. Clare typed them up on a manual typewriter, one of which was sitting on each desk when they came back.

There was a bank of pay phones outside their classroom and they were expected to put in calls to press offices and editors and chief executives. Clare found the phone calls particularly stressful. Some of the receptionists couldn't understand her Northern Irish accent and she hated it when the tutor made her ring back 'contacts' to 'beef out a quote'.

On Saturday morning, Clare got the Tube to Oxford Circus, relieved not to have to contend with the commuter crush. Here, she walked and walked, trying to get her bearings above ground, looking at clothes in shops where she could barely have afforded a scarf. Eventually, she found a bookshop and lost herself in a new reprint of the *Lays of Marie de France*.

However, on Monday morning as soon as Clare reached the end of the Bakerloo line, the panic was back as she struggled to remember the correct exit, as if her brain had wiped out the previous week.

The garish elephant and castle sculptures just served to depress her further, an attempt to make something beautiful amidst the greyness.

The phones were always busy. Dan from Kent had a feature on clubbing that was going to be published in *Time Out*. Katya from Bermondsey had already been commissioned by one of the broadsheets to do a feature on attacks on Eastern European factory workers.

Clare was struggling to organise her own week-long placement. Everyone else seemed to be going to arts magazines or the broadsheets. The trade magazine she phoned said that their work experience scheme was filled six months in advance.

She tried a few others without success. The next morning, a girl in a business suit left behind a glossy magazine on the seat when she got off at Oxford Circus. Clare picked it up.

"Yes," a clipped voice said when Clare had managed to get through the switchboard, then to the right magazine. "We have a work experience scheme. What college are you at?"

The woman had an accent like Clare's and said she thought they might have a slot, as someone had cancelled.

Clare spent her placement week at the magazine opening the post, answering the phone and ordering motorcycle couriers to pick up shoes, dresses, china and various other items for photo-shoots.

She often felt sick with anxiety that she would get something wrong, which she frequently did, accidentally cutting off an important photographer who was trying to get through to the imperious Features Editor.

However, the Chief Sub let her sit at the subs' desk and practise her proofreading every lunch time and quizzed her on what headlines she would use for that feature, what caption she would add to that picture.

Half way through the week, opening the post, Clare saw a proof copy of a biography of a woman medieval academic, whose work Clare had studied at university. She waited until the Features Editor came back from lunch.

"Can I review this?" she asked.

The Features Editor glanced at the press release.

"Two hundred words by Friday. And no promises."

Clare stayed up until three in the morning, two nights running. *Moby Dick* had been good training. She re-wrote the review several times, slavishly checking every fact.

The relief she felt when she'd finished felt similar to the relief she felt when she'd finished her final exam paper.

However, on the way home on the last day of her placement, she felt the old anxiety gripping her, when she realised she had spelt the woman's name wrong.

What little confidence Clare had gained during her week seemed to evaporate with the feeling that she would always be held back by this witch's fairy tale curse, which was always mocking her, just as the Tube station with the silly name was mocking her, promising pantomime antics instead of an underpass reeking of urine and menace.

Clare spent the weekend worrying about the spelling error but when she phoned the magazine on Monday, expecting the Sword of Damocles to fall, the Chief Sub was friendly and relaxed:

“Good of you to phone. My training’s paid off! Oh by the way, there’s a good exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. Might be worth writing a feature.”

The Press officer had warned Clare that she shouldn’t try to take in the whole museum but focus on something that interested her, but as she walked through galleries of planes and tanks and guns, she couldn’t think of anything useful to say.

However, when Clare looked at a letter from a long-dead soldier, she found herself wondering about the stories buried in those letters.

What must they have felt, these soldiers and their wives and girlfriends, mothers and sisters? They must have had to find a way to cope with their fog of anxiety, their own relentless waves of panic at their lives being turned upside down.

She wondered at the mystery of her own anxiety, de-railed by a damp student house, with its strange dynamics and loneliness and the purgatory of *Moby Dick* and *Paradise Lost*, when the joy seemed to be permanently on hold. And now, the menacing tunnels and forbidding features editors, keeping her awake at three in the morning?

As Clare walked back to the Tube station, she wondered if the same part of her brain that produced the fog of panic, also noticed the beauty of the wartime wedding dress made from a silk map, the countries and oceans skimming the slim contours of the bride’s body.

On the way home, Clare stops at a charity shop, where she spies a Silver Reed portable typewriter for £10. Feeling delighted that she doesn’t have to wait until a snatched half hour on Monday at college to type up her feature, she buys it. The shop is not busy, for, explains the West Indian man behind the counter, everyone is Christmas shopping on Oxford Street. A tinny cassette recorder is playing *Joy to the World*.

They get talking and he recognises her accent for what it is (not Scottish or Canadian, as everyone else seems to think). He asks her how she likes London and she tells him about the feature she is writing but also about how she hates the Elephant and Castle with its silly name and network of menacing underground tunnels.

“It wasn’t always the Elephant and Castle. Once upon a time a Spanish Princess stopped there and made camp on her way to meet the English King. And so they named it after her.”

He gives her a receipt for the typewriter.

“She came from Castile. The Infanta of Castile.”

On the way home, clutching her typewriter, which she is carrying like a baby, Clare walks back through the tunnels. This time, she doesn’t see the grey concrete and graffiti, she doesn’t hear the voices asking for spare change, she doesn’t see the sea of people fighting to find out which exit they should take.

She sees instead a Spanish princess, bedecked in jewels and a fine dress, her very hair glimmering with pearls, making camp for the night with her ladies and her retinue, throned in splendour, monarch, even in a strange land, of all she surveys.

Una Mannion

The Bright Lake

SHE FOUND THE LETTERS THE MORNING OF THE SOLAR ECLIPSE. ROSEY'S FIFTH CLASS were taking a bus to Lough Gill with their pinwheel projectors to watch it and Niamh signed the permission slip and took a two euro coin from her purse for the bus. She went into Martin's office to find an envelope. At the back of the bottom drawer she found a brown paper bag from Dunnes folded into a neat rectangular package the size and shape of envelopes. She opened it. Inside were a pile of letters folded over into three sections. She started to read one of them and saw only a few words. 'My Martin.' The possessive pronoun hit her stomach like a kick. She turned to another page. The sign off was 'always yours, Anne.' She flicked through the pages. 'We must make a decision about Niamh,' one letter ends. She'd used the plural pronoun. She'd written her name.

On the wall above Martin's desk was a calendar that Rosey and Niamh made for him the previous Christmas. The month of March had a picture of Rosey when she was four or five, red cheeked, woollen hat pulled down over her ears, hugging a hen with a brilliant red crest to her heart. Everything in the picture was pulsing with life. Niamh stared at it. They had gone to the trouble of getting one custom printed to show the moon phases. 'Eclipse' was printed at the bottom of the box for that day.

'Mum?' Rosey asked as she walked into the office. Niamh turned, holding the letters behind her.

'I'm going outside to see the sun.'

'Okay, not too long. We don't have much time.'

She felt sick. She slumped down to the floor, her back against Martin's desk. The most recent letter was dated three weeks ago. It referred to them having just woken up together and how she loved the intimacy of this, the bulk of Martin's body next to her. She tried to remember where he was three weeks ago. He was in Atlanta that week. She pulled out a sheet deeper in the pile. It was dated last May, ten months before. It was the month her father died.

In the kitchen, Niamh watched Rosey from the window as she moved from tree to tree, checking on the fat balls that hung like baubles in mesh nets of bright red and orange from the branches. Rosey had found the instructions online, rolled the lard and seed and strung them. All through the winter, they watched as birds clutched on to the swinging balls: goldfinch, blue tit, wren, chaffinch and one territorial robin. They photographed the robin for December on Martin's calendar. Niamh cut Rosey's sandwiches in moon shapes and wrapped them in foil. She looked out again and saw Rosey at the bottom of the garden. She put the silver moons in her lunch box. They were late and she banged on the kitchen window. Rosey returned from the garden red-cheeked and breathless.

'The sun's still there,' she said. 'Here. Snowdrops. For you. I found them at the wall.' She thrust her hand toward her mother, a fistful of white flowers.

'They're beautiful.' Niamh arranged them in a yoghurt pot and set them on the windowsill.

'Now, come on. We're late,' her mother said.

'Snowdrops look sad. Don't they, Mum? Like their heads are hanging down.' Niamh considered the flowers, their bowed heads. It was the kind of thing Rosey said that she would usually text to Martin.

'Yeah. They do,' Niamh said. 'But they bring spring and make people happy. Come on snowdrop you. We have to go.'

At the school there was no sign of the bus or school children.

'They're gone. I missed it,' Rosey said, her face set in disappointment.

'It's okay,' Niamh said. 'We'll catch up.'

They drove and listened to the radio. The broadcaster explained that right then the moon was passing between the earth and sun, casting its shadow across Ireland. In the next hour there would be a near total eclipse best seen from the Northwest.

'Hurry, Mum. We'll miss it,' Rosey said.

'It takes time,' she told her. The sky was darkening. They drove down narrow country roads towards the lake.

'Mum, did you know that Lough Gill is a lake of tears?' Rosey asked.

'No, I didn't.' The doleful statement jarred her.

Rosey told her the legend they learned in school. Gile was the daughter of a Sligo chieftain. She loved another chieftain and one day he saw her when she was bathing at a spring. And she was so ashamed about being seen naked, she slipped under the water and let herself drown. Her maid who loved her cried and cried after her death, and there were so many tears they formed a lake.

'And Gile is bright,' Rosey said. 'So Lough Gill means bright lake. I don't really understand why Gile did it,' Rosey mused. 'I'd be embarrassed if I was seen naked, but I wouldn't let myself drown over it.' The story sounded familiar to Niamh except the part about Gile's shame.

On the last stretch of road before the lake, the back of the school bus became visible.

'Look,' Niamh said. 'You've made it, the same time they did.' They pulled into the car park behind the bus and Rosey grabbed her schoolbag.

Niamh watched as the children disappeared down the hill towards the pier at the lake's edge that faced the isle of Innisfree. She got out of the car and walked towards a

small bay off to the east, the letters in her hands. There was a woodland and beneath the trees were boats clustered on the shore, many of them half submerged in rain and lake water. One row boat, painted blue, looked dry. It had been pulled past the waterline and the oars were in their locks lying inside. Between the stern and centre thwarts was enough space to fit a body. Niamh had an urge to lie down in it. It took little effort to pull the boat down across the stones to the water's edge. She waded into the lake to her knees in her heels and tights until the boat was half on shore and half in the water. Getting in, the boat listed for a moment. She held the two sides, repositioned her weight, waiting for it to still. Then, she lay down in its hull.

The water lapped around the edges of the boat and soon found a steady, calming rhythm. Beyond the noises of the children at the pier and the soft slaps of the lake water, she heard birdsong. The wren. 'A very vocal little fellow,' her father used to say. His song bubbled and rattled. She hadn't taught Rosey these things. She pulled the tarp over her body and bunched up layers under her head. She thought of Martin. Right at that moment he was across the world most likely lying in a hotel bed with someone else.

She wished she had shown Rosey the things her father had taught her. Above her, the moon was a black circle. It had started to obscure the sun which had turned a radiant white. She could hear the children shouting from their spot on the shore.

'I see it. I see it. Me too,' they yelled, and she imagined the shapes of the sun and moon taking form on the sheets before them. There was a hush as the moon ate its way fully over the sun. For a moment everything was still and felt upside down. Her hands were around one of the oars and she sat up and took it out of the rowlock, gripped the shaft and pushed the blade against the shore as hard as she could. The boat scratched and scraped across the stones. She adjusted her grip lower on the oar, gave a last push and launched fully out on to the water.

The boat calmed as it gave way to the movement of the lake. She pulled the oar back into the boat, laid down and stayed very still. In the sky, the sun was a diminished moon, just the finest sliver of white. One of the kids shouted. 'A star, a star.' In her floating bark she saw it too, blinking in the half-dark sky. The murmur of the children travelled across the lake water.

She drifted. Soon, the bright edge between the black moon and the sun expanded. The children cheered and started singing *Here Comes the Sun*. Their buoyant voices and lyrics moved her. Her eyes burned from tears and looking at the eclipse and she closed them.

She woke to a creaking sound. She sat up facing the keel and saw the pier directly across from her. There were no children. Behind her the bow of the boat was nudging the shore of the island. Stepping out into shallow water, she hauled it up the bank towards the thicket. She took off her wet shoes and tights and left them there. Holding the letters, she followed a path that crossed the island climbing towards one of the scenic vantage points that looked north across the lake. There she settled herself on the ground and started to read. Anne worked in the Atlanta office of Martin's company. They had gone hiking together. Martin never walked with Niamh and Rosey. He was the kind of man proud not to own a pair of runners. They'd been to the cinema, out with her friends, out to dinner. He had met her sister. Niamh couldn't read anymore.

She started down the rocky incline to the shore and stumbled, scratching her face and hands as she grasped at heather and small brush growing out of rock crevices. A scraggy hawthorn caught her. She eased herself down the rest of the embankment and stayed there, looking across the lake to the north and Hazelwood.

When she was a teenager, she knew a woman who drowned herself in the half-moon bay at Hazelwood. She walked in one evening and kept going. People said afterwards that she was pregnant and the father was married to someone else. The lake had so many dark stories. A fourteen year old girl's pregnant body had been found off the opposite shore a few years ago. She was murdered by her friend's father. He strangled her, stuffed her in a sleeping bag and dumped her body off the shore, throwing rocks at her until she sank. She was in a nightdress when they found her. A child. How many lakes in Ireland held stories in their depths no one would ever know? She took her handful of letters and dipped them in the water watching the felt tip words run together and drip into the black lake. She gathered the disintegrating sheets and waded out to a large rock and pushed the sodden letters beneath it. Another lake burial.

To get back to the boat, she walked the shoreline. As she rounded the southern end, the sun lit a golden bed of reeds. Through the bright stalks a mute swan glided alone, its white plumage illuminated. She pushed the blue boat back out on to the water and started to row. At first she went lopsided, one blade striking water before the other. But soon she moved rhythmically, the catch and draw propelling her in a clean line across the water. She wondered if Rosey had found her silver moon sandwiches. Her bent knees were bleeding. She straightened as she drew the oars towards her and felt the power of her stroke. Her father always said she had a strong back. The sun fell over her body as she rowed. That night when they went to bed she would tell Rosey a bedtime story where they rewrote the one about Gile and her lake.

Sean Daly

God All Day Long

1. PHIL MAKES UP HIS MIND THAT HE WON'T KICK HIS SON OUT AS LONG AS FOLLOWS two simple rules. (A) He keeps his room clean and (B) he doesn't smoke weed anymore.
2. Phil's son is also *a Phil*, which creates a lot of confusion in the house especially when Phil's wife yells "Phil!" and the wrong one answers, and she has to say, "No...Phil!"
3. Phil makes excuses to walk by his son's room so he can leer inside. And he finds? Bed made. Bong missing. Phil tempers his astonishment by telling himself "its early days yet," but he's encouraged by his enrolment at City College.
4. Or so it seems until Phil gets a phone call from his son who can't find the campus on the first day. Phil senses his son's anxiety and he tells him to use google maps. When his son responds "Mom turned off my data," his first instinct it to yell, do I have to do everything for you? But instead he takes in a deep breath and remembers a saying from Alcoholics Anonymous, "anger and resentment are the luxury of ordinary men."
5. Phil muses about sobriety as he drives to work. He no longer thinks about drinking, per se, but about abandoning AA altogether, saying to himself, how pointless it is in resolving his problems. This is not the first time he's wondered about this. Usually such discussions, although made in a soft reflective interior voice, are accompanied by despair.

6. Phil arrives at his job where's he's an engineer for an oil company. He puts down what remains of his coffee and worries about the dropping price of crude while reminding himself of the axiom, *everything is perfect in God's world*.

7. Is this really true? Or a delusion? He mulls it over just as his boss knocks at his door while opening it up at the same time, telling him that there's a staff meeting in an hour.

8. Weakened by the news of potential layoffs, Phil decides to go to a noon AA meeting. He grabs a burrito from a lunch truck and arrives a little late. He sits in the back and decides not to *share*. What's there to say? Reaching into the brown paper bag he finds that the pico de gallo has spilled.

9. Phil sees a man he sponsors who's leading the meeting, in fact, and he acknowledges Phil with a smile which, alone, acts as an indictment of Phil's poor attitude.

10. Phil has always thought of his sobriety as *his better self*, a way of channelling his interior superman, a persona he needs to put on as a means of getting through life, minus the spandex and cape, naturally, and the need to change in a phone booth, which of course, no longer exist.

11. Phil decides to share about his fear, a recurring subject in meetings. He talks about them manifesting in two ways (A) The plummeting price of oil and (B) The state of mind of his son. He ends his sharing by talking about gratitude which he has discovered through the collective wisdom of sober alcoholics is the antidote to a fear-based life. It's Kryptonite.

12. Phil texts his son on the way back to work, *how is your day going?*

13. He doesn't hear back.

14. Phil heads home after an exhausting day mulling over the idea that *nothing happens by mistake in God's world*. Does this mean he's getting what he wants? Or wanting what he gets?

15. Phil sees his son in the kitchen shadow boxing, so he loosens his tie (which his son takes as a challenge) and he squares up with his dad. The two pretend to be in the ring, sparring

with jabs and hooks that don't quite connect. They've done this before and it usually ends in laughter.

16. Sometime after dinner, Phil walks to the linen closet as a pretext to snooping on his son. The door is ajar. He sees that the bed is made. Nice. The room is also vacant so he walks in gingerly. He spots a ceramic jar, opens it and smells the pungent remains of weed although it's gone.

17. Dad?

18. Startled, Phil puts the lid on the empty jar placing it on top of the dresser. His son looks at him as if he has been violated, and if Phil were asked, he'd admit with a degree of guilt over his spying, albeit a small amount.

19. What's this?

20. "Vestiges of before I gave it up so you wouldn't fucking kick me out."

21. Phil feels badly, but mildly impressed at his son's vocabulary while at the same time not believing his son. Before there is a next move, Phil's wife yells "Phil" followed by both of them answering "What!" which leads to a long silence, nobody knowing what to say next.

22. Phil says something akin to, come here, and rubs his son's hair in a fatherly way. This is his attempt at saying *sorry I didn't trust you*, even though he doesn't. He notices his son's eye colour as if for the first time, a washed out blue colour, which shows signs of both rage and disgust.

23. Phil walks out to the patio by himself. He gazes at the potted plants and a glass table which could use some Windex. There's a breeze that he hears in the tress and feels on his arms. Phil figures that if God is just what is here, *now*, a verb more than a noun, then God is not only right here, but he's been with him all day long. This gives him the needed motivation to look for his wife, to find out was the "Phil!" meant for him or his son.

Kieran Marsh

When I Lay My Burden Down

THE BILE ROSE IN BRENDA'S BELLY AS THE ARCHWAY OF TREES REACHED DOWN THEIR thick fingers towards the car. The road to Ballydove was renowned, ten miles of willows on both sides, planted in the famine as work for the starving. They were alive with ghosts and memories. The willow whips slapped at her, then twisted around her ankles and wrists. They were like echoes of his hands on her, the brute Mal Donovan. She remembered the hairy wrists, the stagnant odour that always hung about him. The bile caught in her mouth but she must swallow it long enough to get this thing done.

'You're quiet,' said Jim.

She turned to look at him. His eyes were glued to the surface ahead. It was a rotten road, twisted and pot-holed; the willows obstructed the view and left a skim of soft, decaying organics that made the surface slimy. He was a fine man; not the handsome, world-striding hero she had once imagined was her destiny, but a gentle and straightforward man who filled the places of her heart that Ballydove had left empty and dark.

She pulled down the vanity mirror and checked out her face. She was plain to look at, she knew. She'd had lovely long hair once, her one good feature, but she had cut it short in the wake of that summer and had never let it grow back. Jim had never seen it long. Now it was grey and gone a little wiry. Her long face was beginning to show the signs of ageing. Without any makeup, she felt bleak. What had Jim seen in her at all?

'Would you marry again?' she asked him.

'What?' He looked across at her, confusion stretching his gaze until he almost lost the road. 'What in God's name are you on about?'

'If I were gone. You'd get another woman, wouldn't you? You wouldn't stay alone?'

Shaking his head, Jim wrestled the car back to third gear as a Volkswagen van suddenly appeared around a bend in front. 'You're mad, woman. What would have you thinking about such things?'

'Cancer.' The word fell from her like a toll.

His eyes were pulled to her again. 'The cancer's gone, Bren. I was there with you.'

'I know. And thank you.'

'There you go again. You're talking with a real finality, like you're wrapping up loose ends.'

'I just said thank you.'

'But your tone, it's like "thank you and goodbye."'

'That's not what I said.'

'No, but...' He fell silent.

Willows wept past as they drove.

'What about a red-head this time,' she went on. 'Somebody with a bounce to her? Nice curves, bit of heft?'

'Ah Jaysus, what the hell would I be doing gallivanting around with other women at fifty-five years of age. Besides, if you survived that cancer then chances are I'll never be rid of ye.'

He smiled across at her, a big grin full of the energy that had nursed her through the illness.

'And this Mal fellow,' he said, turning back to the road. 'You think he's still dangerous?'

Yes. She did. She knew in that deepest woman-part of her that he was the most dangerous thing on the earth, that he had killed more inside her than ever the cancer had done. 'I... I don't know. Maybe.'

'If you're afraid of him then let's stop this nonsense now. We don't need to go.'

'Don't be worrying now. Keep going.'

'I feel like there's more to this.'

'Stop worrying. I've told you, just keep driving.'

So, he drove on, pushing the car a little too sharply into the difficult bends. He was angry, she knew. His trust in her was absolute, but they both knew that she was not telling

him everything. He did not know why she had to go back, and all she could do was push away his concerns. He expressed his anger in silent ways, in his driving or his cooking. As ever, it was short-lived. She watched as his hands relaxed, his driving eased, and he began to hum a tune to himself, lost again in his own thoughts.

*

Ballydove was a small town stuck in its own past. The main street ran steeply uphill from them as if it had somewhere important to go. Ageing houses and shops were stacked like boxes up the side. A few stunted side-roads, some of the shops boarded up, a grey concrete church, built in the futurist spirit of the sixties but now like an open sore on a dying man. Forty years ago there had been a community here, but much was changed. The chip shop with the pool table was now a pizza chain store, Mary Heffernan's once elegant drapery had apparently been reduced to a barn, stacked with hay out the door. At the statue of Wolfe Tone where once Brenda had hung out with her holiday friends, a squat woman sat smoking and staring.

Despite the changes, it was like putting on an old coat that you've had in the attic, dusty and alien, but disturbingly snug. She had spent precious summers here, growing up, staying with her aunt and uncle, before that one summer. Successive years spun through her head like a photograph album with the last pages torn out.

They stopped outside *Donovan's Lounge Bar*, the name barely legible on the chipped and peeling sign.

'So this is Donovan's?' said Jim, craning his head. 'Not quite the den of iniquity I had envisioned.'

'I don't suppose he has the power any more, the IRA isn't the force it used to be.'

'He wasn't really a 'Ra man though, was he?'

'He was when it suited him, when he needed a job done.'

When he needed a job done, words that had wrung with her through the years. Words that had sown a seed in her that summer which then grew into a weed that never died.

'I'm not happy with this, Bren,' said Jim, maybe catching her mood. 'I think we should call it off.'

'No!' She tried to keep her tone mild, not to distance Jim again, but it was a struggle now she was back at this place. 'No, I've come this far, I'm going through with it.'

The air in the pub was dark and heavy, stale with the echoes of the past. In one corner, an old man in a crumpled suit and flat cap watched them as a cow might, chewing on his pint.

Brenda went up to the barman, a young, fat lad slowly polishing a glass.

'How ye going on,' asked the kid.

'I'm...' Time seemed to stop, froze her mind as if this were the last chance to turn before entering the gates. 'I'm looking for Mal.'

'Who?' smiled the barman, cocking his head like a quizzical dog.

'Mal Donovan. Owns this bar.'

'Nah. It's Gerry Noonan owns the bar. Donovan's is just the name on it, ye see.'

'Don't be minding the kid,' croaked the old fellow in the corner. 'He's too young to remember Mal "Hatchet" Donovan.'

'Hatchet?' said the barman. 'That sad old fart? Used to own this kip?'

'Used to be he owned half the town. Oh, he was the man once and no mistake, kill you soon as look at you. Something ate him from inside, like worms on a corpse.' He leaned forward, sharing a secret. 'Nothing left but bones.'

'Ah, don't be listening to PJ,' said the barman. 'Sure, he's full of hot air.'

She looked over at Jim. He was bent in examining a poster of freshwater fish that was age-bleached to green. She remembered it from the months she had worked here. Her young mind had held onto the images of fish till they became iconic, they had become a wallpaper for all the bad things in her life.

'And tell me,' she said to PJ. 'Would you know where I might find him now?'

'Ah well,' he winked. 'I might and I mightn't.'

*

It cost her a pint to get the directions from PJ. Back in the car, they drove on down the town and turned right at the *Broken Jug* into a gloomy and derelict street. They stopped at the old bike shop which, as PJ had suggested, had a tree growing out of the roof. Next to it rested a hovel, single story, wooden door half-rotted off the hinges, net curtains more yellow than white behind crusty cracked panes, black render crumbling from the brickwork.

Jim turned to her. 'Look, not too late, you don't have to do this...'

'No!' The word came out much too harshly into the calmness of the car. 'Come on.' She opened the door and climbed out.

Jim went to the boot to fetch the duffel bag. Brenda stared at the shanty. Was this what he had sunk to? A man grudgingly respected by many in the town but feared by all. At his instigation, people had been dragged from their homes and beaten with pickaxe handles. Others were still missing, their bodies perhaps out in the bogs. These were the stories she had heard, and she had never doubted them.

They banged at the door several times. The creature that answered was pitiable. A shock of red hair shot with streaks of grey was gone wild on his head. His face had collapsed in on itself, few teeth to keep the cheeks inflated, so that he might have been a hundred. There were great, dark stains on his clothes, and the smell was repellent, like an infected wound. He wore moth eaten slippers, the rubber soles hanging off.

'How are ye going on?' he said. His voice was cracked but there was a power, an implicit threat about this creature that made Jim take a step back.

'Mal?' Brenda's very bones were turning to water from the site of this thing that had been her horror, her ordeal. Her voice felt cold in her mouth. 'It's Mal, right?'

'Who wants to know?' The thing looked her up and down, then turned to Jim and gave him the same casual but cruel regard, before facing her again, taking a half step closer. His face cracked into something that was, perhaps, a smile. 'Oh, I know you now. I know you, I do.'

'Mal, I'm Brenda. I worked for you for a summer...'

'I know who you are, and I know what you fucking did. You miserable fucking thief.'

Brenda stood her ground. 'You can't intimidate me anymore.'

'Oh, really?'

There was something in that casual statement, a potency that carried more threat than any actual words of violence. Brenda had to stop and use her Pilates breathing to get her calm back.

'I'm not a thief,' she said, as softly as she could manage, 'but I did take money from you once.' She took the money and ran, hid for thirty years, but in truth her guilt, and the closure she needed, stemmed from something else, something much deeper that had happened that summer. Something she could not put a name to.

'That's not all you took from me,' he leered.

'That's all I'm here to talk about. The money.'

'Good.' He leered.

'I spent every day regretting what I did, regretting asking you for a job in the bar.'

'Not as much as I fucking regret it.'

'You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know how much it hurt me.'

'I'd have caused you a great deal more fucking pain if I'd have got my hands on you, you whore. It doesn't buy me nothing, though.'

'I have your money. I want closure.'

'Closure my arse. Where's my fucking money?'

She nodded to the bag Jim was holding, he unzipped it, held it out. 'Ten thousand euro,' she said. 'Interest, damages, whatever.'

Jim handed the money over, and Mal took the bag with an almost inhuman lust, a spasm of spit hanging from his open mouth as he gazed into the cash. He looked up, an ugly, black-toothed smile on his face. Suddenly, he twisted about, as if he expected a shotgun to be pointing at his head, but there was only the putrid void of his home. By the time he turned back, Brenda was climbing into the car.

She sat in the seat. It was done. Jim was still standing there, and Mal was saying something to him in a muttering tone she could not make out. He took a step closer to Jim, and Brenda opened the door, half afraid for Jim.

Mal made a guttural noise that might have been a laugh. 'Wasn't worth the money,' he shouted in her direction. 'Robbed me more ways than one.'

He stuffed a wad of cash into his trouser pocket, tossed the duffel bag into the hallway and, still wearing rotten old slippers, shuffled off into The Broken Jug.

*

Jim was white, his hands clamped to the wheel, as he turned the car back down the hill towards the Dublin road.

'Are you alright?' she asked.

He looked at her. There was something in his eyes, something wounded.

'What did he say to you?'

Jim turned away, shook his head as if trying to clear a fog. They were back on the willow road, the bends seemed sharper now. She had prayed for the pain of the years to be lifted, but the trees reached in closer to her.

'He's a liar, you know,' she said.

He turned to her with a savage vehemence. 'Why did you bring us here? Why did you...?'

There was a sudden loud rumble. He'd let the car drift so that the wheel had started to run over onto the hard shoulder. He had to pull the steering hard to get them back on the straight.

'Whatever he said to you, Jim, he's a liar. Watch the road, will you!'

'Why did you come back?' He looked at her again. She pointed him back to the road.

'He manipulates, Jim. He uses people. Don't let him into your head.'

'You put him there. What could I do?' He was staring at her again.

'Slow down, please, you need to...'

'Jesus, Bren, I love you but...'

'Jim...' she screamed.

Something huge and dark and demonic rounded the corner and they could not stop on time. There is a sickening bang, inhuman. Then, there was nothing.

*

Brenda was upside down. The car was upside down. There was grass above them, and boots, machines. Wreckage was being cut. There was a man on his stomach beside the window, a paramedic, he held a mask over her face.

'Can you hear me,' the medic was saying, calmly, loudly. 'You'll be okay, just relax.'

She looked up at her trapped body. Part of the dashboard was driven into her belly. Her legs were twisted. There was no pain, only cold.

She looked across at Jim. He was untouched, peaceful, head lying at a slight angle on the roof.

'Leave me,' she tried to say, 'make sure he's okay,' but she could not bring power to her lungs. Why was nobody treating him?

Then she realised why.

The medic jammed a needle into her shoulder and a milky warmth flooded her veins, easing the anxiety.

It occurred to her that Mal's evil had won; his brutality and the fear and the guilt she had carried for thirty years had undone her, had taken from her the only thing she valued. The debt was paid with blood. Then she wondered, idly, as the world became gently blurred, if Jim would indeed have married again.

P Kearney Byrne

Every Cloud

FRIDAY MORNING, QUARTER PAST TEN, YOU PULL UP THE DRIVEWAY. YOU'RE FIFTEEN minutes ahead of schedule, but Jo's outside the house rattling her car keys, tennis whites on, legs gleaming like a schoolgirl's.

'Leonard's upstairs,' she says, 'Bernie's dressing him.'

She pulls on driving gloves and kisses you on the cheek, up on her tippy-toes. A quick pat on the arm, car door, engine, gravel, and off she shoots. Just like a normal day.

Only, it's not a normal day. It's Leonard's last few hours in the house and you know it can't be easy for her. But Jo's deep – you're always second-guessing this stuff.

You find Bernie in the kitchen sluicing down Leonard's tray – fucker slobbers everywhere. Bernie's a treasure, a heart like a baker's oven. She goes above-and-beyond the call; meals, medication, toileting, and makes the whole lot look like a walk in the park. She even does his horny old toenails too, grinds them off with what looks like a blacksmith's file.

'How's he doing?' you say.

'Oh, now,' she says, 'the dander was up all the morning. The trouser is still across the back of the chair.'

It's Bernie's last day of employ with the old goat and you'll give her a reference and a half.

You've got to get him to Blackrock, probably a forty minute drive. Since he went ga-ga, old Leonard's a total liability in the car, prone to bouts of wheel-snatching and door-opening once you hit the open road. And that's on a good day. Plus, he's always had great instincts – it's how he made his lolly – so for sure, he'll sniff it out that today's the day he gets his marching orders. Jo's always tried to keep his meds to a minimum, concerns about

the side effects and so forth, but you can't have him going ape-shit in the car. He needs the full pharmaceutical before you set off.

'What about his happy pills?' you ask Bernie.

'Done and dusted,' she says, wiping her hands on a tea-towel. 'I doubled his dose for him. He'll be quiet as a lamb in ten minutes and I'll get them clothes on him.'

You and Bernie are of one mind on such matters.

You go upstairs, take the steps two at a time. Leonard's on the edge of the bed, growling to himself. He turns with his eyes narrowed to slits, points his finger at you and tries to stand up. His dressing gown is hanging open and you can see the silk boxer's underneath, heavy on one side. Bugger's hung like a Shire horse. Still has that steely Brillo-pad of chest hair and the body of maybe a sixty year old. Good going for eighty five.

'Intruder!' he bellows, pointing the finger straight at you. 'Usurper!'

'It's me, Pops. It's Keith.'

They say it's normal, the unprovoked aggression, all par-for-the-dementia-course and so forth. They don't know Leonard. It makes you want to sock it to him there and then. That's the main challenge, keeping your fists balled up in your pockets. You've wanted to sock it to him for – take fifteen from forty five, that's thirty years, right? – slug him one in the mush, or better still, stuff him one in the guts. You tried it that time, a few weeks after you walked in on him and Jo. You'd been on the hop from school, prowling around the top of the house looking for cash to nick, thinking they'd both be at work. You were rifling through Jo's coat pockets when you heard animal sounds, low grunts from downstairs. You crept down the stairs. Halfway down, you saw Leonard's face reflected in the mirror in the hall. The gargantuan head on him with the hair sticking out at the sides, white spittle at the corners of his mouth, the red face, eyes squeezed up like a wrung out face-cloth. You thought he was having a heart attack. But when you got to the kitchen door, you saw his dressing gown, his bare brown legs, and between his feet, another pair of feet in tan high heels, black panties straining across the ankles. And there was Jo, arms braced like she was doing press-ups on the kitchen counter, legs splayed like a mare, head down, panting, while Leonard entered her from behind. He let a big groan, opened his eyes and you locked hard, eye-to-eye, in the mirror.

About a week later you started calling him 'Pops.' You knew it'd piss him off. It was always 'Jo' and 'Leonard' with them, never 'Mum' or 'Dad.' Your sister figures that having

kids was their one big mistake, the fly in the jam of their perfect romance. Jackie reckons, with Leonard being twenty years older than Jo, that he wanted to keep his girlfriend, not have her turning into a housefrau. Women always seem to get the bigger picture while you're grappling with the details. It's the same with your wife, Sally. She shoots from the hip and you appreciate it. One night over a bottle of plonk and a pizza, she gave it to you straight.

'Leonard hates you, Keith,' she said. 'Face it and it'll free you.'

It was only then that you finally cottoned on to the word hate.

Leonard didn't say anything when you started with the whole 'Pops' malarkey, but you guessed he was biding his time. He was a big, fit guy then. You were just beginning to beef-up yourself, rugby, surging hormones, the works. You came around the back of the house one evening. The moon was high in the sky. The black branch of the apple tree was out in front of you and – dooff! – at first you thought you'd walked straight into it. The fucker'd been standing in the shade of the house, waiting. He stepped out, didn't say a word, landed you a punch in the diaphragm. You were bent double – Christ he was strong! – you couldn't breathe.

'Get your own, you little prick,' he said.

He turned to go, still in his solicitor's gear, but you swung an arm up, grabbed him by the jacket. You really thought you could take him. He spun around and you sank a fist into his stomach. He didn't even blink, just slammed another one into you. You keeled over on the grass, head in the daisies, sucking like a stranded mackerel, and he strolled off, clearing his throat, straightening his tie.

He never came after you again, even though you kept calling him 'Pops.'

But it's like that fist of his got lodged inside you that night, right up under the sternum. Some days, you can really feel it, hard and mean, stuck in your gullet like a rock wedged in a drainpipe.

About a year after that, Jackie pointed out the obvious to you. He'd stopped using your name. Soon as you started calling him Pops, from that day to this, thirty years total, he's never once used your name. At least not when you can hear it. So you stick with 'Pops'. Quid pro quo and all that.

*

Bernie follows you upstairs to the bedroom.

‘Right, Leonard,’ she says, ‘let’s get the trouser on.’

That’s her approach. She’s probably asked two dozen times already this morning, but as she says, it’s a fresh start every five minutes. She never loses the head with him. Though in the early days, there was a bit of an ‘incident’. She was bent over picking up his clothes and the bugger lunged forward and bit her arse, sank his teeth right into her buttock. You were opening your mouth to say, ‘*Jesus Christ!*’ but by the time you had it said, Bernie’d already hopped up and boxed him – hard – on the side of his head. He got a shock for sure. Barked like a dog and rubbed at his temple. Bernie stood looking at you with her chin up.

‘It’s up to you now, Mr. H.,’ she said, ‘I’ll finish up today if that’s what you want.’

‘Haven’t a clue what you’re talking about, Bernie.’

You left it at that.

*

Your wife says it’s the summers that saved you and Jackie, stopped you becoming total nut-jobs. You were sent to Galway every year as soon as the school holidays started, staying with Jo’s older sister. Chalk and cheese, the two households, dinner time especially. At home, it was like watching a pervy pick up every night; Jo and Leonard sitting opposite each other with the white tablecloth, the wine and the candles. You hated those fucken candles. Circle of Two up their end, you and Jackie at the other end like a pair of abandoned pups, heads down, trying to ignore them flirting and playing fucken footsie under the table. You knew it even then; it was full of shit, and there’s some shit never becomes normal.

In Galway, in Breda and Brendan’s, it was the other extreme; beans on toast for everyone, kids fighting, endless noise, adults at their wit’s end. Just enough normality to stop you and Jackie turning out complete whackos. Jo’s family were salt of the earth types, pure Galwegians. That’s where your sister lives now, Galway. Kids-wise, she went the other way from you and Sally. She and Donal have notched up five rug-rats so far, the whole family living in a wooden house with goats and what-have-you.

‘Trying to give them what she never had herself,’ Sally says.

You agree; their kids are the be-all for Jackie and Donal. Home-schooled, no telly – never mind an iPhone – organic this, that and the other. All very hippy-dippy. But you love those kids.

*

Bernie fastens Leonard's Velcro shoes. He's looking out the window over Wicklow Bay. He bought the house for that view. Maybe he's having a coherent few minutes. Maybe not, since even a few seconds of *compos mentis* usually has you ramming your fists into your pockets. Last Saturday, you called when they were having breakfast. You sat with them at the table. Jo asked him to hand her his plate.

'Plate!' he said, in that loud voice of his.

He gunned the big head straight at you. You saw his eyes focusing, felt the muscles across your chest gearing up. Fucker was lucid. Clear as a bell. You knew what was coming.

'Handed to you on a plate,' he snarled, glaring at you.

He got his hands onto the arms of his chair and started struggling up, neck straining.

'I work my *bolloxoff* and you get it handed to you on a plate.'

He was a minute away from taking a swing at you across the table. You knew Jo'd never intervene, but Bernie came in from the kitchen just as he grappled himself to his feet. She shoved him back into his chair on her way past, never even asked what was going on, changed the atmosphere, fair fucks to her.

The fact is, you taking over the firm threw up a few conundrums. In his day, it was all business types, helicopters and apartment blocks in Turkey – and the conduction of some majestically dodgy tax deals. It was a thankless task bringing that lot under control, but you did it. Besides, you know it'll go some way towards Jo's old age and it gives you and Sally a few quid to spare, so you've no complaints there. What bugs Sally is the amount of time you still spend with the two of them outside the office. She says Leonard wasn't the father you needed and he never will be and she keeps asking you what you're waiting for.

'Revenge or redemption, Keith?'

You tell her what you believe, that we're all waiting for something. You just want to recognize it when it happens.

*

'I'll take the suitcase down, Bernie.'

‘We’ll be right behind you, Mr. H. Isn’t that right, Leonard?’

At the car, your father climbs into the passenger side of the Beemer like he’s off to the Four Courts, adjusts the seat and snaps the seatbelt shut in that super-competent mode of his, and it all looks a-okay. But when he puts both hands on the dashboard, the fingers spread out like thick-cut chips, leaning forward with his chin jutting out, the seat belt sawing across his neck and twelve inches of air between him and the back of the seat, it’s pretty clear there’s a vacancy in the penthouse.

You scoot up the N17. There are no homicidal capers in the front seat, and in the medicated calm, you relax some, turn in past Ballybrack, follow the coast along Killiney Bay. You come down the Vico Road into the hot little mess of Dalkey Village. You should thank your lucky stars and head straight for the nursing home, get shut of him while the going is good, but instead, you turn right, nose the car towards Dun Laoghaire. You’ve got the road to yourselves, so you twist down the one-way towards Sandy Cove. He’s humming under his breath. Sub-vocal droning; it’s how he used to disguise the dementia in the early stages. You come up through Dun Laoghaire. The car park in front of Teddy’s Ice Cream Parlour is empty. You swing the Beemer into the middle of it. The weather has changed since you left Wicklow, purple clouds ganging up over the bay. You kill the engine and sit looking out over the flat grey water. He’s still humming, hands on the dashboard, craning up at the sky. You hunch forward to see what he’s looking at. There’s a lone gull, up high, balanced on an air current. After a long time, she dips her ocean-most wing the slightest fraction, turns her body and glides off on another breeze. Something about this gives you a notion. You look at him. He seems happy enough.

‘Be right back, Pops,’ you say.

You’re not sure whether he hears you, but you get out quickly and glance around. Then you lock him in the car.

The girl in Teddy’s is a lackadaisical blonde wearing latex gloves and doing a bit of sub-vocal droning of her own.

‘Givus four ‘99’s,’ you say to her. ‘Large.’

Over your shoulder, you check that Ram-Rod is still holding his position in the car. The blonde spirals the ice-cream into the cones, then pokes them into a carton with four holes punched into it and stuffs the Cadbury’s Flakes into the ice-creams at cock-eyed angles.

When you get back to the car, you unclip his seat belt with one hand, shove him back into the seat with your elbow and hand him a '99. Rain slops suddenly onto the windscreen and the breeze becomes a wind. You sit back and take a cone yourself. With the metallic downpour drumming all around you, and the heaving sea out front, there's something of an optical illusion. It's like being on the bridge of a ship on the high seas.

'Storm's coming up,' you say.

He's giving the '99 what-for, snaps the flake off in two bites, taking a ragged chunk of cone with it and a flop of ice-cream.

'You like?'

You indicate the cone, which is losing ground fast. He continues mauling the ice-cream, but gives a wolfish grin before crunching the pointy end loudly. He seems to be moving his jaws up and down but not sideways, so bits of wafer are scattering down the front of his tee-shirt and even across his shoulders, like tanned dandruff. He licks his fingers with a heavy tongue and eyes the cardboard container.

'Need to keep your strength up, Captain,' you say, passing him a second cone.

'Hah!' he says and sets to again.

There's a strangely convivial atmosphere on the ship's bridge, celebratory almost.

'The open sea is your only man,' you say.

'Nothing like a Teddy's ice-cream in the eye of a storm,' you add, as the car rocks in a u-turn of flouncing wind.

He laps noisily at his feast. It strikes you that this is an unexpectedly enjoyable moment, so you say this too, wiping your fingers on some wet-wipes Bernie gave you. You look across and see two substantial dairy rivulets making their way down his chin, dripping onto his tee-shirt.

'You might want to wipe your face there, Leonard,' you say.

He keeps lapping but sticks his chin out obligingly and you use a couple of wet-wipes to clean him up. You are so engrossed in this that it takes you some minutes to register that you called him Leonard. You sit back in surprise, digesting this unforeseen turn of events. Your father dispatches the remains of cone number two and sits smacking his lips appreciatively and volubly. You consider what you are about to propose, then look straight ahead, clear your throat.

‘Here’s the deal, Leonard,’ you say. ‘You ever want to come here again and, you know, sit here, maybe shoot the breeze with Yours Truly, you just give me the nod.’

You pass him the last member of the cone quartet. He falls on it with the happy relish of a dog snaffling a ham-bone.

Outside, up in the stormy sky, a flock of gulls whirls seamlessly on the diverse and invisible currents, and it occurs to you that there are many opportunities in this life, many opportunities.

flash fiction

Robín Oree

The Gift of You

SHE IS HERE.

I spy the van from my bedroom window – the station of an emaciating vigil that has lasted dawn to dusk, every day, for two straight weeks. I'm already bounding down the stairs when the doorbell rings. The sharp trill crackling in and out, from an index finger resting too delicately on the buzzer. So familiar. So exhilarating. So missed.

Wrenching open the door, I feel a screw pop in the handle.

The first thing to strike me is her corona. I'm not sure if it's the midday glow soaking her hair or just my febrile vision. For a full minute or so, I forget to blink, breathe and swallow.

"I'm Marlene," she says.

She is. She is one hundred per cent, every vein, fibre and follicle of her. Here's that smile, two clips of smooth, glossy bullets cushioned in dewy peach. Here's those folds of skin draping off the far corners of her eyes, casting a shadow like indelible winged eyeliner. Here's her hair, so dark the mere sight makes me crave a glass of milk. Here's the cool asphalt of her bare legs, rising from cuffed ankle boots and hooded by a cornflower blue dress.

A stinging moisture rings my eyes and, ashamed, I rein them in. Then it occurs to me that shame is no longer applicable.

"Is everything alright?" she asks.

Oh yes. It is.

"Come in," I manage.

"If you would, sir, your signature, please," says her handler, whom I only notice now.

A woman in her forties, hair sculpted in a slanting weave that resembles a water slide. She taps a button on her wristband and a holographic lattice gloves her palm. I take the proffered hand. Her grip is courteous but insistent. While the scan is in progress, she does not make eye contact. The grid turns green, then dissolves.

"Thank you. Here's your Welcome Package. Please enjoy."

The handler gently shoves a slim binder into my hand, then heads back to the van. I don't take her abrupt manner personally. No doubt there are many more deliveries to make.

Marlene steps through the door, with that stupefying frictionless grace, steps into my, now our home. I close the door behind her.

"Now," she says, "what would you like us . . ."

I don't let her finish.

Later, I'm watching her doze, hair spilled on the pillows, one foot peeking out from under the duvet, to release heat. It's a sight straight out of the dreams I've been having night by night for nearly three desolate years. I hesitate to trust my eyes, fearing that I'd jolt awake any second now, alone again, rejected, pathetic; but then I remind myself that I have

worked for this. She is here, in my bed, because I have earned her. Nobody can take this away from me now. Nobody, but one.

I resist the urge to brush aside the duvet, grasp her shoulders, kiss my way up her throat and into her mouth. There'll be time. There'll be forever.

Slowly, I roll off the bed and steal downstairs, to pick up the phone. I'd much rather wake up tomorrow knowing hands have been shaken and all bad blood drained. When she finally answers, she doesn't say a word. I never suppress my caller ID. Honesty, always.

"Marlene."

A deep breath on the other end.

"She's perfect." I reach for the binder, place it on my lap. "Just like you."

Silence. Then, finally: "Will you stop now?" Her voice. Even when angry, she can't keep that gentle purr out of it. Her voice was meant to speak kindness and warmth. Marlene never understood that. Come to think of it, a waste.

"Will you leave me alone?"

I open the binder, shuffle through the certificates and manuals.

"I will."

"For good? This time?"

I run a finger over the logo, printed in living ink on each document. A rotating heart symbol, beating, swelling, undergoing mitosis. Doubling itself. The two hearts orbiting each other, for a second, before they re-merge into one and the animation loops again.

"Yes."

"You know the terms. If I ever see as much as a text from you again . . ."

"I know."

The sound of her just about to hang up. I know it, in my bones.

"Marlene?"

"What."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

The line goes dead.

Marlene, my Marlene, creeps up behind me, given away by that unmistakeable scent of wet grass and vanilla. Not a single note they didn't get exactly right. Her arms snake around my hips.

"Who was that?" she murmurs, tongue flicking against my ear. "Are you talking to other girls behind my back?" Her arms making a sash across my chest.

I twist to face her without breaking the embrace. Her breath, slow and warm, spreads over my collarbone. My fingers straighten the curtains of her sleep-ruffled hair.

"No," I say. "There was only ever you."

Eileen O'Sullivan

Cockroach

IT WASN'T A DREAM. I NEVER DREAM. SCUTTLING AND BLOOD, AND MY PINCERS clicking. They didn't like my pincers, screamed when they saw them. Clicking, slashing, flashing metal, my pincers doing their work.

No more timid Timmy Cockroach, scurrying, head down, don't notice me, timid Cockroach.

In the first month of the first year at college they started, Matthew, Justin, Gemma, Paul and Karen, the other five occupants of the dorm corridor. Brilliant, beautiful and popular, entitled to grasp the glittering prizes. They ignored me at first, skinny, timid Timmy in the corner room, hurrying past, shy, stammering. Then the drinking started.

"Let's play a game, rugger. Come on Timmy we're playing rugger. You can be the ball. Got some bruises there Timmy, didn't mean to hurt you, all piled on in the scrum see. Just a joke. You can take a joke, can't you, Timmy. Timid Timmy Roach. Cockroach. It's just a joke. Can't you take a joke, Cockroach? No harm meant. Look he's crying. You crying, Cockroach?"

"Sorry about the state of your room, Cockroach. Got a bit carried away while you were at your Dad's funeral. Your door got broken, see. Kind of messed up your stuff. That'll take some cleaning. Didn't mean to throw your laptop out the window, you know how it is with a few drinks".

“Just forgot you Cockroach, the drink you know. Can’t remember tying you up. Didn’t realise the tape covered your nose. Sorry you nearly suffocated, it was just a joke. Shit, did you piss yourself? Look, Cockroach pissed himself ‘cos he can’t take a joke. Dirty Cockroach, what a wimp.”

Cockroach, Cockroach can’t take a joke, wimpy, piss your pants Cockroach.

Unrelenting from the first month of the first year at college.

Stopped going back to the dorm. Slept in the lab store cupboard or the janitor’s room. They thought Cockroach had gone but they were wrong. They didn’t know about the attic. Only Cockroach was skinny enough to crawl through the access hatch. Cockroach lurking in the shadow, always behind the door or above them in the ceiling, they never saw him watching, listening. Only coming out when they weren’t there. Making preparations, scuttling away. Buying the stuff. Pincers, sharp metal pincers, putting them in the backpack, the carapace. They drank, got sick, the bottles weren’t clean, dirty Cockroach had got to them. They all fell over, passed out, then Cockroach struck, pincers slashing, stabbing, scurrying from one room to the next. Scurry, scurry, click, click, slash, slash. Oh they screamed, they pleaded. There was blood when Cockroach went to work with his pincers.

It wasn’t a dream, I never dream. I can hear banging on the door, they’re looking for the monster who robbed the world of those beautiful, talented young people. The loathsome beast who stole their glittering futures.

“Hello, I’m Timothy Roach.”

Marie Gethins

Future Proofing

PICTURE THIS: A SCORCHING LANZERGROTTY AFTERNOON, ME BAKING ON A LOUNGE chair. Pure bliss until the big splash, shouts, feet slapping concrete, and Joaquin's shadow across my face. Sun cream might have dripped into my eyes or maybe that third glass of Sauvignon Blah had kicked in – it took a few tics to get him into focus. By then hotel first aiders had Declan by the feet, slick and wet. They tugged him onto dry land. Later, cleaners scooped his blood and brains out of the pool. All-inclusive doesn't usually feature knocking off husbands.

You're waiting for me to tell you how Declan was an awful brute or pissed away our money on horses. This isn't one of those stories. Solid, reliable – you knew what you got with Declan. Up at 6:15, out the door by 7:05 Monday through Friday. Two pints of Guinness with the lads on Saturday at The Shamrock. Sunday fry-up and The Indo. No mystery on gifts either. I knew before I opened the box or envelope: for Christmas Dior Poison (his mother's suggestion 20 years ago), birthdays a €50 All-For-One voucher in a sex humour card.

We'd even gone to the same resort for 15 years. May and September – when kids were in school and you'd get the best deals. We agreed no heirs upfront – before the diamond ring and semi-D in Drumcondra. 'Let's enjoy life,' Declan said. 'Live for ourselves.' Sounded good to me. Ah course, I wished we'd mixed it up a bit, and Declan forever scrimping got on my nerves. Still, the Grand Volcan has an amazing golf course and three designer pools. Fabulous food, I'll tell you. The staff, well, second to none. Joaquin started working there five years ago. We weren't a week in when he noticed Declan off with the golf clubs and me alone by the pool every morning. The sex is fantastic. Declan, Mr Missionary, but Joaquin – enough said.

I'm spontaneous; Joaquin the same. Declan was the planner. Ok, Joaquin elbowed Declan as he went by, but it was total fluke that Declan tipped backwards and hit his head off the pool edge. Joaquin and I made the most of an opportunity. That is until the terms of the will came through. So it's Poison every Christmas, €50 All-For-One voucher every birthday – special delivery. The Grand Volcan May and September. In between, a fecking monthly stipend, inflation-indexed.

Eileen Acheson

Thank You Letter

13 CHILDHOOD LANE

Dear sibling,

Yet another of your “gifts” arrived in the post, protected by layers of bubble-wrap this morning and the postman interrupted me when I had just wrapped my legs around my lover (with great effort I might add even though the yoga classes have loosened my joints somewhat, it’s still a work in progress.) I leapt in fright and managed to put my husband’s back into spasm as I grabbed my jumpsuit. (Yes I know I called him my lover earlier on – I felt it sounded more oh la-la French.) Anyhow, having raced to the front door to take hold of your latest gift I could hear our aunt the nun say “It’s the thought that counts. Caring is sharing.” Or was that the feckin’ purple dinosaur who said that?

Back to your gift – which I carefully opened. Thankfully, I might add, there was nothing on the label to scream danger, open with care. A former Philadelphia tutor used to say there are two tongues “one in the mouth and one in the shoe. Always watch the one in the shoe.” Having considered carefully your gift and having invited several expert opinions (ok, it was just the husband, the dog and the 3 cats) it was agreed that you had in fact sent me a hand grenade for my birthday. I was going to add it to the slow-punctured water-bed and the no-brakes bike and the jar of honey with a sell-by date two decades ago but decided to send it

back to you for your birthday with this letter and a kind “be careful” sticker. Expect the other gifts to follow in due course.

Your thankful sister

Deirdre Kingston

In the Bus Station

When the doors of the bus station opened in, they noticed him. The weather had eaten at his face, making it the colour of sunset.

He could have been any age.

He sat on the bench opposite them and took a packet of tobacco from the top pocket of his denim jacket. With the thumb and forefinger of one hand, he made a cigarette and sealed it together with a lick of his tongue. He checked his watch and then asked them:

“Has anyone the time?”

They all looked away.

“My watch isn’t working,” he said and extended his arm so that they could see. It was a gold watch, plain but expensive, and the face of it was cracked.

“Broken,” he explained, as if they hadn’t noticed. “Useless, so it is.”

He opened the strap and cradled the watch between the fingers of his left hand. His fingers were lined with the soot of the streets.

The people sitting across from him still did not look at him. The young man swiped on the screen of his iPhone. The man next to him studied the tooled pattern on his leather shoes. And the woman with the buggy made faces at her grandchild.

“It was my father’s,” he said, almost to himself.

The man with the leather shoes nodded.

"It was my father's," he said again, and brightened. "From when he retired. It's the only thing of his that I have."

He held up his hand and the watch caught the sun.

"It's a shame that it got broken," said the man with the leather shoes. "Maybe it could be fixed."

"You think?" the man said. "It's only the front that broke. Look."

"I wouldn't know much about watches."

The man stretched out his hand. "Take a look at it for us, anyways. It's still in fairly good nick."

The man with the leather shoes gave a slight shrug of his shoulders and took the watch between his fingers. He examined the face of it. Then he turned it over, and looked at the back. An inscription read: "Anglo Irish Bank – Annual Golf Tournament 2003".

Beside him, the woman sighed.

The man with the leather shoes rubbed a thumb across the face of the watch. "That's a shame. How did it happen?"

He gave the watch back to the man, and the man made a grimace, baring his teeth.

"Heart attack. But when they found him, he had been dead for three days."

He waited for them to speak, but the young man with the iPhone typed with his thumb, the man with the leather shoes folded over his newspaper and the woman with the buggy jiggled a toy giraffe that squealed when it was squeezed.

Then the man put the watch back on his wrist.

At their feet, two pigeons began to squabble over the crusts of a sandwich and the woman shooed them away with her free hand.

The man spoke.

"He used to wait up for me, my father. In his armchair, with the telly on. And he'd always wake up. Even if I was quiet about it. And he'd say 'John, John, I kept a bit of dinner for you.' And then he'd say 'What hour is this anyway?', as if he was cross. And we'd have a smoke, and a bit of a chat, because he didn't like the telly."

The man with the leather shoes smiled at him, then rolled up his newspaper, and tapped with it against his knee.

“And I didn’t get there, you see, that week he died, because I was a bit out of sorts.”

Then the man with the leather shoes, said: “And your father was fond of golf?”

The man stuffed the tobacco packet back into the top pocket of his denim jacket, and stood up, pointing at the man with the leather shoes.

“My father, but. He waited up for me every night.”

Then he dropped his hand by his side, where it hung from him like a limp fish.

In the bus yard an engine turned over and the bus station was filled with the sound of it.

The young man zipped his iPhone into an inside pocket. The man with the leather shoes put his newspaper in a rubbish-bin. The woman with the buggy pushed her way to the top of the queue.

And all around them, the bus station was busy with the sound of people going their separate ways.

review: Amos Greig

on Vinny's Wilderness

by Janet Shepperson

VINNY'S WILDERNESS IS THE DEBUT NOVEL BY POET JANET SHEPPERSON. The standard of writing in the novel is impressive; the story flows well and the author uses first person narrative for most of the story. While Vinny is technically the main character the real central character is Alex: a woman from the Malone Road and whose past plays a key narrative in the story. To say any more than that would be to enter spoiler territory. My concerns are that the male characters feel unfinished or rough. Several of them almost border on stereotypes: the distant father figure, the mommy's boy unable to let go of the apron strings, etc. I found myself wanting to know what their influences were, as they showed promise.

There were several story threads which intrigued the reader, however many of them were left unfinished, and on a first reading this proved jarring. On a second reading though it made sense. Life is never simple, things come up we intend to deal with them and then something else comes along.

The Bildungsroman approach combined with the use of first person narrative reminded me of Jumpa Lahiri combined with Charles Dickens. The ending threw me off a little as it switched to a third person perspective: 'I' became 'she', and it was an interesting tool that the author has used to bring us into the present.

Vinny's journey goes around full circle; we leave where we first met her. Vinny and her daughter serve for the reader as the gatekeepers to the real story. It deals with the pain of

growing up and the changes that affect friendships and shape our future. I could see this book being on the Contemporary Literature module at university, or on the Irish Literature module. It reminded me very much of the sort of book which wins the Man Booker Prize for literature. An excellent start, although I would have liked a bio on the book.

Vinny's Wilderness is available from Liberties Press.

plays

James Meredith

Secrets

CHARACTERS:

ANGELA, a 25-year-old woman from Belfast.

PATRICK, a 27-year-old man from London.

SCENE:

Lights up on PATRICK and ANGELA, standing.

PATRICK wears a dark suit, white shirt, black tie. ANGELA wears a black dress. A silver crucifix is on a thin chain around her neck.

They regard the audience, for a time.

ANGELA: It was so cold up on the hill. A bitter wind. But the sun was shining, all the same. Patrick held my hand all through the prayers. His hand was so warm. It was comforting.

I watched the priest. The steam coming from his breath as he spoke. I barely listened to the words.

As they lowered her into the grave I looked away.

From where we stood I could see the rooftops of the estate where I've lived most of my life. Where Mum lived all of hers.

Patrick squeezed my hand.

PATRICK: It was fucking Baltic. I wished I'd brought a warmer coat. I didn't know the weather would be this... different. London's warmer in the spring. Ireland's bloody cold. Grey. Fucking miserable.

I'd never been to a Catholic funeral before. The service was depressing. I sat in the church feeling out of place.

All those white faces.

Angela asked me if I would help carry the coffin. 'Would you take a turn?' she said. This woman who I'd never even met.

This woman my dad...

His dirty little...

The coffin was so light. Like it had feathers in it. Like there was no-one even there.

It was even colder up at the cemetery. The wind. Jesus! I wanted to stick my hands in my pockets but Angela held on to me and wouldn't let go.

Tears streaming down her face.

She looks a bit like him. Around the eyes, mostly.

My father.

Our father.

ANGELA: It was so nice of him to come over, considering. It couldn't have been easy meeting me for the first time. Like this. Grieving.

He never knew her. Mum. Never knew we even existed until a few months ago.

We're strangers really. I knew he existed, of course. Mum had told me all about my dad and his other family. Why I grew up without him. She never

held anything back from me. Not ever. At least that's what I...

But Patrick didn't know, not until I got in touch that first time.

PATRICK: The letter was addressed to Dad, but he'd been gone more than a year by then. It had been forwarded from his work.

And Mum was still... she's not been the same since.

So I slipped it into my pocket when I was on my way out and read it on my tea break.

Dear Reg, it said. My name is Angela. I'm your daughter.

I nearly spilled my coffee all over the work bench. What. The. Fuck! Talk about a kick to the balls.

You don't expect something like that. You can't be prepared to hear... to read... to learn that your old man had a secret like that. It changes everything.

You think you have everything worked out. You know your life. You know where you came from and you know who you are. And then...

ANGELA: He was a soldier, my dad. First Battalion, Queen's Regiment. Handsome, so Mum said. A silver-tongued devil. He could charm the birds from the trees. And the knickers off young girls.

She met him at Charlie Heggarty's in Bangor one Saturday night.

Mum was beautiful back then. Eighteen, with her long red hair. These big blue eyes. You should see the photos. She could've been a model.

I'm sure his eyes must've popped out of his head.

She must've been mad. Going with a soldier. Where she was from. But she was like that, you know? She didn't give a fuck.

PATRICK: Twenty five years he kept his secret. Right up until he died.

He had an accident at work. Fell from a gantry and smashed his skull. He left the house one morning and never came back.

I was six when he bought himself out of the mob. He always talked about how much he enjoyed it, though. All the great times he had, the good mates he made, all the places he'd been. Germany, Belize...

(sarcastic) Ireland.

I'm sure he fucking loved it.

But he'd had enough. He wanted to settle. Didn't want me and Mum living in married quarters while he was sent here and there for six months at a time. Didn't want me to grow up an army brat.

He wanted us to have a proper home.

Family is everything he used to tell me.

(angry) What a fucking..!

ANGELA: And then I came along. Well, the promise of me.

That's when he told her.

I don't blame him.

Mum never did either.

It would've been...

Life could've been different. For her, for me.

But these things happen for a reason. So they say, anyways.

You never know how things would've turned out if he hadn't already have had... a home to go back to. A family to support.

Mum just got on with it. There was never any question of getting...

She was a good Catholic. And she never thought about adoption either.

When I was born it was obvious that the father... wasn't from here.

My granda – God rest him – asked Mum when he saw me for the first time.
“How could such a pale wee thing give birth to such a dark wee thing?”

My granny just said: “She’s beautiful.”

PATRICK: It took me a day or two to calm down enough to call her. She’d wrote her number on the letter.

I thought about ignoring her. But she might’ve written again, and Mum might’ve seen it. I couldn’t risk it.

She was dying. Her mum, I mean. That’s why Angela wrote to Dad. She thought he should know.

Cancer.

They’d stayed in touch, you see.

Every Christmas she wrote him a letter. And he wrote back.

All these years he’d been writing to another woman while he...

The cunt! I mean, how could he?

(coldly, almost sadistically) So I rang her up. Told her about Dad.

She cried. I could hear her snivelling down the phone line. I wanted to tell her, don’t waste your tears, love.

What the fuck was she crying for anyhow? She didn’t even know him. She was crying for a dad she never even had.

ANGELA: I cried my heart out. I’d wanted him to know that my mummy was dying.

I’d read his letters to her. One for every year I’ve been alive. It was the one thing she never shared with me, you know? Not until near the end.

Why? I asked her. Why’d you not tell me? I could’ve... met him.

“That’s why,” she said to me. “I didn’t want to share you.”

PATRICK: Angela asked me if there were any letters. If he'd kept them. If there were I hadn't found them.

And Mum... she wouldn't lie to me. Would she? Keep that from me?

How could I ask her?

ANGELA: "I was wrong," Mum said. "I know that now."

PATRICK: She gave me her email. Wanted us to stay in touch.

Her brother. That's what she called me.

I'm not a bad person. She was losing her mum. She was reaching out.

She was trying to find something to hold onto.

Someone. Me. Her brother.

Fuck that!

ANGELA: I emailed Patrick almost every day. I wrote him the story of my life. Growing up, just me and Mum. The good times. The bad.

And all the while Mum was... wasting away. Disappearing.

PATRICK: She told me all about herself. Poor little black girl growing up in Belfast.

Asked me question after question. About me. About Dad.

ANGELA: He didn't mail back much. Just sometimes.

Mum went into the hospice.

Those last few days... I spent all my time with her.

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that Dad was gone.

I held her hand. We talked... when she could.

PATRICK: She wanted me to understand. She was reaching out to someone she thought...

I was the only person who could tell her about the man she'd imagined all these years. Dreamt of, fantasised about meeting.

But she never had that chance. All she had was me.

I began to feel...

She was hurting. I could help.

ANGELA: When I told him that Mum was... gone he booked flights right away. He flew over the night before the funeral.

I met him at the Europa.

I knew him as soon as he stepped off the bus. He looked like I'd always imagined my dad to be.

PATRICK: She was paler than I thought she'd be. She was hardly...

But she'd been through a lot. You could see it in her eyes.

A lovely face, though.

ANGELA: We had people back to Mum's after the funeral. A few friends, relatives.

There aren't many family left now. Granny and Granda are both gone.

And Mum was like me. An only child.

Great Aunt Roisin helped me with the sandwiches and the tea.

Ham salad. Egg and onion. Some sausage rolls.

Everyone was curious about Patrick, of course.

Nosey holes.

The surprise on their faces when I told them he was my brother.

The questions on their lips.

PATRICK: I felt so out of place. All those people just looking. Talking behind my back.

Wondering.

Angela's aunt was nice, though. She kept piling sandwiches on my plate.

And Angela, I could see how hard it was for her. Even in the middle of a crowded room she just looked so... lonely.

My anger towards her. It... it just went. Left me.

ANGELA: We kept sneaking out to the kitchen and sneaking nips of whiskey.

It felt like I'd known him all my life, you know?

He was a gentleman. Very polite to everyone.

PATRICK: I wished they'd all fuck off.

ANGELA: When everyone had finally left we brought the whiskey into the living room. We were half-cut by that stage.

PATRICK: She'd asked me to bring over a photo of Dad. I showed it to her. A family portrait. Me, my mum and Dad when I was two.

I'd studied it so much over the past few weeks.

Looking at his eyes.

Trying to find the secret hidden there.

She showed me a photo of her mum. When she was young. Probably what she looked like when Dad would've been with her.

She was a looker alright.

ANGELA: I saw him for the first time. How he was when he and my mum first met.

He had a cheeky smile.

PATRICK: *(sarcastic)* Happy families.

ANGELA: We talked and drank, sharing stories.

PATRICK: I told her things I'd never have said sober.

ANGELA: I could see the pain in him. I hadn't thought about this being hard for him too.

PATRICK: She was so sad.

ANGELA: We both ended up really pissed. Fell asleep on the settee together.

PATRICK: I must've passed out.

ANGELA: I woke up sometime in the middle of the night.

It was so quiet.

Just the sound of both our breaths.

So loud in the quiet

He was curled into me like a question mark.

I could feel his... you know.

Pressing up against my...

I... pushed back into him.

Then I – God forgive me – reached behind me and... undid his trousers.

I took hold of him. It felt... nice. The same as all the others.

The heat... the need.

Then he... began to move.

PATRICK: See, you think you've got it all worked out.

You think you know what life will throw at you.

But we don't know shit.

Patrick 'kisses' his teeth. Silence, for a time.

ANGELA: His flight was at ten. My head was splitting! I felt like I was going to be sick any minute.

I ordered him a taxi. It was a... an awkward goodbye.

PATRICK: She couldn't look me in the eye. We had this weird... hug at the front door. I wanted to tell her... I wanted to say something, but I just couldn't find the words.

ANGELA: It was only when I was tidying up the living room that I noticed what he'd left behind.

It was on the coffee table next to the empty bottle of Jamesons.

He'd carefully torn the photo.

Leaving just my dad.

His smiling face.

The secret in his eyes.

PATRICK: You see. Pictures, they're only frozen moments in time. And they have these clean edges that hold life's secrets at bay. But the truth's not like that, is it? Life's not like that. It rips and it tears. And it leaves a great bloody mess behind.

ANGELA: The secrets that bring us together.

PATRICK: Secrets that tear you apart.

BLACKOUT

Secrets was first performed as part of Terra Nova Productions *Arrivals 2* at the Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast, from 11-14 March 2015, followed by a tour of Northern Ireland. Angela was played by Melissa Dean. Patrick was played by Robert Bertrand. *Secrets* was written by James Meredith and directed by Andrea Montgomery with a score by Anthony Toner.

Stewart Roche

Bittern

Alison (*Pretty, late 20's dressed smartly*) sits at a park bench. She occasionally picks at a salad bowl and sips from a bottle of water, flicks through a graphic novel. After a few moments **Patrick** walks over (*Early 30's, casual wear, superhero type t-shirt*). He stops a small distance away from the bench. Looks at Alison. Looks about. Seems undecided what exactly to do next. Eventually—

Patrick: Ehmm. Could you move your bag over please?

Alison: I'm sorry?

Patrick: Could you move your bag over?

Alison: (*Looks around, half smile.*) Sure. (*She does. Reluctantly Patrick sits down, wedges himself into the extreme of the bench. He takes out a Subway foot long roll. Proceeds to eat. Silence.*)

Patrick: Thanks

Alison: No problem. (*Pause. Patrick eats, takes an occasional sip out of his drink. After a bit—*) So is this your lucky seat?

Patrick: What's that?

Alison: Is this your lucky seat? (*Patrick looks confused.*) It's just that there's a free bench over there so I was wondering why you'd want to sit down here. Either it's your lucky seat or there's something—

Patrick: It's not my lucky seat.

Alison: Right. (*Pause. Alison goes back to reading. Patrick eats exactly half of his foot long roll, wraps the other half up and puts it back in the bag.*)

Alison: Not like it? I wouldn't be mad on them myself—

Patrick: I like to keep half for later. For my dinner.

Alison: I see. Not much of a cook then?

Patrick: I'm a very good cook. I just don't bother on Fridays. (*Beat.*)

Alison: Why not Fridays? (*Patrick starts to get up.*) I'm sorry. I'm blabbering. (*Beat.*)

Patrick: Is this a normal thing for you?

Alison: What?

Patrick: Blabbering.

Alison: No. Bit of a rough morning at work.

Patrick: (*Beat. He decides to sit back down.*) What do you do?

Alison: I work in the clinic, just off the square.

Patrick: Oh.

Alison: So a rough morning at work for me doesn't mean someone using my favourite cup.

Patrick: No.

Alison: It looks like one of my patients has a very rare blood disease. I had to prepare the, try to prepare them for the eventuality of...well, you know. 36. Two kids. It's just...

Patrick: That's awful.

Alison: Comes with the job, I suppose. Doesn't make it any easier. (*Beat.*) What do you do? Apart from half eat your roll and wear ironic t-shirts.

Patrick: I'm not being ironic. It's casual Friday.

Alison: Do places still do that?

Patrick: Apparently.

Alison: We don't have it in our place. I met a friend for lunch a while back, big, faceless multi-national. They had it. Didn't like it. Lots of balding 40 something men beating themselves into Superdry and Abercrombie and Fitch. (*Patrick smiles.*) Sounds familiar?

Patrick: There's a couple of those guys in my office. My big, faceless multi-national.

Alison: What are you, IT? Kidding. You're not IT. I can tell.

Patrick: How?

Alison: What?

Patrick: How can you tell I'm not IT?

Alison: Well, you have something of a tan for a start. Which means you must take a break from your computer for at least a couple of hours a day. And you wear aftershave. Aftershave to IT guys is like garlic to vampires.

Patrick: What are you, some sort of modern-day, female Sherlock Holmes?

Alison: Just observant. And my younger brother works in IT so I know about this stuff.

Patrick: I work in the legal department.

Alison: Interesting I'd say.

Patrick: Not really. (*Beat.*) Do you usually have your lunch in here?

Alison: Sometimes. Why?

Patrick: If you usually had your lunch in here then you'd know that bench is reserved for crazy Ned. (*Patrick points over. Alison looks.*)

Alison: Crazy Ned?

Patrick: He looks a bit like Ned Beatty.

Alison: What?

Patrick: You know, Deliverance, Network, Superman—

Alison: I know who Ned Beatty is. And that guy looks nothing like him.

Patrick: He does.

Alison: Not remotely.

Patrick: A little bit.

Alison: He looks more like Ned Flanders.

Patrick: Come on—

Alison: He even has a moustache. (*Beat.*) He definitely looks crazy.

Patrick: Wait till you see how he feeds the birds. (*They both look.*)

Alison: OK that is just wrong.

Patrick: Yeah.

Alison: Seriously?

Patrick: I know.

Alison: Jesus. (*Beat.*)

Patrick: Crazy Ned.

Alison: Flanders.

Patrick: Beatty.

Alison: Whatever. (*They both smile.*)

Patrick: Where do you get your taste in books from? Your IT brother?

Alison: Oh, this? Yeah, actually. He's been telling me for years how incredible this was so I thought it was easier to just read the thing. It's not bad. Have you—

Patrick: No.

Alison: Really? Thought all guys—

Patrick: Don't really like Alan Moore. Self-important. Taking his name off all those movie adaptations. He's been told he's the second coming for so long he's started acting like it.

Alison: You don't want a lend then, when I'm finished.

Patrick: No, you're fine. (*Beat.*) Who would you read? Normally, I mean.

Alison: Celia Ahern. Marian Keyes. Sophie Kinsella. Chick lit basically. (*Pause. She starts to laugh.*) You should see your face. Chick lit? Fuck that, I'd rather pluck out my eyes. I like crime novels. American ones. Lehane, Price, Pelecanos. Connelly is decent too.

Patrick: Did you like The Wire?

Alison: Damn straight.

Patrick: Damn straight?

Alison: I can't believe I just said that. (*They both smile.*) Did you like it, The Wire?

Patrick: Loved it. Used to watch it on TG4. They had it before everyone else.

Alison: Didn't know that.

Patrick: Yep. Everyone goes on about Breaking Bad, which is great, but it's The Wire every time for me.

Alison: I'm with you on that. (*Beat.*) So he likes The Wire but wears superhero t-shirts. Ok you can stay.

Patrick: Thanks. (*Pause. They both look out front for a bit.*) The main reason I sit here—

Alison: Apart from watching crazy Ned?

Patrick: Apart from watching crazy Ned.

Alison: OK go on.

Patrick: Is because every day around this time a heron swims over to this side of the lake. I don't know why, he just does. Every day around this time. I like watching him and this is the best place to do it.

Alison: You're sure it's a him?

Patrick: Yeah I looked it up online. You can tell by the length of the beak. If you're still here in a few minutes you'll see. (*His phone beeps. He checks it.*) Unfortunately I won't be, I have to get back.

Alison: To your faceless multi-national.

Patrick: Exactly. But stay, if you can. The heron's pretty cool.

Alison: I will.

Patrick: (*Standing.*) It was nice talking to you.

Alison: You too. Oh, my name is Alison.

Patrick: Patrick. Might see you again.

Alison: Well I know where to find you (*Patrick looks puzzled.*) You'll be here I mean. Bird watching.

Patrick: Right. Bye. (*Patrick exits. Alison goes back to reading. After a minute another man, **Thomas** comes and sits down beside Alison. He starts to read a newspaper.*)

Thomas: Is this your lucky fucking seat?

Alison: It was the best I could come up with.

Thomas: Jesus Christ. It wasn't exactly—

Alison: I had to come up with something because he didn't seem to notice the unusual sight of a woman in her 20s reading 'V for Vendetta.' Or maybe he did notice but didn't say anything because he fucking hates 'V for Vendetta.' Which genius was responsible for that little oversight?

Thomas: He looks like a comic book fan, what can I say? (***Alison** shakes her head.*) Look, it was a mistake—

Alison: Fucking right it was—

Thomas: —a mistake which is regrettable but won't be repeated.

Alison: It better not be.

Thomas: It won't be. (*Beat.*) It went well though, I thought.

Alison: It went OK.

Thomas: It went well. (*Beat.*) We'll have a better idea this time next week. After you've "bumped into him" a few more times.

Alison: Could you please not do the quote gesture?

Thomas: Sorry. (*Beat.*)

Alison: Are you sure he's the right guy?

Thomas: He's the right guy.

Alison: He doesn't seem to fit the—

Thomas: He's the right guy believe me. Wait until you see the files on his laptop. It's mind-boggling the kind of shit people think that... (*He shakes his head. Beat.*) When will that be do you think?

Alison: His laptop? (*Thomas nods.*) Ten days max.

Thomas: Really?

Alison: What, too long?

Thomas: No, not at all. I thought it would take longer actually.

Alison: Ten days is conservative. I'm factoring in not being able to see him over the weekend.

Thomas: Wow. OK. Good. That's eh, that's good. (*Beat.*) You should probably go. You've run over. Your lunch break.

Alison: Right.

Thomas: See you Monday. (*He reads as Alison leaves. He takes out a phone. Dials. Beat.*) Yeah, we're good. (*Beat.*) All right. (*He hangs up. Reads. Notices something across the lake. Smiles.*)

contributors

Eileen Acheson remembers writing, aged six, on the back of a wooden ironing board. Years nurturing offspring and releasing inner stories have now yielded space for her own writing. Eileen is the author of *Self Care for Parents* (1999) and a student of The Story House and Writing Changes Lives.

Anne Caughey (Assistant Editor) lives near Belfast and has lived in England and Japan. She has been awarded a full bursary to attend the John Hewitt Summer School and her first story was long-listed for the Fish Short Story Prize.

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Sean Daly's novella, *Dirt Where the Lawn Should Be*, was a finalist in the Black Hill Press summer competition in 2015. His fiction has appeared in journals including *Prick of the Spindle* and *Dogzplot*. His memoir, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Cancer*, was published in 2016. @seangdaly

Carlo Gébler has written numerous novels and plays. He was a teacher and writer-in-residence in HMP Maghaberry, Co. Antrim, for almost 25 years. His latest book is the short story collection, *The Wing Orderly's Tales*, which is published by New Island.

Marie Gethins's work has featured in the *2014 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Litro*, *Vintage Script* and *Word Bohemia*. She won or placed in Tethered by Letters flash, Dromineer Literary Festival, The New Writer Microfiction, and 99fiction.net. She lives in Cork, Ireland and is working on her Master of Studies in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford.

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

Patrick Holloway is an Irish writer living in Brazil. His stories and poetry have been published widely and he has been shortlisted for various prizes including the Bridport prize and the Manchester Fiction prize. His book of bilingual poetry *When Now Era Antes* will be published in October. Instagram and Twitter: patchwriting

P Kearney Byrne's work has won the Francis MacManus (2012), Bryan MacMahon (2014), and WOW (2016) Awards. Her stories have been published or are forthcoming in *Compose Journal*, *Vitality* lit mag and *Per Contra Magazine*. She is currently enrolled on an MA programme in UCD. Originally from Dublin, she and her partner now live in Co Leitrim.

Louise Kennedy grew up in Holywood. In 2015 she won Ambit Fiction Prize and Wasifiri New Writing Prize (Life Writing). In 2016 she has been shortlisted for Cuirt New Writing Prize, Highly Commended in Colm Toibin Short Story Competition, and runner up in Short Fiction Journal Prize. Her work has appeared in *Ambit*, *Wasifiri*, *The Incubator* and *Silver Apples*. She lives in Sligo.

Deirdre Kingston is an apprentice writer of flash fiction and short stories. This is her first published flash fiction. She lives in Cork with her husband and three children, tweets on books and all things writing @DKingstonWrites.

Louise McIvor teaches Creative Writing in the Open Learning Department at Queen's University, Belfast. She writes short stories for *The People's Friend*. Louise worked for many years as a sub-editor at *The News Letter*. She started her career as an editorial assistant at *Vogue* magazine in the early 1990s, after completing a postgraduate certificate in periodical journalism at the London College of Printing and a degree in English at Leeds University.

Una Mannion teaches Performing Arts in IT Sligo. In March 2016, she was nominated for the Hennessy New Irish Writing (poetry) in the Irish Times. In 2015 she came second in Dromineer and won the Yeats Society Seamus Heaney prize. She has been shortlisted in Listowel, Bridport, Fish, Cuirt and elsewhere.

Kieran Marsh's short fiction has appeared in many publications including *New Planet Cabaret*, *Southword Journal* and *Writer's Forum* as well as published in *New Irish Writing*. He has been shortlisted for competitions in the *Irish Times*, *RTE Guide* and elsewhere. He read his story Snow Can't Last on RTE's Arena program. <http://gooseberryseason.com>.
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James Meredith is published in *The Stinging Fly*, *Abridged* and *Black & Blue*. A past winner of the Brian Moore Short Story Award, James is also the author of the plays: *Shadow & Light*: a monologue (LunchBox Theatre 2013), and *Don't Get Me Wrong* (Terra Nova Productions 2014). A poetry chapbook, *a wine cup with base*, will be published this autumn by Pen Points Press. www.jamesmeredith.wordpress.com @JamesMeredith68

Robin Oree writes. Slowly. It took him forever to write this. He's based in Dublin but never actually goes outside. If you tweet him at @nibOree, he'll send you a picture of two polar bears hugging and it'll be the cutest and most life-affirming thing you ever did see.

Eileen O'Sullivan dabbled for years, creating characters and scenarios that went nowhere, until 2012 when she joined a local writing group. Their support and encouragement inspired Eileen to start taking her writing seriously and look for an audience. She is still experimenting with a 'voice' and genre.

Stewart Roche's first play, a version of Bram Stoker's short story *The Judge's House*, ran in Bewley's Cafe Theatre in October 2013. His first original play *Revenant* was nominated for the 2014 Stewart Parker Award. Other plays include *Tracer*, *Variance* and most recently *Snake Eaters*. @purplehearttc

Claire Savage (Features Editor) has stories published in *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Incubator* journals, *SHIFT Lit – Derry*, and *The Launchpad*. Her poetry has appeared in *Abridged*, two *Community Arts Partnership* (CAP) poetry anthologies, the *Co Derry Post* newspaper and *A New Ulster*. In 2014 Claire received a SIAP grant from the Arts Council NI.

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