

A close-up photograph of a polar bear's face underwater. The bear's eyes are closed, and its mouth is slightly open, with water splashing over its snout and nose. The water is a deep blue-green color, and there are many bubbles and droplets visible around the bear's face.

# the incubator

issue 11 | fiction | essay



**the incubator journal**  
home of the Irish short story

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*call for submissions*

*Our reading period is now open*

*(December 2016)*

*for new Irish writing.*

*For Issue 12*

*(due to be published in April 2017)*

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories and poems.***

*Guidelines are at **[theincubatorjournal.com](http://theincubatorjournal.com)***



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## *editorial*

THREE YEARS ON FROM THE FIRST KERNEL THAT BECAME *THE INCUBATOR*, WE HAVE MADE some changes. As our editorial staff continue to pursue their own projects, we have decided to scale back from four issues a year to three. The contemporary Irish short story is still at the heart of the journal; and we will continue to showcase plays, memoir and poetry. However, with we feel that in the years since we started, plenty of publications have sprung up that offer to publish non-fiction, so alas, this will be our last issue featuring essays.

One big difference you will find in our updated submissions guidelines, available on our website, is the length of short stories we will accept. In light of there being insufficient publications accepting stories over the 3000-4000 word mark, we have extended our maximum word count to 6000, hopefully offering a home to longer pieces of work that take their time.

A hearty congratulations to P. Kearney Byrne whose story 'Every Cloud' was longlisted for the *Bord Gais Energy Irish Book Awards* Short Story of the Year. This is the second year we have had a contributor's story on the longlist, and we are delighted.

In this issue I speak with DJ McCune about her writing inspiration and the *Death & Co.* books; we have fantastic essays, flash fiction and short stories.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

*Kelly Creighton*

Editor



*in interview: DJ McCune*

*author of Death & Co.*

**DEBBIE, THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO SPEAK WITH ME ABOUT YOUR TRILOGY OF novels, *Death & Co.* which, for those not familiar with the books, is about fifteen year old Adam who is a rather reluctant Luman. The trilogy is labelled as paranormal, a thriller, and marketed as young adult and crossover. How do you feel about these labels? Were you thinking where your work might sit in terms of genre whilst you were writing the books?**

Most writers feel ambivalent about these kinds of labels because they can hinder rather than help. I wasn't thinking about those labels while I was writing the books – I was just thinking about Adam and his family. I think that teen / YA books are often classified on the basis of the main character's age but the themes are the same as in adult books. Family, identity, love and friendship; the big questions about finding your place in the world. These were the things I was thinking about.

**When did you start writing?**

I've always written, for as long as I can remember. It's funny because I found the physical act of writing quite difficult – I was really slow at handwriting until the end of primary school, when we were finally allowed to write in our own hand rather than joined up. It was like throwing shackles off! Even when I wasn't writing, I was creating stories. I wove these elaborate paranormal mysteries about ghosts and murderers. My friends and I would run around our estate ghost-hunting, following blobs of paint, flocks of birds and anything else that looked like a clue.

I remember writing as a child of 7 or 8. I would fold bits of paper in half and then staple them into books. Even then, what I liked to write had an element of the fantastic in it. I have a very clear memory of writing a thriller about a stolen wallaby and showing it to my granny. Her only comment was, 'It's not very realistic!' I wish I could go back in time and tell myself, 'Hey, guess what? There's a whole genre of fiction where you can tweak reality– and someday you're going to write whole books of it!'

PS: I adored my granny but I'd also tell myself, 'Kid, sometimes adults aren't as encouraging as they should be. Just remember that if you ever have a child of your own!'

### **Which writers inspired you most as a child?**

The first writer to make me really fall in love with books was Enid Blyton. I loved the Famous Five and Adventure books. My dad gave me *Five go off in a Caravan* for my seventh birthday – and, wham! That was it. I could read a book in a couple of hours so libraries were a really important part of my childhood.

The first book I ever felt sad to finish was *The Children of Green Knowe* by Lucy M. Boston. There was a BBC adaptation of it which was absolutely magical and I remember seeing the book in Easons and spending my Christmas money on it. It was the first time I ever reached the last few pages of a book and thought, 'Oh no! I'm going to have to leave this magical place soon!' It's a wonderful feeling when a book sucks you into another world so completely.

### **I love how you have chosen to write about death in the lives of teenage characters. What inspired the Death & Co. trilogy? And what drew you to death as your subject matter?**

It took me a long time to realise that the *Death & Co.* books aren't really about death. They're about free will; living a life of your own choosing and what an enormous privilege and responsibility that is. Adam, the main character, sees so many people whose lives have been cut short before they ever did the things they wanted to do and he realises that *he's* being railroaded into living a life that he never would have chosen. So really the books are about life and how to live it, not death.

Of course, death is a theme in the books and some people might think it's not an appropriate topic for teenagers. As a teacher, I've seen how fascinated teenagers are by discussions about death and life after death. Having worked with young people for many years, I've been completely astonished by their grace and courage in the face of suffering and loss.

I've tried to keep a balance between darkness and light in the books, so there's a lot of humour with his friends, and great strength from his family, along with the darker elements.

**I felt for Adam, born into a family where he has this duty of balancing both death and a normal-as-possible teenage life. How hard was it to get into the mind of a fifteen year old boy?**

I've worked with young people for so long that it feels quite natural to slip into their thinking. I also remember *being* a teenager and how everyone struggles to get the right balance between independence and belonging.

And, let's be honest, I'm still a bit of a teenager at heart. If my husband and daughter are away and I get a night at home alone, I go feral! A fly on the wall would find me Netflix-ing at 5am, surrounded by books, Coke cans and pizza boxes...

**Your characters' names, ie. Adam Mortson, his father Nathaniel, and so on, could not fit them more perfectly. How important is naming characters to you? Do you have any helpful techniques?**

Baby name websites come in handy, especially when you want to use a name with a certain meaning! Names are funny – sometimes they just fit a character's style but some go deeper than that. I chose 'Nathaniel' rather than the conventional spelling 'Nathaniel' as the name for Adam's father because it *felt* more right, closer to *Thanatos*, the Greek personification of death.

**You're also a blogger and have documented your road to publication. Would you recommend blogging to emerging writers?**

Blogging can be great for emerging writers because it starts to build a web presence and that can take time. The best advice I got was: start your blog / social media while you're writing the first book! I'm not great at Twitter but I enjoy blogging because you're sharing actual advice.

I was a much better blogger before I got published – then I had a few years with very tight book deadlines and not as much time for blogging! My original blog was called Notebook to Novel because it was about that journey to publication. I'm finally about to get a real, grownup website so my New Year's resolution will be to keep it up-to-date. You can check it out at [www.debbiemccune.com](http://www.debbiemccune.com) from the middle of December.

**You were a reviewer on the Kerry McClean Show on BBC Radio Ulster. What are some of the best books you came across in that year?**

I discovered Graham Joyce's books while I was doing the show and Kerry and I had great fun reviewing *Some Kind of Fairytale*. It was live, daytime radio and the book has some fairly graphic content. I think we both agreed to describe it as *earthy*. We also agreed that if Hiero had offered to take us away, we'd have gone with him in a flash! You'll have to read it to find out why...

Graham Joyce's books are a really good example of the kind of fantasy I like – the kind where reality and fantasy are so seamless that it reads like normal life. There's always a question in his books – did anything magical actually happen? Or could there be a totally natural explanation? My favourite is *The Limits of Enchantment*, which is about traditional hedge witchcraft – the village witch, the wise woman who healed with herbs. It's about what happens to a woman like this in rural, northern England when the NHS introduces free healthcare and midwifery for everyone.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

I am on my final, final, FINAL draft of an adult fantasy book. It's funny, sexy, fantasy crime for want of a better description! But I'm also in the wonderful early stages of a new YA. It's edgy urban fantasy set in Belfast and I can't wait to get properly stuck in. I'm excited about it in that 'new love' kind of way.

**What is the best piece of advice you would give to another writer?**

Enjoy it. Writing should be your playground – the place you go to be someone else but also most truly yourself. But at some point, when you're getting serious about a book, it becomes work. Don't panic about that. Writing 90,000 words of exciting, moving, believable fiction isn't easy. So have as much fun as you can in the first draft – but understand that it's the editing stage when the real work begins.

Interview by Kelly Creighton

The *Death & Co.* trilogy is published by Hot Key Books



*essays*

## *Marie Walsh*

### *Little Brown Packages*

I DON'T KNOW HOW IT STARTED. SIX MONTHS ARE A BLUR. MOULDED INTO SOME SICK Picassan landscape with no real beginning and certainly no end. Maybe it is a seascape and I am bobbing on a boat somewhere.

I didn't even know I had received the first package. The images came. We are all there. The church is packed. No faces, though I know people are crying. Just bodies. Bodies crammed together maybe for protection or maybe just because they don't know what else to do. And every time it is the same. I see the coffin. Even the lines in the wood seem up close somehow. And all I know is that I am crying. And that the sea of bodies is moving, the coffin is moving and I keep on crying. For what seemed like months (though it could have been weeks), it was there. Making the 2 hours and 17 minute trip from Tipp to Dublin, it was there – as if it was watching me in the mirror from the back seat. When the woman with the mad hair and sad eyes beeped me at the traffic light, it was there. No, oh, that was me. At the mini roundabout in the hospital parking lot as the man shouted, Roll down your window. ROLL DOWN YOUR WINDOW. All I saw was the spit on his chin (and I knew he didn't) and I kept replaying 'he doesn't know, he doesn't know'. And all the time it was still there. Of course I told myself to snap out of it, how could I be so morbid? When that didn't work I took the softer approach of 'this too will pass'. The AA phrases took on a totally different meaning. But still. The coffin was tied to a piece of rope and whether I drove or walked it trailed back and forth, back and forth, snakelike behind me.

The second package, now that was much more obvious. I could almost call it honest. Almost. Not that I noticed when it arrived but I certainly knew it was there and I was so afraid that it would never leave. This was the dying bit. The dark devastation that you were going and there wasn't a damn thing that I could do. The unfairness of it all. How the fuck did this happen? Why the fuck did it happen? Fuck, Fuck, Fuck. And that doesn't even cover a fraction of it. And I cried because you were fighting and living and dying with it all at the same time. But mostly dying. I cried because you were not old and fading away, you were wasting away while you were still young and alive on the inside. Thinning. So thin. Thinning hair and waist and muscle until all that was left was as you said – a bag of bones. I remember when you looked down. You shook your head saying, 'this is not my body, this is not me'. And all I could say was 'I know'. And I wish now that I had had something better to say. It was there all the time, the dying and the knowing that there was nothing I could do. At the start I kept searching. I read every book, every journal, every little blue booklet that might tell me something about what is going on. Maybe something had been missed. I went from site to site on the internet and found chat rooms where that kind of thing shouldn't be discussed. How could anyone *chat* about something like that? Or maybe I just didn't see myself there yet. Surely I wasn't one of *them*. Desperately I suppose I was searching for the holy grail of a cure but that was the only thing that the Doctors seemed certain of — that there wasn't any. 'Whatever you tell me to do, I'll do it...' you had said. 'What, no dancing?' That was just your way. And on the way out for a smoke when you saw all the family, you knew. We all knew. And you fell onto your walker with a cry and we all kind of fell.

That was the second one. I sat with it one day. It was brown (they all were), like the paper we used to use to wrap school books. And I would carefully draw three lines on the front with the wooden ruler for name, class and subject. But this had no lines, no name, just careful folding and clean edges. And I imagined that this is how grief was, or at least mine anyway – wrapped in little brown packages. I wondered who packed them. Was it some benevolent spirit or guardian doing this 'for my own good'? If this is how it is supposed to work, well nobody ever told me. Or was this something to do with karma, pay back like I did something really, really bad that I can't remember? This would make the packages more like

suicide bombs but I kept getting them over and over. And over. Or maybe there are little people somewhere, a warped Willy Wonka World, cutting emotions up like cake and sending them in the post piece by piece? I prefer to think it's the little people.

The third package, now that was a surprise. You tried so hard to stay for Tracy's wedding. At the British Grand National you bet on 'comply or die', your fate on a horse. It wasn't said but we knew and by the second course we were all at it – shouting at the telly 'GO ON!', as if he could somehow hear us and would run faster. Much more rested on him than money, it was hope. Neck and neck they raced the final 100 metres and when he crossed the finish line there was something about your shout, that was it – your shout for joy that made us forget about everything else, just for that moment. And in the midst of the blur, the wedding day happened. With Tracy's hair in over-sized curlers, I knew how proud you were. The clink of champagne glasses in the sitting room, a small bouquet of roses in a basket for the flower girl and the talk, the talk full of hope that the weather might hold. In the church you embraced the bride and groom with your prayers. The long trail of the dress swishing red and ivory down the aisle. A day of fine clothes and fine food and photograph smiles. At midnight, as if in some twisted fairytale, a candle went out abruptly in the hotel courtyard, announcing you had left. All day I would absentmindedly and yet innocently say, 'I am sure I am forgetting something'. Then I would freeze with sudden knowing and chastise myself for doing it again. How cruel the mind can be when it plays deathly tricks.

I knew it had arrived. The familiar brown paper and the smell. It smells of something old, dusty. I didn't want to open it. Like a child stretching a shaky, pointed finger out to touch a boiling pot on the stove. I couldn't help it. Couldn't help me. Once arrived it could not be sent back, would not leave. I turned it over, running my finger along the smooth tape, willing it to be something else. The tape came off too easily, as if it wasn't sticky at all. In my fingers the paper cracked open and there they were, the three of them. Three little and awful words – *she is gone*.

## *Annie Coyle Martín*

### *The Day I Became a Feminist*

IN THOSE DAYS THE SECOND WORLD WAR RAGED IN EUROPE BUT WE IRISH CHILDREN HAD no concept of danger. My father pinned a map to the sitting room wall and marked the armies' movements with drawing pins. He never the missed the BBC news on the radio and was a member of the Local Defense Team which met weekly to talk of important things like preparing for an attack that was not really expected.

The government passed The Compulsory Tillage Act requiring anyone who had land to till it. There were government grants and suddenly everyone wanted to be a farmer.

My father was the head of the boys' school so he leased most of our land to neighbouring farmers. He retained a few acres to grow vegetables and provide grazing for our cow and the pony that pulled the trap we used for travel.

My father always drove the pony and trap. He was much older than my mother and every Saturday he drove her ten miles to town to shop. I had enormous respect for him, so wise was he in the ways of the world. He received a steady stream of visitors in our sitting room, usually local farmers seeking help in completing government forms or income tax returns. Once he was called to the bedside of a man who wanted to make his last will and testament. My father held an aura of mystery and wisdom in my eyes not unlike that enjoyed by the parish priest who lived in solitary splendor in a big house a quarter mile away.

My mother was a teacher in the girls' school. I thought her so giddy as to be unworthy of marriage to this serious public figure. She did no house work. It fell to a farm girl, Rose, who lived in a room at the back of the kitchen and also looked after our flock of hens and the cow. Rose seemed more in touch with village life than my mother.

Although her parents had been farmers, my mother dressed in fashionable high heels. Her skirts were impractical for the country, and her finger nails were scarlet. I wanted her to be a normal mother baking bread and feeding the chickens.

One morning when I was about seven I came down for breakfast to a bare kitchen. I ran to Rose's room but her bed was empty as was my parents'. I could hear my brother crying in his crib and then voices in the cow byre. I ran outside and was speechless to find my mother sitting on the milking stool, her black curly head against the cow's side. Her red tipped hands squeezed and two streams of milk poured briskly into the pail. My father stood sheepishly to one side.

"Mammy, why are you milking the cow?"

"Rose went home last night, her mother is very sick."

She paused before adding, "Your father doesn't know how to milk."

# *flash fiction*

*Mark Mayes*

## *Stags and Mushrooms*

ADOLF KNEW A LOT ABOUT MUSHROOMS. HE HAD GROWN UP IN THE EAST, ON A SMALL farm surrounded by forest. He instantly knew the poisonous from the beautiful. He would fry them with bacon and onions on the coal stove back at 53 StauseeBogen. For this, among many other things, his daughter idolised him.

One afternoon, Elisabeth, the daughter, the only child, brought up three buckets of egg-coal from the cellar, to please her father when he got home. 'Who has brought up the coal?' he asked.

'Elisabeth did it,' answered Liselotta, his wife.

Elisabeth did not look up from her schoolbook. Inside she glowed.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the forest, the stag's breath was visible. It stamped once. Elisabeth and her father did not move. The stag came nearer. Elisabeth buried her face in her father's grey coat. She smelled tobacco, wood smoke.

'Be very quiet,' said Father. 'Don't move.'

'Let's run. It will get us. Please,' Elisabeth whispered into the rough, grey material.

Father picked up a large stick. 'Be very quiet and still. Like a statue.'

Elisabeth turned and saw the stag had got nearer. It watched them, daring them to run. The antlers were huge. She could smell the animal. Its breath streamed out into the January afternoon.

'We only wanted mushrooms,' Elisabeth said to the stag, peering out from behind the coat. It tilted its head a little. Its hoof lifted and dropped, crackling the pale, dry leaves. The pine needles.

Somewhere, far off, a gunshot. Too far and out of reach.

'Be quiet, child. If we are very still, he will go away.'

'Hit him, father. Hit him on the head.'

'Shh. It doesn't have to be.'

Elisabeth clutched at the buttons of her new coat. The one from the big store in Essen. A button came away in her hand. A pink button. She dropped it like an alien thing. It lay by her foot.

The stag very slowly turned away. It moved away between a group of pines. Once, it glanced back. But the father and girl were still statues. They waited until the animal was out of sight. Father placed the stick against a tree, gently.

'Come. We go home.'

'And what about the mushrooms?' said Elisabeth.

'We go home. It will be dark soon.'

They found their way back to the path that led to the road, which led to the bird sanctuary, which led to the Stausee, which led to 53 StauseeBogen, and the scent of frying onions, and the low lost sound of dance music from a foreign radio station.

In the darkening wood, a pink button from a child's coat was nosed by a badger, who tested it for edibleness, leaving four small indentations from its teeth. It dropped the tasteless disc back to the leaves and went looking for slugs.

\*\*\*\*\*

An old woman turns over in bed. Her eyes have gone and she can't make out the strange furniture in the dark, strange room. She eases herself out. She is wet. Her eyes. And down there. She calls for someone. That name of him that used to answer. A name that won't answer because in this house there is no one by that name. She stands on the pad by the bed that sends a bleeping signal to the night-carers that someone has got out of bed.

The old woman meets Beauty in the hall. The hall is dimly lit and smells of dust, sour polish.

‘It’s late ‘Lisabeth. Time to be sleeping,’ Beauty gently guides the old woman back to the room that isn’t hers but has her name and photograph on the door. A photograph she cannot recognise.

‘They won’t take me away. They won’t just do it. They say they will do it. But they never do. Help me, Mama. Help me. Oh, Mama, Mama.’ Elisabeth’s head is bowed as she allows herself to be placed back beneath the cool covers.

The musty breath of the stag comes from the darkest corner of the room. There are pine needles in the bed.

Beauty places the reindeer and the penguin either side of Elisabeth’s crying face. ‘Sleep now, young lady,’ she says. ‘Sleep, ‘Lisabeth. Tomorrow there will be music.’

\*\*\*\*\*

Before the war, a mother calls her child, Elisabeth, to come from the river, to help her with the washing. The girl comes home, she is nibbling at a raw carrot. There are holes in her dress where another girl has, in spite, poked a pen through the flowered material.

The girl is slapped across the legs by the mother’s water-reddened hand. ‘Why didn’t you come when I call you?’ she demands.

*Elisabeth remembers the day silver fell from the sky.*

She does not argue, but stares in disbelief. She helps with the mangle. Then pegging the washing on the lines in the washing room. Later she will help with ironing and folding, but it is not time yet. She goes to her room and sits on her bed. She says to herself, but imagining her mother was in front of her: ‘How could I hear you? I was too far away.’

Nothing is fair, the girl thinks, and she remembers how last Saturday her mother had thrown the silver spoons and forks and knives and even the silver teapot out of the window, where they clattered on the cobbles below. Passers-by picked them up, some brought them back, for they knew the mother. Some moved away with their prizes.

Ah, but when Adolf gets home from the mine, there will be chocolate, and kisses, and accordion music.

The old woman wakes in the strange room with the dead furniture and the dead stuffed animals. Beauty enters, sees the old woman at the window. She goes to her, not daring to touch her. Together they watch the silver falling. In her hand, the old woman secretly clutches a single pink button.

## *Clíodhna Walsh*

*¡Ayyyy, generalísimo!*

HE WAS AN IDIOT: OF COURSE I LIKED HIM. HE WAS ALL BIG HAIR, ROUND GLASSES, TWEED jacket; I would watch his slim little fingers nimbly rolling tobacco papers, as lick! the flimsy skin would corral itself into a cylinder, assuming concrete shape until, evidently, it no longer would, the architecture of it a ghost of smoke and ash. I saw him and I liked him and I thought he was great. All things with him were exaggerations; he had gargoyle opinions, a fondness for provocation and the hand gestures of a dictator in wartime. Our interactions always became little spectacles: he'd point a finger in my face and shout at me for being a dirty socialist, so I'd laugh and tilt my chin and reprimand him for being a filthy little irregular at every chance I got. Nothing thrilled him more than such abuse. Every word he spoke was a load of rot, and my only response to such theatrics was to condemn him as a lunatic or a freak. And, in truth, he was. Let me confess now — and there is no easy, blasé way to admit this — he was in Fianna Fail. The chill up my spine endures.

I recall the horror, hypnosis of the night that I realised his interests were the exact same as my grandmother's, i.e., Fianna Fáil, smooth jazz, attention. Also like her, he was fond of Bertie but preferred Haughey; a good choice, I agreed, Haughey being so glam. He was so insanely naff: he fascinated me. Left-wing, right-wing — why would he bother with a coherent ideology when Fianna Fáil was a thing of the soul? "I'm in it for the pints," he said. Principles, people: he wasn't really too into that sort of thing. He looked at me like I was an account waiting to be fiddled. He seemed a bit evil. And I enjoyed it.

That same evening, we had been the last two left in the pub when he leaned in quite close. "You'd vote for Fianna Fáil now, wouldn't you? Sure you'd make a fine little Fianna Fáiler, I'd say," he purred, as if a cat in a villain's lap.

"I wouldn't give them my flipping twelfth pref, you idiot," I yelled.

"But surely you'd give me your first?"

I nervously drank my pint. "Are you flirting with me now?"

He moved closer: "Ah, I'm no good at flirting at all."

"Why's that?"

"Well, it's just that I get caught up in – I suppose, you know, the way that nothing ever lasts? – that nothing's infinite?"

"I suppose —"

"Well, I guess it's just that — at the end of the day — only one thing really *is* infinite to me, and stretches on, and on and on — your *legs*, darling."

Suddenly, a smooch. He was just lovely. His face irradiated a fog of brown curls into which I plunged and dissipated, beatifically. Hands on leg, waist, tongue in mouth, ears, I hopped on him, the two of us tumbling round, round, round, bouncing like a lotto drum's coloured balls. "To your apartment!" I cried.

Consequently, I found myself in a bedroom whose walls were festooned with 1916 Proclamations and whose bookshelves displayed a heady cirque du freak of Bertie Ahern biographies and the oeuvre of Ross O'Carroll Kelly. Old Sunday Independents flashed up at me from his bedside like everlasting fire greeting new scumbags to hell. At the reminder of Ian O'Doherty's column anxiety cut zigzags through my stomach. What was I doing here? Where were my scruples? Was it wrong that sleeping with the right felt so *right*? Could a *left* and *right* make a *wrong*? And if it were wrong, would I want to be *right*? But then I thought: you're going to have sex, girl. Fair play to me.

And then with violence he threw me onto the bed – suddenly, excitement, comrades! My limbs popped and posed in a classically Mills & Boon-esque lounge. My hair billowed behind me on the breeze of my self-satisfaction. My white blouse was stainless. I awaited ravishment impenitently. And, all at once, epiphany hit, as I felt my mouth, as if from the cosmos, commanding forth:

“you pretend to be Charlie Haughey and I’ll be Terry Keane.”

He startled, hooting at me, “you’re some freak!” – yet instantly shimmied out of his jumper, and smeared his hair to one side in a racy imitation of Haughey’s comb-over.

“That’s hot”, I said. “Tell me what you did in the Dáil today.”

“Nothing”, he said, removing my tights, “they’re a bunch of fuckers.”

“Tell me more”, I said, “before I pop in my diaphragm –”

“Fianna Fáil does it all!”

~~~Oh~~~

“A lot done, a lot more to do!”

~~~Oh~~~

“The boom is back, baby!”

~~~~ I screamed thunderously, blissfully,

a huge Yes

like the second Lisbon Treaty ~~~~~

Exhaustedly he turned to me, his big eyes serious and quiet. He talked to me and said nice things in my ear. He asked me to go to the Ard Fheis with him. I was appalled; I said no. It was the happiest time of my life.

## *Neíl Slevín*

### *My Ball*

IT WAS UNCLE RONNIE WHOSE KICK SENT IT INTO THE DONEGAL SEA. BUT I'M NOT SURE HE was even there.

I watched my ball land in the water, drift away from me. The spring current sucking it into the horizon. Bobbing there, it treaded water like a forlorn swimmer before it sank beneath the waves.

My ball's flight had been so brilliant, so beautiful. Its landing and what followed knifed me. I thought I'd never see it again.

\*

We left the seaside, without my ball. I didn't play during that time. Aged 5, I just knew I had lost something.

Ronnie was the one who had played football, who had always played. I was the one who kicked and chased, always hoping for a soft landing; who always got caught in the hedge, the brambles, the drain, hoping my ball wouldn't fall too far.

\*

I don't remember the weeks that came after; I just know they were spent.

Then the Sunday came for us to visit Uncle Ronnie and Auntie Mary, to go to Sligo.

I told him my story, or I had told him already. Or Ronnie just knew.

\*

Strandhill was wet, windswept. It always was. And I had no ball to follow, no dream to chase. Until Ronnie emerged from the shop, my ball in his hand, freshly packaged. His smile was wide, his forehead crumpled like a leaf.

“When you told me what had happened, I rang the man who owns the shop straight away.

“Mr. Matthews is an old pal of mine. We used to play together. He said he would check the beach every day, in case your ball washed up.

“At first there was no sign of it. But then he saw it rolling along the beach last Tuesday morning, covered in seaweed and other things I won’t tell you about.

“He took it back to his shop, cleaned it off, and put it in one of his spare wrappings. He wanted you to think it was as good as new.”

I took my ball, dropped it, and hugged Ronnie, held him tight, tears staining my eyes. Then we ran the length of the strand, kicking, catching, chasing, until I couldn’t run any more.

Me and my ball, Ronnie there too.

\*

I remembered Ronnie’s story for years, how he and the friend I’d never met rescued my ball. I never thought to question it, nor what it meant to Ronnie, to us both.

I don’t know why my ball was so important to me, why another one just wouldn’t do. But Ronnie did. Even now when I try to piece together what he must have thought, how well he knew the 5 year-old me, I still can’t.

I don’t remember a day of my ball’s life beyond the one of Ronnie’s story, nor what happened to it. I just hope that when my 5 year-old loses something, I’ll know exactly what to do. Like Ronnie did.

## *Reggie Chamberlain-King*

### *And What Which Might I Be On Growing Up?*

HIS VOICE BROKE DURING THE FIRST CHOIR PRACTICE OF THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR. HE thought perhaps a neighbouring boy-soprano had sung a high B flat that quivered at the resonance frequency of his larynx, cracking it down the middle. Like chalk snapping on a blackboard, it screeched upward, then plunged into the basso register.

“Peep peep peep,” his mother said, indistinctly, in a distant, descant whistle.

“She’s right,” his father added. “You’re maturing faster than the other boys. And there’ll be other changes too, you’ll see; hair will grow in places that are, at present, bald; you’ll begin responding sexually to stimulus and your extremities...” he coughed, like a man whose extremities were cupped in a doctor’s hand “...may distend and not always feel at your control.”

The peccadilloes of the piccolo-voiced juniors meant nothing to him now, for it was only the rumblings of the older boys and masters, but not the mistresses, that he could hear. Noise of a higher frequency was out of his range entirely, because, he reasoned, he was soon to be a man and only the deep conversation of men could be important to him. However, such distortion couldn’t mask, rhythmically, the cheeky laughs that peep-peeped as he joined his classmates in the showers. It didn’t faze him, as he knew his new, tight-curved plumage was something to be proud of, even the thick down across his bottom. The other boys laughed just because they wished to develop, someday, as he had, for he was now putting childish things away and moving closer to sophisticated pleasures such as drink and sex.

“A child has more bones than an adult has,” his father explained to him. “And they must grow into each other if you are to be made taller. This is why you sometimes get those pains in all your limbs...” his father droned, as the tone grew fluty, higher-pitched, and far away.

He hadn’t noticed getting any taller. In fact, he he'd actively watched the horizon growing, not only higher, but closer too. Perhaps his father had spoken incorrectly, because he hadn't responded sexually to stimulus yet either. He would like to, he imagined. So, sometimes he would walk through the wood not far from school, thinking, if perhaps he picked some flowers and gave them to a girl — as a gesture of intention — this may be the start of things.

He stooped to pluck some amaranthus — Pigweed — and, from the corner of his eye, caught a sleeked flash among the green. Following the movement, he saw, now still upon a rock, a hare, arched gracefully, its ears erect. He started to recall what his father said about “extremities,” as his own ears set to surging and pulsating. His hands raised to his head and he felt the ears elongate through his changing fingers. The pains in his legs were not, as his father had suggested, growing pains, but pains of retraction, as the limbs began to bow. They resulted — the pains — he realised, from tottering around up on hind legs. Quite consciously he stumbled, finally, falling on all fours and leaped into the woods.

#

*“Come, sit thee down upon this flowery bed,  
While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,  
And stick musk-roses in thy sleek smooth head,  
And kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy.”*

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream,  
Act IV, Scene I.*

## *Geraldine McCarthy*

### *Buried Treasure*

THE HEAT WAS STIFLING. EVEN THE SEA FAILED TO PROVIDE ITS USUAL BREEZE. MARK walked along the narrow boreen, hugging the hedgerows, in no hurry to reach his destination. To his left, waves crashed against the cliffs, the sound interrupting that special island stillness. On the right, sheep grazed in the miniature fields, penned in by rugged stone walls.

No one wandered the road but himself. It was almost lunchtime and children would still be in school. The tourists had yet to arrive, with their cameras and backpacks, and baseball caps covering their eyes. When he visited last year he had met an old man bringing home a load of seaweed with his horse and cart. He could still remember the pungent smell of that seaweed. He hoped he wouldn't bump into anyone this time.

The cemetery clung to an incline, the graves on different levels. Mark made his way up the central path, turning left at the top. Úna had one of the best views. He sat on the low wall of a nearby grave and gazed at her headstone, carved in the shape of a standing stone, as if transported from the Burren. It fitted the landscape, blended in. The Gaelic script was simple, elegant — *Úna Ní Mhaoldomnaigh, 1974-2004*.

Mark placed a single white rose on the pebbles, as he had done these past three years. This time was different, though. He felt a stab of envy; a knife to the gut. That Úna lay here, tranquil, with the most breathtaking vista in Ireland, while he had no choice but to

struggle on somehow. "You were born to make blunders," Úna had once said, in the heat of an argument. Of course, all had been forgiven and forgotten, and the making up had been wonderful.

She would always inhabit the largest region of his heart, but he knew this would be his last visit. He had told Stephanie he was travelling here today and she had squeezed his arm and smiled. But he couldn't continue to come year after year, on a pilgrimage of doom, to this wild and beautiful place.

Maybe he should have brought artificial flowers? Something which would withstand the weather. Yet, even synthetic ones would fade in time. Úna's family would have to remove them, and their gripe against him would only intensify.

He stood up and laid a hand on the curve of the headstone, tracing its irregular outline. Gulls screeched. "A sign of rain," Úna's father used to say. Mark wouldn't visit her parents today, though they would hear from Patsy John that he had been on the ferry. Another black mark against him. But who was counting now?

As he turned down the path, her voice came to him, soft and melodic, "Slán, a thaisce."

"Goodbye, my treasure," he echoed, looking back one last time.

And his soul was filled with an incredible lightness. And a gentle breeze began to waft in from the sea.

## *Audrey Quin*

### *Unsettled*

AS THEY CROSSED OVER THE HILL THAT SEPARATED THEIR FARMS, SEAN RAN A FREE HAND across his forehead, flicking sweat onto the well tracked path. He glanced at Mary to see if she had noticed, but she was too busy labouring with the steep incline, her breath ragged, to pay him any heed. He hated seeing her struggle like this, so out of her element. She belonged inside. With a baby nursing, and a stew simmering. He cursed her brother Tadhg, off gallivanting in Australia, for leaving the old man with just Mary to depend on.

“You tried to do it yourself this morning?” Seán had heard as much from his mother when he’d come in from milking the cows. Mary nodded, not taking her eyes off the trail. He shifted the shovel to his other shoulder. “Sure, it’s a tough job. I’d never ask you to do it.” He saw the red rising on her cheek and regretted having been so forward.

Although the matter had long ago been settled by their families, they weren’t married yet. He’d have to broach the matter with Paddy again. It had been nearly a year since the funeral, but he was still digging his heels in alright, and Seán wasn’t sure how forceful he should be. Maybe Paddy was afraid of being left with all the farm work, but Seán would do right by him until Tadhg showed face. The rate his mother was losing patience, it was probably best that Seán tried to sort it out himself before she started interfering. Little did any of them know how much the marriage would please him though. It had crept up on him slowly over the years, and while it was of no consequence really, he quite fully loved Mary.

When they reached the septic tank on the far side of the hill, the patch of muddy

ground a few feet away let Seán know the problem was a clogged filter. Within minutes he'd dug up the concrete cover. Casting the shovel aside, he reached in and pulled out the offending object. He swung around to show Mary, and she recoiled.

"Sorry Mary, I was just...I just wanted to show you what it was." He shouldn't have been such a man about it. He needed to be gentle with Mary. She hadn't been the same since her mam died. Not that he could blame her for being so...so unsettled, so withdrawn. It had come as an awful shock to the lot of them when Eileen had passed.

He tried to catch Mary's eye to apologise again, but she was waving one hand about her face. There was dead heat in it now. He heard the low buzzing before he saw the wasp hovering around the paleness of her neck. He reached out to swat it away before it could do her any harm.

The small scream was more of a shiver that wracked her body than a sound. He moved back, to show he'd meant nothing untoward by what he'd done, and stepped on the end of the shovel. The wooden handle shot upwards, delivering a swift blow to the spine, and he lost his footing. He seemed to be an age teetering there in the mud, mesmerised by the absurd look on Mary's face.

\*\*\*

"Seán!" He had landed heavily on the concrete slab with his back to her, his head at an odd angle, one foot venturing into the puddle of sewage.

The strength ran clean out of her, sending her to her knees. She inched towards Seán, her hands sinking into the ground, but then sat back, her shorts riding up her legs and cutting into the flesh of her thighs. Midges busied themselves around her eyes and mouth and nostrils, and she wiped at them, smearing muck across her face.

She looked skyward, a low prayer on her breath.

If there was a God up there at all, the least he could do was make this right.

She looked back down to see two flies playing hopscotch on Seán's right ear.

And then there was movement somewhere along the length of him.

Maybe.

And then there it was again.

There was a lightness to it, but she was sure this time. The groan came next. Low in the throat, dragging up pain, unnatural in its depth. Mary crawled towards him. She wanted to see his eyes looking at her. She'd look back this time; she'd never stop.

If he could just be ok.

He had to be ok.

She couldn't go back to that house if there was no hope of escape coming.

\*\*\*

Paddy was mending the fence when he clocked Mary climbing the hill with young Conway. Hadn't he told him to leave well enough alone for the time being? He'd hand her over when Tadhg got back and not a day before. He ignored the pull on his guts and continued hammering. A man with land to farm couldn't be fussing like an auld woman, worrying about things like this, but he checked his watch to time them all the same.

Paddy pulled the wire taut over the post. Mary must have told Kate Conway about the tank earlier. He'd given her just one job, just one small thing to lighten his load, and she'd made a hames of it as usual. She wasn't much good at the farm work, but she had her uses alright. At least Conway would sort out the problem and save him the trouble. Still. He didn't like the way Mary was always whispering in the mother's ear. She'd want to watch that mouth of hers if she knew what was good for her.



*short story*

## *Rebecca Spicer*

### *Summer Street*

HOLLY JIMMIED THE LOCK WITH A FAMILY FARE VALUE CARD. AFTER A MINUTE, THE DOOR swung open. She eyed the inside of the house. She'd obviously taken the dog by surprise. She smiled. The small caramel and white pit-bull barked with confusion at her hooded figure.

"What's wrong? Is it my coat?"

Holly shimmied out of her army-green parka and let it fall on top the tiled floor. She was a strange creature, with long arms that dangled like wisps from her thin frame, hair a mass of bleached frizz — black roots beginning to show, and dark circles under her eyes. Clothed in an oversized knit sweater, baggy jeans, and generic tennis shoes, everything about her seemed to yell, *I'm a mess, but if you stare I'll ask you for money.*

They stood in the entrance of the kitchen. The walls were painted cream and the lower cabinets a mint-green. There was a brightly colored cloth rug, with braided fabrics woven together, on top of wooden flooring. Each utensil, appliance and food item seemed to be an accessory of a DIY project. There were Mason jars with chalk labels, and a rake's head, nailed to the wall, used to hang spoons and spatulas. Old tea cups lined the window frames with various succulents and herbs. Even an empty Kleenex box was being reused to disperse plastic bags.

"Come here, you beautiful thing, you." The dog made his way over to Holly; his backside wiggling. He fell at her feet, rolling over, presenting his white belly. Holly laughed and scratched his velvety fur.

"You're a good boy, protecting the house," Holly said. "Will I get you a treat?"

Inside the fridge were prepared meals in clear plastic Tupperware, labeled by the days of the week.

"What day is it?" Holly recited backwards using her hands to assist.

"Tuesday," said Holly with her middle finger left out from her closed hand. "Oops, sorry about that — didn't mean to give you the finger. Unless you deserve it? Do you deserve it?"

The dog became excited and jumped at her legs. He caught his paws in the rips of her jeans. Holly pushed him off and selected the container labeled *Tuesday*. She shut the door using her feet. Inside the container was stewed beef and mashed potato. Holly stuffed a large chunk in her mouth and tossed another piece to the dog. She repeated this motion until the food was gone.

The dog continued to beg at her feet. Holly threw the container to the ground and returned to the fridge. She began eating pasta and marinade with a fork found in the sink.

"Here Oliver, have some more." Holly sprinkled spaghetti noodles over the floor.

"I'm starving," said Holly. Her cheeks bulged like a chipmunk storing food for the winter.

The doorbell rang. Holly chewed quickly. Using her hand, she wiped the red sauce from her lips, smearing a stain across her jaw. She let the rest of the spaghetti fall to the ground.

Crossing from the kitchen to the living room, Holly walked up to the window. Through the opening of the blinds, she could see a Comcast salesman. He was a large man — tall, big-boned, with a small head. His black windbreaker bore the Comcast emblem. Holly shoved the dog in the bedroom, connected to the living room, and then opened the door.

"Hello," said the man. He held a clipboard stacked with brochures.

"Sup?" Holly gave a broad toothy smile. This took the man by surprise and he struggled to answer.

"Is the owner of the house here?"

Holly followed his gaze behind her to an empty room.

"Talk to me," she replied.

"I won't take too much of your time — just a few questions."

“Shoot.”

“Okay . . . how much do you pay for cable each month?”

“I don’t have cable.”

“Have you ever considered getting cable?”

“Now, see, I have a highly addictive personality. If I got T.V. I’d never leave the couch. Heck, I might as well buy weed from the guy down the road. At least then, my mind would be stimulated.”

“True enough.” The man smiled trying to stay personable. “But can I just ask you how much you pay for Wi-Fi?”

“Do you know what’s better than the internet? Books! The library! It’s free. I don’t pay a thing to read. I’m in the middle of *Oliver Twist*. Poor kid. What a soap opera. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah... ” he said, slowly. “Young people don’t normally say that. You can’t be more than twenty.”

“I must have been old in another life.”

“Are you telling me you don’t have Facebook or Twitter?”

“Oh, yeah, sure I do. Who doesn’t?”

“How can you do that without internet?”

“They’ve got the inter-webs at the library. I’m telling you, the library is the way of the future.”

“That’s not what the experts say”

“What can I say? It’s a conspiracy.”

“Well,” said the man. He looked down at the last question on his questionnaire. “Can I interest you in Comcast’s special bundle of cable and high speed wireless?”

With a look of sympathy Holly patted the man’s arm.

“Life’s all about the hustle. I get it. But, I’m sorry. I don’t have that kind of money and commitment,” Holly said, and closed the front door.

The sound of footsteps trailed off the porch. Holly let the dog out of the room and went to the kitchen. She pulled out Thursday’s dinner, then returned to the living room. Next to a newer entertainment system was a retro radio with an antenna slightly bent from misuse.

Holly fiddled with the knob of the radio until she heard the voice of Candi Staton.

"This is my song," she yelled, and stood up to dance.

Holly lifted up the dog and spun around several times. His eyes widened and his head fought with the pull of gravity, but the dog didn't struggle and allowed her to hold him. Holly then slowed and took his paw in her hand, she rocked back and forth, singing the wrong lyrics to the song. "Young love, be free."

She dropped the dog and continued to dance and spin until she fell to the ground laughing. The dog joined and sniffed at her face. Holly's laughter turned to sobs and the dog licked her salty tears. She continued to cry on the thin rug. *This must be what hysteria feels like.* Holly turned to her side. She imagined her uterus wandering about the room in a frenzied state flinging itself against the curtains.

"Get back in here," Holly mumbled. She closed her eyes. An overwhelming feeling of tiredness swept over her but she fought it and sat up.

Holly opened the container of food and found curried chicken and rice. She allowed the dog his share and then began to devour the bowl, licking her fingers as she went.

"What are we going to do now, Oliver?" She set the plastic Tupperware down for the dog to lick. Pain formed behind her eyes. She'd been out all night after spending most of the day in the library drinking 50 cent cups of coffee. After that she'd joined a group of friends at Leila Arboretum. One of the guys had had a summer job working with the groundskeeper. He hopped the fence and found the keys for the gate. The rest of the night they hung out in the greenhouse drinking Black Velvet and philosophizing. By sun-up they locked the gate and walked from Urbandale to Old Territorial where the group went to crash in a friend's basement. But Holly hadn't been tired. She continued walking to the house.

Holly was tired now...and smelled terrible. She sniffed the air a bit. It wasn't curry. It wasn't the dog's breath. She needed a shower.

The bathroom was small. Its walls were painted a butter yellow. The toilet and bathtub were an older design but there was an attempt to modernize the space with a trendy curtain and brightly colored shelves. All the beauty products were labeled organic, no animal testing.

While the bath filled with hot water, Holly looked through a selection of expensive bath-bombs. One smelled of lemon and she dropped it into the water. The color soon changed to orange and bubbles formed along the surface. With her clothes piled in the corner, Holly

stepped into the bath. The heat sent panic through the nerves of her feet but they soon calmed and she lay back in the water. The steam held the pleasant aroma of citrus and Holly breathed it in, clearing her nostrils. She allowed her body to sink into the water until her head was covered and she emerged again. Holly massaged her hair with a ginger-scented shampoo and rinsed it under the tap until the water turned clear. An hour passed while Holly soaked. The water began to cool. She could hear the dog whining outside the door.

“All right, All right.”

Holly stepped out of the bath leaving puddles on the linoleum. The mirrors had fogged up. She used her hand to wipe away the condensation. Two small eyes, a small nose, and thin lips. “You are one freaky freak; you know that?” Holly kissed the mirror. “And it works for you.”

The dog barked. “Give me a second. I just got out of the bath.” She wrapped herself in a towel and opened the door, allowing the bathroom to exhale.

Holly walked into a large bedroom and pulled open the top drawer of a dresser. After rummaging through a variety of underwear she selected one of black cotton fabric. She skipped the bras and walked over to the closet filled with clothes on hangers. All the clothes were organized by outfit and Holly chose a jacket with wine-colored velvet. Under the jacket was a white blouse and attached behind were black slacks.

“I need to find a job where I can wear something like this. Like an office job or maybe I could work in the library.” Holly looked down at the dog. “Can’t you just see me? Someone comes up to me and ask where a book is and I reply ‘oh, yes, let me just have a look.’” She pretended to type something into an imaginary computer. “Ah, here it is. If you would just follow me, I’ll show you where the book is located.” Holly walked over to a bookcase and used her pointer finger to skim the titles. She placed her finger at the top of a book spine and tilted it forward until the cover was visible. “Is this it?” Holly dropped it to the floor in front of the dog. “Perfect. I’ll leave you alone then.”

Holly changed into the outfit and then lay on the king-sized bed, covered with a spectacularly white comforter. She patted for the dog to join and he jumped up, cuddling next to her. Holly rubbed her head against the velvet and fell asleep.

There was a sound of the backdoor opening and the dog left her side.

“Hello, Rocky, looks like mommy left the door unlocked again,” said a voice in the kitchen. “Why is the radio still playing? I don’t remember turning that on.”

Holly opened her eyes. She stumbled from the bed and rushed to slip her shoes on.

“What is this mess?” the voice yelled angrily. “Rocky!”

Holly opened the bedroom window and jumped the three feet from the house to the neighbor’s driveway.

“Walk like you know where you’re going,” mumbled Holly to herself and she drifted away, down Summer Street. The warmth of the sun was gone and a chilly autumn breeze caused Holly to fully button the velvet jacket. *Damn it*, she thought, *I left my coat in her kitchen.*

## *Brian Sheehan*

### *St. Stephen's Day*

YESTERDAY, SAILING BOATS, CRUISERS AND JET SKIS CUT WHITE TRAILS ON THE WATER AT the start of the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. Today, from our balcony, squinting, I see only a handful of dinghies and the colossal Manly Ferry, docked at Circular Quay.

André, the big German, slaps me on the back. Do I want coffee, he asks.

'To wake the sore heads.'

I give him the thumbs up, smiling back at him. I figure he's pretty shook too.

I remove my pouch of tobacco, wallet and phone from the pockets of my shorts and place them on the table. My phone vibrates as I put it down. It's a text message from my mother:

"We have storms here. Some of the trees fell. Joe Dolan died today, RIP."

I twist in my chair to face the living room.

'Joe Dolan is dead,' I shout.

André doesn't reply but I hear clinking and banging from the kitchen. I shout louder.

'Joe Dolan is dead.'

'Joe who?' he shouts back.

'Dolan,' I say. A singer.

'Is he famous?'

'Yeah. Kind of.'

I roll a cigarette and put it to my lips. I wait until I get my coffee to light it. The worst of the hangover has not yet hit me. Later, my body and brain will pay.

André manoeuvres his way around the furniture carrying the percolator, sugar, milk, cups and spoons balanced on a small tray. He tiptoes around our couch, careful not to falter and send the coffee splattering onto the cream-coloured suede.

When he pours the coffee, I light my cigarette.

'To Joe Dolan,' I say, raising my cup.

'Joe Dola,' says André.

#

The whole business had started yesterday when Richard volunteered to go to the supermarket to get supplies. The six of us in the house, three Irish, three Germans, pooled our money and Richard promised to return with cheeses, bagels and fruit for our breakfast. We all agreed that a detox was in order. However, two hours passed and there was no sign of him returning. The Germans tried calling his phone but he didn't pick up.

At noon, I heard shouting from below. Richard stood looking up at us. With him, I saw a guy I recognised, Jim, from Donegal. We had picked fruit with Jim, and the Germans too, out in rural Queensland, before we came here for the holidays. Jim got on my nerves.

Richard shouted up.

'I forgot my keys.'

I went downstairs to let them in. Richard and Jim both held beer cans. They offered me one from the bag.

Well,' said Jim. 'Fucking melons eh?'

'Jim is coming drinking with us,' said Richard.

'Great.'

Upstairs, Richard unpacked the shopping — beer, vodka and a box of wine — onto our kitchen table. The Germans demanded to know where the food was.

'In the shop,' said Richard. 'We'll get something on the way.'

The Germans said they didn't want alcohol or town. They said they were sick of alcohol. They had been sick of alcohol since before Christmas.

'Nobody wants to drink today.'

They looked at me for support. I looked at the opened beer can in my hands.

Richard saw me and laughed.

'Its tradition.' he said, 'St Stephen's Day is the best day of the year.'

'Aye, said Jim. 'Back home they go mad.'

André looked at the shopping on the table and shook his head.

'I am not happy with this.'

'Do you not know St. Stephen's day?' asked Richard.

'Stephanitag,' said André. 'It's the same. It's a boring day in Germany. A day to visit family.'

'At home,' said Richard, 'We watch football and horse racing and everyone goes out. I'm telling you, if you saw the queues for nightclubs in Carlow and Portlaoise, you'd know it was special.'

'Fucking mad one in Letterkenny,' said Jim.

Anyway, I have no idea what the Germans really thought about the experience but they laughed and clapped enthusiastically when Richard and I sang our version of "Take Me Up To Monto" later in Ryan's bar. We beat out the rhythm on the table and I spat my words. Richard hummed mostly and joined in when he remembered the lyrics. All of us sang the chorus.

'Take me up to Monto, Monto, Monto,

Take her up to Monto, lan-ge-roo

To you!'

#

I lie back in my chair, feeling the heat of the sun.

'What do you think of Stephen's Day now?' I ask André.

André rubs his nose with the back of his hand.

'How we went drinking?' he asks.

'Yeah.'

'Being honest, I could live without.'

I run my fingers over the arms of the wicker chair. I make a clicking sound with my nails.

André could be right. I was surprised at myself. I wouldn't even have gone out back home. St Stephen's Day in Ireland seemed too messy, too busy and because of the crowd and alcohol involved, too primal. Depending on luck and sobriety, you either ended up waiting for a taxi with a warm bag of chips or with a cold woman.

The door slides open. A voice behind me croaks.

'It's too early for shouting. Some of us were drinking last night.'

I sit up in my chair.

Richard appears sick and grey. He has slept on the couch in the hall, underneath the towels and sheets. He wears the same clothes he has worn since Christmas Eve on Coogee Beach. He holds his hands over his eyes and steps around us onto the balcony to sit down. I offer him my tobacco.

'Why are ye shouting?' he asks, taking the pouch.

'Joe Dolan is dead,' I say.

'Oh.'

He slumps in his seat. He rolls a cigarette in silence. He makes the signal for a lighter.

'Did you ever hear of Joe Dolan?' he asks André.

'Not until this morning, is he famous?'

'Very,' says Richard.

André goes to pour him coffee.

'No. I don't want any,' says Richard. 'I'm going back to bed after.'

We sit, listening to the whoosh of a breeze through empty streets, birdsong and silence, enjoying our cigarettes. I look out over the treetops at the sparkling water of the harbour. I listen to the street sounds and singing. I hear a flutter of wings beside me. A macaw, red with green and blue tips on its feathers, lands on the balcony next door. Soon other macaws join him. We are used to them now, these birds from pirate stories. They scratch about on the balcony and knock over an empty wine bottle that clinks as it rolls over the gaps between flagstones. I met our neighbours when they drank it last night. An Irish couple from Cork. The only other Irish we have met so far in Neutral Bay. I had arrived back

with two of the Germans, the other having gone home earlier in the day, and we drank schnapps on the balcony until it got late and cold.

Richard twists in his chair. The bags under his eyes are black. He folds his arms across his face.

‘I’m wrecked,’ he says.

‘I thought you were fading fast last night.’

‘Shows what you know, Sheehan.’

Richard says he and the lads went to Kings Cross and stayed until the clubs threw them out.

‘This,’ says André, ‘I know this. You told me at six AM. Do you remember?’

Richard grunts.

‘No.’

‘You were so drunk,’ says André. ‘That you couldn’t open the door. Really. You had the keys like this.’

André closes an eye and mimics a drunk Richard drawing circles with an imaginary key in front of him. Richard groans.

‘I might need to throw up.’

#

I bring out the radio and keeping the volume low, I search up and down through the dial. But as I turn it up to hear, thinking I had the volume too low, I land on a channel coming in clear and for a second or two, pop music blasts.

Richard, who I thought had fallen back asleep, sits bolt upright. He rubs his eyes. He looks at André, squinting.

‘It’s a pity about Joe Dolan,’ he says.

‘You keep saying this,’ says André. ‘I don’t know who he is.’

‘You’ve missed out,’ says Richard. He turns to me. ‘Put him on there, would you?’

I look at the radio in my hands.

‘What?’ asks André.

'See if he's on,' says Richard.

I laugh.

André scrunches up his face.

'You know, dead people on the radio?' says Richard. 'When a famous singer dies you hear their music. Like Johnny Cash or Ray Charles. Or Ike Turner before Christmas, when all the stations played "River Deep Mountain High".

'Yes, I understand,' says André. 'This is common in Germany too.'

Richard nods.

'That's what confirms it, you know, their death. You turn on the radio and you hear them.'

'But how will this Joe person be on the radio?' asks André. 'In Australia?'

'Joe Dolan,' says Richard. 'That's his name.'

'But will Joe Dolan be on the radio?' asks André. 'He is not famous.'

'No.'

I try to explain.

'He is famous.' I say, 'But only in Ireland famous and maybe a little famous in the UK.'

'So, you don't expect me to know him?'

'It was a joke.'

André sighs and puts his head in his hands.

'Four months I have lived with you. You say crazy things. I mean...really crazy. I think it's too many crazy things.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'And he is famous in Ireland?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you like his music?'

'He had some good songs. He's a good singer—'

'He was a great singer,' says Richard. 'Older people like him more.'

The German looks at Richard.

'Why do you keep saying it is a great pity?'

'Because it is,' says Richard.

#

The macaws make little thuds as they peck between the flagstones. I think about back home and what everybody is doing and I don't know whether I'm in a daydream or what but this image floats by of lads in county jerseys, pints in hand, tapping their feet, waiting a for a song.

Richard appears to be asleep. I reach across the table and grab his chair to shake it.

He grunts. I shake it again.

'What?' he asks.

'You know. It's still Stephen's Day at home.'

Richard laughs.

'St. Stephen.' I say and raise my cup.

'Joe Dolan,' says Richard.

'Joe Dolan,' I say.

We look at André.

'Joe Dola.'

'Back home,' I say, 'They're probably playing "Good Looking Woman" now. In Mullingar.'

'And everywhere else,' says Richard, 'They have to play it. It's the law.'

'Sing me this song,' says André.

'We can't,' says Richard. 'It's too complicated.'

André groans.

'Forget it.'

I sit low in my seat, closing my eyes. A breeze catches my collar and I drift in thought, imagining the crowds packed in pubs, queuing to get into nightclubs. The smell of aftershave, perfume and sweat. The crush at the bar as lads in tight shirts and girls, with long glossy swishing hair and short skirts, wave money to buy drink. Dry ice and a DJ who speaks in a funny accent between song; "It's a big night tonight and we're rocking it up for St. Stephen." And you drink and you get into it and soon you don't hate it at all.

A humming sound brings me back. I sit up. I know the tune. I tap my foot. Richard hums the verse because he doesn't know the words. When it comes time to sing, I clap my hands and belt it out and I watch the bemused look on André's face. Richard sings with me.

'Oh-me, oh-my, you make me sigh,  
You're such a good looking woman...  
When people stop and people stare,  
You know it fills my heart with pride'

We teach André the words or at least those we know and we sing the song over and over, Richard humming us into the chorus, André laughing and his cheeks getting red.

The door of our neighbour's balcony clicks open and the parrots hop up onto the railing, ready to fly away. A girl with messy dark black hair and bloodshot eyes sticks her head out. Her mascara, slept in, covers her cheeks.

'What's the noise for?' she asks. She has a strong Cork accent. 'It's early. Some of us were drinking last night.'

'Joe Dolan is dead,' I say.

'Oh,' she says.

She steps out onto the balcony. The macaws fly away. She looks at the empty wine bottle on the flagstones and shielding her eyes from the sun and squinting, she gazes out over the rooftops to the harbour.

'I had heard he was sick alright,' she says. 'It's a pity, don't you think?'

'It is.' I say, 'It's a real shame.'

*Morna Sullivan*

*A Date with Paprika*

“WHAT DOES PAPRIKA DO, LOVE?”

She studied the labels searching for star anise and cloves. She was intent on replenishing her supplies after cooking her Christmas aromatic ham. A well-stocked spice rack was a necessity. Wouldn't you think the herbs and spices would be arranged alphabetically to make it easier for customers to find what they're looking for?

She was aware of a pungent smell to her right. She wasn't convinced it was coming from the jars and boxes in front of her. It certainly didn't smell aromatic or appetising and didn't belong in this food aisle. A splash of Old Spice might have helped disguise it.

He was standing looking at her, expecting an answer. She looked back at him, taking everything in as she replied.

“It's pepper – just like white or black pepper except it's got a bit more flavour.”

“Pepper? Are you sure, love? Then why don't they just call it pepper? Is it not more exotic?” he asked.

“Well, it's a kind of pepper. There are lots of different sorts. Look, there's hot paprika and smoked paprika,” she said, pointing out the jars.

“Oh, I like it hot,” he said, smirking.

She pretended she hadn't heard his retort and went back to scrutinising the shelves. She lifted a refill box of cloves and popped it in her trolley. Surely this supermarket had star anise. It was usually well stocked. She'd already been in three supermarkets this week looking for a refill and they'd all been sold out.

"Would you use it for Indian?" he asked.

Ignoring him clearly wasn't going to work.

"You could, but you would need to use other spices too. Like turmeric and fennel seeds or cardamom and coriander seeds. Paprika would give the dish you're making a good colour but you need the flavour too."

"Oh, right."

Under his pulled down beanie hat he looked puzzled. Tall, a bit older than her, tired and relatively attractive, but puzzled.

"It depends on what flavour you want," she said.

"I want Indian. Is paprika Indian?"

"No I don't think so. I think it's European originally — from Hungary possibly."

"Are you sure it's not Indian. I'm sure she said it was. Are all spices not from India?" he asked.

"No. A lot are Indian — but spices come from all over the world."

The smell didn't seem as bad now or maybe she was getting used to it, or it was being masked by the spices beside her. He looked as if he'd been wearing the grey work trousers with pockets all the way down the legs and the faded navy blue hoodie for the last few days. They were stained with what looked like oil streaks and mud.

"How would I know which ones are Indian?"

He still looked puzzled, bewildered and overwhelmed by the colourful choices in front of him.

“It probably tells you on the label on each jar. They usually explain how best to use them. You know, the spices can be quite expensive. You might be better buying one of those mixed jars like curry powder or tandoori mix or tikka masala because you need quite a lot of different spices to get the right flavour and if you don’t use them a lot they can lose their flavour in time. Which type of Indian dish do you like?”

“I like paprika, love,” he replied. “She said she wanted paprika in it.”

He shuffled over in his muddy work boots to look at the ready mixed spice jars. She took advantage when he moved out of the way to find the star anise refill box and popped it into her brimming trolley. She also took the chance to take a better look at him. His eyes looked tired and his body was slightly hunched as if this was all too much of an effort for him. He probably wasn’t as old as he first appeared. He looked like he could do with someone to cook his dinner for him and make everything ok again.

“I think they have a lot of these Indian dishes in the ready meals section and also in the frozen food section. You can heat them up in minutes in the microwave. They’re quite tasty. You can also buy jars of the sauce already made up. It’s not bad if you’re in a hurry,” she suggested, trying to be helpful.

“Yes, thanks – I know you can buy them.”

“It would save you time.”

“I have to cook this myself. I promised her. I promised myself. What’s that you’re buying? Is it for a curry?” he asked.

“It’s star anise. I use it to flavour my spiced ham. It’s quite sweet. I think it’s used in biryani dishes sometimes but it doesn’t bring much colour to the dish. I don’t think it would help your curry.”

“I do want paprika. She’ll know if I don’t use it.”

"I'm sure you could get away without using it. Paprika will add to the colour but there are other ingredients that give colour too. You could add more tomatoes, or just buy a jar of curry sauce and add some paprika. You know, paprika won't give you the strength and depth of flavour you're probably looking for."

"What about this one? What about turmeric?" he asked.

"Yes, it's used a lot in Indian cookery. Lovely colour, but you would need to use a few other spices with it to get the authentic flavour. What curry are you going to make? Do you have a recipe?" she asked.

He didn't look like he was the type to have Nigella's latest recipe book at home or to have cut out today's recipe from the Daily Mail. Neither did he look as if he was an avid fan of Saturday Kitchen nor that he would search for a recipe on the BBC food website. He looked at her blankly for a moment.

"There's sometimes recipes on the back of the spice jars. Look – this one has Rogan Josh on it."

"I really like paprika, love," he said.

"Well, that's a good start. What do you like about it? Is it the colour, the smell or the flavour?" she asked.

"All of those. And I like its name. Paprika! Most of all I like how it sounds – exotic, warm, spicy, mysterious, magical, tantalising. Just like her. I like her name. She's called Paprika Moldova. We're meeting for the first time tomorrow night and I'm cooking dinner for her. She said I had to use paprika and she'd know if I had. She's lovely isn't she?"

He thrust a photo on his phone in front of her.

"She seems very attractive."

"She's a consultant surgeon."

“Really — she looks quite young — to be a consultant. I know it’s none of my business, but how long have you known her?”

“A few days. We’ve been chatting online. She’s very friendly.”

“I’m sure she is. What if you don’t like her when you meet?”

“I’m sure I will.”

“Why don’t you just go out for a drink with her and maybe see how you get on and then you could maybe cook dinner the next time. She might not appreciate the effort you’re making.”

“Oh I’m sure she will.”

“Sometimes people you meet online aren’t quite the same when you meet them face to face.”

“It sounds like you’ve had your fingers burned.”

“I have. And I’ve heard all sorts of weird and wonderful tales of online dating. You have to kiss a few frogs before you meet your prince. And, believe me, there are a lot of frogs — very few resemble their online photos. But I could be wrong. Paprika Moldova could very well be the beautiful, intelligent, rich, young woman you expect her to be.”

“I know what you’re thinking — what could she possibly see in me?”

“No — not exactly. I just don’t like to see people getting hurt and sometimes when something seems too good to be true, it is. You can’t be too careful. Do you really want this stranger in your house? Sorry, I’ve said too much. It’s none of my business. Don’t let me put you off cooking your Indian meal. You could always practice making it for yourself so when you meet her the next time you could cook it for her — or for someone else.”

He looked straight into her eyes. She shifted from one foot to the other and glanced at her shopping list.

“I should have just lifted the paprika without speaking to you.”

“Well, you should just buy it then if it’s what you want. But you should maybe also get one of those ready mixes. You can’t go wrong with them. You could always experiment by adding paprika to one of them – maybe the tikka masala one?”

“I like trying something new,” he said, again looking straight into her eyes.

She was beginning to feel very warm under her puffed feather down coat and loosened her hand knitted stripy scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. Why had she bothered coming out shopping tonight? And why had she even bothered to look for cloves and star anise? It wasn’t as if she needed the spices tonight or tomorrow or even next week. Then she recalled one of her New Year’s resolutions was to get out of the house every evening – even if it was only for a walk or to go to the supermarket. One of her other resolutions was to make an effort to speak to strangers. Well she was definitely ticking all the boxes tonight!

“Are you going to cook chicken or lamb? Or maybe you’re vegetarian?” she asked.

“Me a veggie? Do I look like a veggie?”

“Sorry I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Does it matter what I cook it with? It will probably be chicken.”

“No, no. It shouldn’t. I’m sure chicken will be lovely. That’s what I usually cook,” she said.

“How do you know all this? Are you a chef, love?”

“No, but I like cooking. I did an Indian cookery course last year so I know a little about it,” she said.

“You seem to know a lot about it. I like it hot.”

“Well you can add more spices to make the dish as mild or spicy as you like,” she said.

“Definitely not mild. I like a spicy dish,” he said.

“Most men seem to have a palate that tolerates spicier food than women.”

“Oh right.”

“That course was great fun. It was at the local tech. You should look it up on the internet. They might still be running it and they usually start a new course after Christmas. I learned so much about cooking Indian food and everyone was really nice. We cooked a different dish each week. Do you know *Tandoor* on the Bristol Road?”

“Yes, I’ve been there loads of times.”

“Well, it was the guy who is the head chef there who took the course, Sanjeev Rashid, lovely guy. So it really was authentic. He used to tell me off each week for chopping my onions the wrong way. Who would ever have thought there were so many ways to chop onions? And so many types – red ones, white ones, Spanish ones and shallots. The large Spanish ones were the worst. My tears were tripping me when I chopped them. According to him you have to chop them different sizes depending on the dish you’re making. He certainly knows his onions – and all his spices. I used to chop them as big as possible as chopping onions always makes my eyes water and I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.”

“You seem to know your onions, and your spices too, love. I’m sure you could teach me a thing or two.”

She smiled as she remembered that it had been more than onions making her cry this time last year, but the onions had been a good excuse to blame for her tears, dropping into the meal she was making in the class, adding a bit more saltiness with each tear drop. Sanjeev hadn’t told her off about that even though she knew it broke every food hygiene rule in the book. He’d just smiled kindly, clearly knowing the difference between onion-induced tears and those brought on by a broken heart. As each week passed her tears had lessened. She put it down to perfecting her onion chopping skills, rather than her broken heart starting to heal.

He selected a jar of tikka masala mix and a jar of turmeric and put them into his basket.

"I love Indian food. It's so much healthier when you cook it all from scratch. Don't forget your onions," she said.

"Which sort should I use?"

"I'd recommend starting with the large Spanish ones. I've found they're best for disguising heartache."

"Sounds just what I need, love," he said.

"You should try that cookery course. It was one of the best things I've ever done. I made new friends — real people — I love calling into see Sanjeev in the restaurant now to swap recipes."

"Ok. Thanks for the advice. Maybe I will."

"Don't listen to everything I've said. Good luck with the cooking and your date with Paprika tomorrow night. Maybe I'll see you back here in a few weeks buying more spices to cook for her again and maybe you'll have signed up for that course."

"I hope so, love. I might, but then, maybe I could cook dinner for you?" he asked.

"When you've got the flavour right, I might like that," she said, smiling back at him.

"Maybe you could help me with it."

"Maybe I could. But what about Paprika? What will she think?"

"I think I'll give paprika and Paprika a miss. I'll go for something with a more distinct flavour that can bring out the best in the dish. I'll focus on cooking what I like."

"That's important. You'll enjoy it more then."

"I'll have fun experimenting in the kitchen. See you back here then."

January wasn't looking so bleak after all she thought, as she stood in the checkout queue and began to place her onions and spices on the conveyor belt.

## *Jack Sheehan*

### *Withdrawal*

START AGAIN. A FAMILIAR PLACE. A BLIZZARD UNDER GLUEY GREEN STREET LIGHTS. A clapboard diner, windows vignetted with frost.

Inside, a tired cook in his forties, hairy arms, stained vest, dirty cloth. At a booth, alone, a woman. Her hair has fallen in front of her eyes. There's food, untouched. She has her elbows on the table, palms together, flexing fingers again and again.

You ask for coffee and go to walk past her. She holds out an arm.

'Sorry,' she says, 'do you...could you tell me the time?' You fumble with your phone and tell her. She smiles.

"Late. Late late late."

"Uh, yeah. Late to be out. Are you meeting someone?"

"Supposed to be. But something tells me..." She looks away. Her hand freezes in place, artificially immobile. The chef stands with the cloth, just about to be tossed into the air, rigid, static. The diner crackles, shatters, disappears. You're alone, in a huge, grey, empty room.

A synthetic voice says, "Character load error. Apologies for the inconvenience. To complete simulation, please add more memory."

You sigh with pain. Old pain. You seldom leave the house, except on the first Sunday of every month, for groceries. You used to take your greyhound for walks around the neighbourhood until he — old, deaf, but still affectionate — died, two winters ago. Your skin has a yellow-white cast, although you don't eat enough to have gained weight.

Thinner, if anything. Thinner. Paler. You check the time and it's before noon, so you put on your one jacket and prise open the stiff door of the house.

Outside it's colder than you remember. October. Your street is red brick, quiet and enclosed. It's full of new families who came over once each, to say hello and then never again. The path to the tram station takes you between two rows of immense trees. The ground is stuck with slick yellow leaves, and you have to be distantly careful. The tram is near-empty. You wonder if it's the weekend. You're going to a warehouse, out beyond the suburbs, beside a motorway, on the edge of where Dublin finally becomes somewhere else. The man knows you, or knows the type, and takes you to the memory section. He suggests the 256 Zettas. They're perfect, he says, for your kind of work.

Your kind of work. At home you install the memory on racks in your garage. A huge fan sucks hot air into a neighbourhood heat exchanger. The blocks of RAM, so big and heavy when you piled them into shopping bags, now look tiny next to rows of similar.

Start again. The same blizzard. The same lights.

"Late. Late Late Late."

"Are you meeting someone?"

"Supposed to be. But something tells me that ship has sailed."

"Was it important?" you ask. She looks directly at you. You sit down opposite and she smiles.

"Important. Yeah. It was...giving something a last go. Y'know? My husband, he...we were going to meet one last time. Fresh start. This is...this is the place we met."

"Oh. And he's late?"

"Not that late. But you get a feeling. I realised when I sat down that he wasn't coming."

"What made you think that?"

"I...I'm sorry. I have to go."

"What? No, I..." you say. She stands and takes a last look at you, before walking out the door into the snow.

Stop simulation. You fall to the floor with a soft bump as the torn booth disappears beneath you. The room is grey, featureless.

Start again.

\*\*\*

On Wednesdays, an alarm reminds you, you go to your meeting group. You stand in your grey room and dial in. So does everyone else. Early on there used to be a theme every week. You'd meet on a snowy mountaintop, or an Italian villa. Now though, it's the same dim church basement. You went to one AA meeting, a long time ago, and it was just like this. Chairs. Coffee. Stale biscuits.

The group changes a bit, as people drop out and join in. This week a woman is telling her story for the first time.

"So it's a little embarrassing to say this, but the scenario I'm programming is the first time my husband and I were...intimate together. I've been working on it for almost a year now, since he...and well it's been going great but I...uh...see the problem is I can't make him...y'know...complete?"

No one looks in the least surprised. There are supportive nods. The leader of the group asks, "And in the original print, your husband had no trouble, um, finishing?"

"Well actually he uh...yes he did as a matter of fact but in the simulation I was trying to...um..."

The group becomes animated then, with one of their usual arguments: whether it's wrong to try to change the history that you're simulating. You stand and wander over to the sandwiches, aware that you'll have to eat again after the meeting is over.

Standing at the coffee burner is a man you've seen before. Broad shouldered, open faced, dark blonde, but greying. A small voice in your head tells you: Mark.

"Same old, same old, eh?" says Mark.

"Yeah. I wish we didn't have to have this every time," you say.

"I know. I wanted to talk about technical stuff, actually, but I don't think we'll be..."

"What sort of stuff?" you ask.

“Oh, I’ve had to keep installing memory.”

“Yes I’ve had... It’s...when you put in more character data, diaries and photos and...y’know. The simulation is logarithmic, so the memory usage goes up exponentially.”  
This is the most you’ve spoken in quite a while.

Mark smiles. “I’m no good at the hardware stuff. No head for it. I have to keep paying people to come in and do it.”

“Oh it’s not hard. I could do it for you if you’re close.”

He is. The same city. You hadn’t realised. He accepts your help gratefully, before you can think about it.

\*\*\*

Mark lives by the sea, in an old Georgian townhouse, stuccoed pink. It’s orderly, minimal. A little old fashioned, in a warm kind of way. You think of your own house, bare, with unreplaced bulbs in the hall because you get just enough streetlight to reach the bathroom.

He offers you tea, from a pot, and a plate of biscuits, all kinds. You can see the packets lined neatly on the kitchen counter, newly bought, missing four each.

It reminds you of a house you lived at in college, with old grey Swedish furniture and wood floors covered in shaggy rugs. There are no clocks anywhere.

“I like your place,” you say.

“Oh thank you. It was our parents’ house.”

“You and...”

“And my brother. He died four years ago. He’s the...I read some stuff about sims and I...well I’d never been too into coding or...but there are guides, you know.”

He’s leaning over the table in the living room, gesturing with a mug that says ‘Road Race Kilternan ‘42’. He’s wearing a blue chambray shirt, and olive trousers.

“You were very close?” I ask.

“We...yes we were. Yes. It’s funny, I had talked about moving out before he...but yes we were. Very close.”

“It’s very hard.”

“Oh yes.” He takes a sip of tea and picks up a biscuit, before putting it down again. “My brother was a difficult man. Very...oh very, just, difficult, you know? And not now, not shy about spreading it around, either. Of course he had his reasons, now, and we all did our best. We all...we all did our best.”

“Of course.”

“Now I mustn’t make it sound as if we didn’t love him. I loved my brother very much,” he says, like the answer to a quiz question. “We were tremendously close.”

He looks over at you, and seems about to ask something.

You stand, and say, “Will we have a look at the array?”

“Oh. Oh yes. Yes, lets.” You leave your mugs and walk into his garage. The setup is different, the smell familiar. If you spend enough time working in here, the buzz follows you around. An electronic tattoo.

The installation doesn’t take long. You almost suggest running the sim, but stop. It would be like asking to read someone’s diary, or watch their sex tapes. Not even impolite, something farther. A bizarre transgression suggesting mental illness or social oddity.

Back in the living room he asks you if you’d like to stay for dinner. You half refuse, but think of the long evening and accept.

Some people are naturally cooks. Even in routine, fatigue, isolation, what they make always has weight, and flavour. They are writing poetry in prison. The rest are waiting for parole. You think of your standard meals and you find you can’t remember what they taste like.

At dinner, you gradually begin to discuss other things. He asks you whether you’ve been following the World Cup. He says that he finds he doesn’t have time for much, but he’s always loved rugby, and y’know, everyone needs a hobby.

You listen, and ask occasional questions. He becomes animated, talking about the teams and strategy; great matches he’s seen. He has a talent for full colour storytelling. You want to watch, too, but there seems to be so much to learn about it. You feel like it’s already too late.

“I don’t know if there’s anything I still feel that passionately about,” you say.

"Oh, well, I'm sure there's something. I mean I feel I only watch the rugby because I grew up with it. You know, that kind of thing is hardwired in when you're a kid. It's almost unconscious. You probably have something like that."

"No. Well...I mean I used to swim up until a few years ago, but..."

"Well there you go! I swim a bit still, too. We should go to the forty foot some day."

"Oh well I..."

"No really! Look, we'll do it this Sunday, before we forget."

"We...um...ok." You don't quite know how you've agreed to it. But it would be nice. You do miss it. The silence. The feeling of floating, weightless, held.

You feel a gear change, a tension loosened somewhere. For the first time in a long while you relax, some. And it's a perfectly nice evening. Friends. Old friends, perhaps, catching up. That explains the dash of stiffness, the delicate questions, but also the rushes of warmth, words strung together quickly like beads on a cheap necklace.

But even old friends will come back to the thing that obsesses them.

"I apologise if you've said this before but you wife, you...you're trying to replicate your first meeting?"

"Yes. She was supposed to be meeting her old husband."

"And instead she met her new one?" he says, with a smile, gentle.

"Um, yes. But I can't quite get past the initial...the meeting is fine, but...but she keeps...leaving."

"Leaving? Well I've never had that happen, now. My brother he...normally he just sits mute. I mean now he did that a lot when he was alive, but you know, you can tell the difference."

"Yes, of course. And have you had much progress?"

"Well initially, yes, but you know all the things they say about diminishing returns. Do you feel you're getting there, yourself?"

"I'm...well I've come a long way with the realism of...yes I think there's been some noticeable improvement. With my wife you see, the meeting is...well. I think I've seen some improvement."

"Do you ever think about stopping?" he asks.

"Well, I..."

"It's just that I wonder, you know? I find that I've lost touch with a lot of people. And I went to a friend's, an old dear friend's 50th a few weeks ago. You know, it was nice. I surprised myself. I think sometimes that I feel I should just maybe let him...you know...let him go." He looks into his wine glass and turns it back and forth. "Do you ever feel that? I mean, with your wife?" he asks.

"Well I...no...no. I think it's rather different. I think you can't really generalise with something like that."

"No of course not, I..."

"It's quite late. I think I should go. Thank you very much for the dinner Mark, it was lovely."

"No, you don't have to. I'm terribly sorry if I've offended you, I of course didn't mean— "

"No no don't worry," you say, "I should...it was a lovely evening."

He hands you your coat with a pained smile. "Shall I see you Sunday?"

"I think I...well I think I'll be busy. Very sorry, very kind of you to...no I don't think so."

At the door he lightly rests his hand on your shoulder. "It was a...a pleasure having you," he says.

\*\*\*

Start again.

You ask for coffee and walk up to her booth. "Sorry," she says, "Do you...could you tell me the time?" You fumble with your phone and tell her. She smiles.

"Late. Late late late," she says.

"Are you meeting someone?"

"Supposed to be. But something tells me that ship has sailed."

"Was it important?" you ask. She looks directly at you. You sit down opposite and she smiles.

"Important. Yeah. It was...giving something a last go. Y'know? My husband, he...we were going to meet one last time. Fresh start. This is...this is the place we met."

"Oh. And he's late?"

"Not that late. But you get a feeling," she says. She lets out a breath. "I realised when I sat down that he wasn't coming."

"What made you think that?"

Because why would this time be any different? Why would one last meeting make any difference at all? Because we've had a lot of last shots." She reaches across and puts a hand on yours, lightly.

"It sounds like...you should say goodbye to him," you say.

"It's hard, though."

"Of course it is. But that doesn't mean it's not worth doing." She smiles again, and it's finally her.

"Goodbye," she says.

\*\*\*

You stand in borrowed swimming gear, atop a huge stone cliff. The day is steaming bright, fog burnt off by 11AM. Below you is October water. Mark is already swimming. He shouts at you to jump, and you do.

It's blessed ice, cutting, cooling, endless. You doggy paddle around, as if you've forgotten all those strokes. Perhaps you have. Mark swims past you, laughing, happily, gentle.

"It's hard!" you shout, "I've forgotten how to do this!"

"You just have to start again!" he shouts back.

You just have to start again.

## *Bernie McQuillan*

### *Maggie's Escape*

IT WAS WELL AFTER TEN WHEN MAGGIE PULLED INTO A PARKING SPACE ON EGLANTINE Avenue, her breasts tingling and ready to feed Liam but the first floor flat was in darkness. The distant laughter from The Bot reminded her the night was still young; this time last year she would have been getting ready to go out clubbing with the girls. She turned the lights on in the flat, scanning the kitchen surfaces for a note but there was nothing, only a couple of empty wine bottles and two glasses, half-full, on the table beside a baby's soother. Her phone rang and Conor's name flashed up. She gulped, realising she'd been holding her breath, found her hand shaking as she answered.

'We're down in the Children's hospital.' Why did he expect her to know it was him?

'Where's Liam? And Tanya? She was meant to be looking after him—' her voice cracked.

'Don't panic,' he said. 'A bit of a fall. I'll explain when you get—' Maggie raced out the door and down the stairs. All the way there she imagined Liam lying on a slab, bruised and deathly white, his eyes closed forever against the harsh yellow bulb overhead. She swerved into the hospital grounds and followed the signs for Children's, pulling up on the double yellow lines when she saw Conor standing outside the low grey building. He turned and she saw he was smoking. He took another puff before throwing the butt on the ground, stubbing it out with his foot. 'He's going to be fine,' he said, putting a hand on her arm. She pulled away and went inside, the bright lights of the emergency unit on her right and a long

corridor in front. Conor led the way, turning round as if he was a tour guide. 'Tanya was carrying him down the stairs and she slipped—'

'He fell down the stairs! Jesus!' Now she saw Liam lying crumpled on the bottom step, his head twisted at an odd angle, not moving.

'—they're keeping him in. Just to be on the safe side, that's what they said.'

'I knew I shouldn't have left him.' She looked down at the damp stains on her top where the breast pads had soaked through. She imagined her useless milk streaming down the street and lying curdling in the sun while dozens of babies withered and died. Conor stopped in front of a set of double doors under a sign 'Intensive Care Unit' and pressed the buzzer.

'Why is Liam in here, if he's only got a bump?' she said, grabbing his arm, pulling him around to face her. 'And why were you in my flat?'

Conor's eyes darted away to the blue-uniformed nurse coming towards them.

'You bastard! There's something going on between you and Tanya—' Maggie scanned the room. Children lay motionless in beds, attached to beeping, flashing machines, watched by parents with white faces and hopeless eyes. Like a casino without any prizes. The nurse pointed to a cot in the corner with a mobile attached, green and blue aeroplanes, wings outstretched. Maggie ran over and looked in at the baby behind the high metal bars, the left eye swollen and shiny purple and red, the arms bandaged in bright blue. It was her Liam, wearing a popper vest that wasn't his, red with orange dinosaurs and too tight. She reached through the bars to stroke his cheek and watched his chest rise and fall, his arms twitching above his head as if disturbed by his dream. All she wanted to do was hold him but the nurse stood there beside Conor like a prison guard.

'Where's Tanya?' she said.

Conor looked sheepish. 'She was a bit dizzy—'

'Dizzy? You mean drunk? I saw the empty bottles in the flat.' Her voice rose and she saw some of the parents staring at them.

'I brought the wine round for you but you weren't there—'

'So you and Tanya got rat-arsed and my baby ends up in here. You absolute wan—' There was a cough behind her and Maggie turned to see a bearded man in an open necked

shirt and a girl with a sleek blonde bob carrying a file. The man introduced them as Doctor Browne and Julie from Social Services and he led the way to an office down the corridor. She presumed this was where parents were told bad news. She looked back for Conor but he had slipped away.

'Can you tell us what happened to your son?' the girl spoke first. 'We were given very limited information by Mr Davidson. '

Maggie stirred uneasily in her chair. Conor's surname was Robinson. 'I left Liam with my friend Tanya. I had a family emergency.'

'Your friend's name?'

'Tanya Kinsella. She's here in the hospital somewhere.'

'And who is the baby's father?'

Maggie frowned. 'Conor is, I think.' She shifted in her chair and felt her face flush. The girl looked up. 'How long have you known Mr Davidson?'

'About a year. But we don't live together, he had just called to my place.'

Doctor Browne's hands were bony and he reminded Maggie of her old headmaster, carefully weighing up the evidence before dishing out the punishment. 'When Liam was admitted, his eyes were dilated and his stomach distended. As a precaution I had to pump his stomach.'

'What?' Maggie leaned forward, a pulse throbbing in her temple. Conor hadn't mentioned any of this. 'But he's only six weeks old —'

'Could Liam have been given any drugs or pills, anything like that?'

Maggie hesitated. Today was the first time Liam had been fed from a bottle. Was it possible that a tablet had fallen into the baby powder? There was only her birth control pills, not that they had been any use, but they were safely in her underwear drawer. Then she remembered the packages that arrived for Conor most days.

'Conor sells diet pills,' she said. 'The boxes arrive at my flat, I'm always falling over them.' Julie scribbled in her file and Maggie realised that she'd said the wrong thing.

'Liam will stay here while we review his home circumstances and assess your fitness as a mother.'

Maggie stared at her. 'What do you mean, fitness as a mother?'

'You've confirmed that drugs are delivered to your home—'

'But they aren't mine—'

' —the flat is yours. You left your child in someone else's care and your child was injured. By someone who *might* be the baby's father — need I say more?'

Maggie jumped up and yanked the door open, running back to Liam's cot. He was kicking his legs against the mattress, his hands reaching towards the mobile, the dangling bells chiming erratically. She stood, holding the bars, tears sliding down her cheeks. 'You are not taking him away from me,' she said.

Dr Browne walked slowly over to Maggie's side and smiled down at Liam, reaching into the cot to stroke his hand. 'It's amazing how kids bounce back, isn't it?' he said.

Maggie felt her shoulders relax. 'He's fantastic,' she said softly, her voice hoarse.

## *Dermot O'Sullivan*

### *Apple Seeds*

THE TERRACE OF THE CAFÉ IS PACKED AND I AM SEATED AMIDST THE CROWD, SMOKING, the pulse of an imminent turd throbbing in my rectum. It always goes like this. I wake, dress and head out for my morning coffee, intending to bask for an hour or so in the noon sun and read my book, but no sooner have I finished my espresso than the peristaltic machine roars to life, the dose of caffeine having woken it from its overnight slumber, and I find myself obliged to wince and writhe my way through what was supposed to be a period of tender relaxation.

Though this scuppers my original plan, there is always some compensation. In this perilous state, squirming against the inevitable, I always seem to see or feel or think of something both profound and amusing and which in any other circumstance would mean absolutely nothing to me at all. In short, I become mildly prophetic in this condition and so it appears to me that the possibility of shitting myself is the only phenomenon powerful enough to get me to forget all the rubbish for a while and stare life straight in the eye.

At this present moment I am gazing languidly at the others seated around me and at those walking by on the street. They exist so casually, or so it seems at times. A lady grasps an overflowing sandwich and brings it timidly to her lips, while another, flouting the red man, darts across the road. A corpulent retiree dribbles coffee down his chin and compliments his wife over the phone. A pair of friends request the bill, fight over it, and then tip the waiter flagrantly. And they all do these things without skipping a beat, apparently without the slightest worry in the world.

But my temporary clairvoyance is onto them: I know that things are not as rosy as they would like us to believe. I am aware now, intimately aware, for all that they try to hide it from me, that every one of these two-legged monstrosities is situated somewhere in the endlessly repeated cycle which at this point in time is reaching a disastrous climax for me. Enslaved by their bowels, each one is nursing his or her own little ineluctability whose emergence into daylight is as unavoidable and embarrassing as the crises of emotion and personality that characterise their individual lives. Yes, rammed somewhere up each of their colons like a plug of tobacco is a little black gift that will stink up the entire universe when it has its moment in the sun. I am exaggerating perhaps, but you get the point, it's a little bit of insight, and not unpoetic: these are the kinds of things that make my day.

As if to prove my point, the terrier two tables down stretches his hind legs taut and scrunches up his little arse in concentration. He has received the same call as I it seems. And here it comes, like a long stick of dough from a mould. When he is done, he turns his head and peers cautiously at the little bundle of dirt he has just deposited on the footpath. His owner rises immediately and, still chatting to her friend, wraps it up in a plastic bag and lobs it in the bin. Ah, if things were only so simple for the rest of us.

An idea has just struck me, a quite ingenious one in fact. Imagine if one could assemble all these people in an enormous room, a room fitted with row upon row of toilets, the bowls containing no water at all, only a simple, blank hole which would give onto a lower level, the floor of which would be one giant resonating board made of some sort of hypersensitive metal, or any drum-like material in fact. Well, you follow: think of the music one could make! Speeded up of course. To get anything out of it at all, one would have to take the recording thus made and speed it up significantly. The rumbling sound of load upon load of apples coming in, each thud and the timing of each thud signifying the peculiar necessities and oddities of the person involved. Perhaps it would just be a dull, meaningless roar. Or something reminiscent of the graceless splendour of raindrops battering a tin roof during a downpour. But so what? It would not matter, it really would not matter, whether our collective noise were the occasion for horror or delight. It would not matter at all. We would know what that noise is at least and that would be something.

Oh dear! The globule of faecal matter — what is it about that stiffening K-sound in the genitive which rocks my soul? — is descending to my anal cavity now and I give a little internal yelp that seems to express with admirable concision the precise degree of shock and delight that I feel at this development. Now my very minutes are numbered. The terrier yaps, once, twice, and I feel that I must heed his warning. This is something that demands to be taken care of straightaway, to be acted on without delay, but what a pleasure it is to be feckless and free, to overflow with lassitude at the very moment that urgent action is required.

I mash my half-finished cigarette into the ashtray, extricate another from the packet, and light up. Let us pass on to something else.

What I wish to propose at this point in time, just for argument's sake, is that the pith of our lives is really defined by these small, furtive acts that fill us with shame, these non-moments that creep up on us with all the quiet insistence of winter and sunset, these miniature deaths which remove us from society and barricade us inside the tiniest and foulest of rooms until they are concluded. We are our darknesses, whatever else we may be, we are the brownness that lives inside us. This is my belief. So you can imagine now the attraction that the scenario of hundreds of men and women shitting in one enormous room provides to me, and then all of us gathered in the auditorium later that day listening intently to the brutal racket of our most intimate selves...

And I must insist that I do not have any scatological deformities or obsessions. I shit as all shit, not from my armpit, not into a blender, and rarely in humiliating circumstances. I sit, I push and I wipe (time constraints taken into account of course), and then that is that. I admit that some days, in ascertaining whether the wiping job is yet finished, I do raise the soiled scrap of toilet paper a little closer to my face than one would expect is normal, just for a pungent little nip on the nose, but I believe we have all done so and we need not feel ashamed.

My oh my... These flights of fancy are tiring. And the turd has just lurched down another rung with what felt like a thump. It must be nosing my underwear at this stage. Too bad. The orgasmic quivering currently rushing through my guts is compensation enough.

I take a couple of rapid, noisy drags from my cigarette and consider my options briefly. I come to no conclusions.

What is it about the way I speak that makes people believe that I'm forty years of age and lonely? I'm in my mid-twenties and have had several long-term relationships. I bring my niece to the park for Christ's sake!

Tiring.

I wonder if anyone has precise control over this thing? Can at will coax the faeces out, shove it back in again...utilising rectal muscles alone that is. Resorting to the use of external aids would render the achievement utterly pointless in my opinion.

It's hot in the sun. Very hot. Let's see... Here! I used to wonder why we fart constantly when we need to shit. I reasoned thus: the pooh is blocking the way so how does the fart get out? I pondered this for many months until I realised that, of course, the turd itself is producing the fart. It is solid mass of detritus and gas-emitting bacteria and like some vaporous planet it fumes and bleeds noxious airs from its own body. The gases build up until the pressure is too great for the anal sphincter and thus...

I should leave now. As you may have inferred I am farting abundantly and I think the people around me have begun to notice. A pained constriction of facial muscles has appeared on several nearby faces in any case and I am beginning to feel somewhat ashamed. But, then again, so what? We are too great in numbers here on the terrace for anyone to credibly pin the blame on me alone.

Wait. Yes! There is one more thing I wanted to get to before I admit defeat and head back inside. I once frigged a girl in her bottom and encountered there, much to my dismay, the wrinkled snout of a nesting turd. Asleep, dead to all the world it seemed. But then the idea struck me that with its pointed tip the bit of dung was rather more like a finger than a dozing animal. It was a finger outstretched in greeting, belonging to some inverted creature that lived inside her, lonely and very much alert, dying to know someone, anyone, needing desperately someone to speak to, even for a while. Needless to say I was in no mood for conversation that night and so the thing went no further. Now, if I were in company, I would emphasise the revulsion that this unexpected occurrence provoked. But the truth is, as is usual when one encounters something repellent, whether it is during sex or in the course

one's evening meal, I simply withdrew my finger and politely pretended that nothing was amiss.

The turd has by now pinned my trousers to the chair that I am sitting on. It is in all likelihood mashing its face up against said chair, slowly and imperceptibly flattening its leading extremity against the hard wood. I have never gone this long before. No, I have never come this far before. I do not know whether this is a triumph or a new personal low. No doubt debating this point will occupy me for much of the day.

The sun seems to have grown hotter in the last few moments. Or perhaps this is simply the hot flushes of my inner need. The people around me are eating sparkling salads and drinking white wine. Good gracious, it is Saturday, completely slipped my mind. The waiter glides by and, dramatic gestures not being advisable in my present state, I twitch a finger in an effort to retrieve the bill. He does not notice and goes back inside. That's me stuck here for another few minutes at least, which may well mean that by the time I settle up I shall be unwillingly seated on a warm cushion of feculence, the sodden, murderous odour of my stool blossoming in the air, grimaces appearing one by one in a slow wave on the faces around me, forks shuddering to a halt in mid-air...

What's this? The woman at the table next to me has addressed me with some words. She has noticed my book and wishes to talk about it. Or rather, she is alone. That is perhaps more to the point. She is, I note as I turn to face her, tolerably attractive, and it is quite likely that if she had been in my line of sight the entire time, and not somewhat to the back of me, I would have ceased my scatological ruminations and merely gawped at her body and imagined tonguing illicit portions of it like any normal, decent human being. She has the air of an individual who does not shit at all, and this pleases me immensely because I know that, perforce, she must shit too.

I immediately assume my most charming manner. This transformation is not difficult for me, no more so than for anyone else at least. You see, I am savvy enough to know that, although I am almost queasy with incontinence, to her I am merely a man sitting at a table smoking and enjoying the sunshine. And I am good-looking, striking enough to have engendered several obsessions in any case. She saw me. She spoke. I looked up. I smiled. This is all she knows and I am utterly at ease. That said, I would much rather if I did not have

to worry about the possibility that I may poop myself at any instant. It would make our conversation that bit more agreeable I believe.

Despite the inconvenience, we are soon chattering away together pleasantly. Lining up word after meaningless word and firing them one by one from my lips, the old familiar duty, for once it almost gratifies me. To talk to this woman is almost not to talk at all, and the pleasure I derive from this is surprising to say the least. I'm even a little happy, one could say.

Soon however an impatience with this process takes hold and I feel the call of a sensation both murkier and more enticing than the mindless joy of reciprocal vocalisations. She is... how can I say? She is drawing me in. My peristaltic convulsions have slowed down considerably by now. I wish I could say they have grinded to a halt, but things are rarely so easy.

I take a last pull on my cigarette and flick the butt away into the gutter.

Now I am pinned down by a real need, a victim now not of inevitability but of something I vigorously desire. I want this woman and I think that she wants me. She is beautiful to me and, if I speak frankly about my bodily functions, I also speak the awful truth about the movements of my soul: she is truly beautiful to me, and some precious thing inside me is bleeding out towards her. And I am on the verge of shitting myself. The music we could make together, the strange fire of our peculiar necessities and inevitabilities, this is what fills my mind, and my words are tinged with sadness and I think she senses this and somewhere inside herself she understands.

It's hot and there isn't a cloud in the sky, just acre upon burning acre of deepest blue.

A breeze pushes down the street. Napkins flutter. The plane trees hum. She steadies her glass, though there is no need to do this, no need at all.

And I say to her, because she must know the truth if she is to love me, "I'm like crap: you must sift diligently through the inform, brown stuff to arrive at the sweet corn and the apple seeds."

I think she smiles, but my bowels are bursting now and my mind's gone to fog so I'm really not sure. I wince and feel a hand cover my own and clench softly, like a ghost's.

But she is no ghost, and at the first warm throb of her palm against my netted veins a vision slips into my blood like some long forgotten instinct. I see this whole city struck by some huge and tender force, and all of us in one glorious instant lose control and crap into our perfumed frocks as one, flooding our drawers with that little bit of ourselves we would rather keep inside, and the stench of whatever it is — whatever it is at all — rises all around us and swamps the streets and for a moment we are all filled with that joy that freedom that dancing in our bones that Friday feeling that lurks at the edge of dreams in which everything has finally been divulged.

She looks across the table into my eyes and her toneless gaze, as clean and as cruel as a freshly whetted blade, reaches into me and tells me that though she knows it all, though she knows every inch of me, this is only the beginning and she will promise nothing, nothing at all.

It is not enough, say her motionless lips, to just smear the shit in streaks all along the wall for everyone to see. It is not enough to just know the truth, say her lidless eyes, we must know it and then we must live it.

A deep, warbling ache has seized my abdomen now, but I must go on, I must beg for what I need now that begging seems like a new and truer way to dream.

“And there are apple seeds. I swallowed many of them when I was a little boy. It was said by some that they could never grow. And, true enough, one by one they went to waste. But I think I have one left, I’m quite sure of it, I think of I have one left... just for you.”

## *Alistair Graham*

### *The Outpatient*

IT'S 8.30AM WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE ULSTER HOSPITAL IN BELFAST. THERE'S A SIGN ON THE desk: Reception for day procedure opens at 8.45AM. I arrived early for my appointment, hoping to be seen first because I have a job interview to attend and can't be late.

In the waiting area a grey haired lady with spectacles reads her newspaper at arms-length. A man with a walking stick sits opposite the lady, drinking coffee and staring at the floor. There are five or six others sitting waiting, all of them elderly. The air has no hospital smell, in fact the waiting area reminds me of a job centre and by the looks of the other outpatients I am the only person fit for work. More elderly people arrive. It's nearly 8.48AM so I walk up to the desk.

"Have you got your wee letter there?" the girl asks.

I hand her the letter and she bends over the counter to read it. I can see the swell of her breasts; one of the buttons popped open as she leaned across, her blouse is now open right down to the start of her breast bone.

"It's actually on the first floor" she tells me. "There's a reception on the first floor too." She smiles and hands back my letter. I say thank you and realise I have looked again at her breasts. I notice the grey haired man, who has made his way to the counter, is also looking at her breasts; the girl smiles at me again telling me I'm welcome.

The girl at reception on the first floor reads my letter and confirms my address and date of birth.

"Just take a seat" she says. It's not long until they call my name. I walk along a corridor and enter the room.

“Please, sit down,” the doctor says. He asks me to look at letters on a wallchart and read them out, as far down as I can. The doctor thanks me for coming and squeezes drops into my eyes. The stinging will only last a minute or so, he says. I walk out, back to my seat and wait.

There are eight people now sitting along the wall in single chairs waiting for their eyes to dilate. The girl from the ground floor reception walks past me with medical records in her hand – she recognises me and smiles. The drops are starting to work making it difficult to focus and the girl looks a little blurred to me but I return her smile.

I’m back in the room with the doctor again wondering if I’ll be here much longer. I can’t afford to hang around or I’ll miss the interview and the chance to get my life back. My wife died ten days before my thirtieth birthday and I cried nonstop for weeks then I fell apart. It seemed my face was constantly damp from the tears. I cried in work at my desk, in the toilets, at the supermarket while pushing the trolley, even standing opposite the cashier in Dunnes Stores because she reminded me of my wife.

The job went first followed by the house. The house was a grand affair which we both loved dearly. I kept the grass and hedges trimmed and took care of the small maintenance jobs. My wife picked all the colours for the rooms, decided the interior design and kept the place like a new pin. I now live in a hostel for men. I did stay with friends at first and I’ll always be grateful for their kindness but it was never a permanent solution – not for them or me. I took the medication every day as prescribed and slowly began to feel better. I worked a few jobs, mostly manual but they were temporary positions, some of them zero hour contracts. The pay was so low it barely covered the cost of the petrol to get there or enough food or the rent for the small room I had in a shared house. I left the house when I got the letter from the hostel and moved my things in the following day. The total cost of the hostel is £30 per week for a small room with a bed including all meals. Most of the men at the hostel have drink and drug addictions, history of petty theft and short prison sentences and will probably never live independent lives. A small group have no history of addiction and work a job when they get the chance and attend interviews facilitated by the hostel. Many of the men have children and wives and broken marriages that left them homeless. I suppose society sees us all as broken men regardless of the reasons why we’re

here and they're right: fifty plus men, housed in a building in tiny rooms with single beds; all of us broken. The interview today may change that for me. It's a good salary, similar to the job I lost a year ago, and will allow me to rent a place in a nice area. They'll want to know why I've been working manual jobs for twelve months and why I left my old job and I can see their faces across the table when I mention the word breakdown. Of course they'll have sympathy because my wife died suddenly but will they think I am weak, damaged and unable to perform at a professional level? When I leave the interview room will they be moved by my story, think what bad luck I've had and hope that I make it but unfortunately it will not be via a position in their large company as the risk is too great and they're not in the business of charity?

The doctor takes a closer look at my eyes. He's happy with everything. He says he doesn't need to see me again and I will be discharged from the clinic. I shake his hand and thank him and walk out into the corridor. The job interview is at 11 am but I am not supposed to drive for two hours after the drops. I walk down the corridor, negotiating the route, partially sighted. At the end of the corridor I see a large sign on the wall which I can just about read. I move up close to the sign, almost touching it with my face: it reads, Hospital Restaurant. A nurse walks past and asks if I'm looking for the restaurant. She gives me directions and walks on.

The restaurant is busy; mostly staff in blue or green outfits, all of them chatting at speed while eating and drinking. I walk up to the food counter.

"Just help yourself love," the girl says.

I can barely see the food or what it was. "Excuse me," I say. "Is that just scramble egg, there's no meat in it?" I point to what I think is scrambled egg. The food in all of the bain-maries looks the same with no revealing colour or definition. My eyes are a mess.

"It's just scrambled egg love," she replies.

I ladle two helpings of the egg onto my plate. At the end of the food counter there is a large stainless steel toaster. I place two slices of brown bread on the wire mesh conveyor belt and watch it disappear into a red glow. Beside the toaster is another stainless steel machine. I place a paper cup below the spout and press the button I think has a picture of a large coffee. The girl behind the food counter walks over to the till as I approach with my

tray. I have enough loose change in my pocket to pay the girl but I know I will not be able to distinguish the coins. I feel for my wallet and hand the girl a note.

“Have you nothing smaller?” she asks politely, “smaller than a twenty?”

I thought by the colour of the note it was a ten. She could have short changed me and I’d never have known. I scoop the bunch of coins from my pocket and present them to the girl. “Can you take it from that?” I ask. “I’ve drops in my eyes and I can’t see properly.”

The girl smiles and leans over to select the coins from my hand. She opens the till and I lift my tray to walk away.

“You’ve twenty pence to get,” she says.

I set down the tray and take the coin from the girl and say thank you.

“You’re welcome,” she says and smiles.

I sit alone at a table with six chairs. Two paramedics sit at the table beside me. The fat one has a huge breakfast in front of him with a large pool of brown sauce on the plate beside his sausages. My eggs taste thin; they’ve been prepared without salt or pepper. It’s what hospitals do now to make the food healthier. I’m supposed to add my own seasoning, to taste, but I can’t tell where the condiments are placed and the room is a blare: I should have asked the girl when I was at the till. I finish the thin eggs and the toast and sit starrng out the window not thinking about my vision. After daydreaming for more than an hour my eyesight seems to be a little better so I walk outside to the smoking area at the side of the building and light a cigarette. The girl from the ground floor reception is there too; smoking. I take a puff from my cigarette and notice she has closed the button that popped open. I wanted to mention the button when I was at the desk earlier this morning but I was too shy. I ask her what time is it. She checks her watch and tells me it is 10.35AM. I decide I may just make it on time for the interview so I finish my cigarette and walk back inside and across the lobby to the exit. On my way out of the main doors I misjudge the step and fall down, crashing my knee against the concrete. The pain is instant and I know I have done damage. The girl from the ground floor reception runs out to check how I am. She can see how much pain I’m in and tells me not to move. She comes back with a wheelchair and a doctor and they gently lift me onto the seat. The pain is terrible and I let out a shriek.

“You’re ok, sir,” the girl from the ground floor reception says. She puts her hand on my shoulder and leaves it there as they wheel me back inside. The doctor carefully examines my swollen knee and says I will need an x-ray. I explain I have a job interview and ask how long the x-ray will take. The doctor looks at me and pauses; he tells me I will have to wait my turn. After the x-ray the girl from the ground floor reception comes by and asks me if I would like a coffee while I wait for the results. She also brings me a chocolate bar and sits with me while I wait. We chat about stuff and I tell her about the job interview. She says she’s sorry I missed it and it sounds like a really good job. She lives with her small dog in an apartment close to the hospital and has worked there for ten years. She says she loves her job and couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

The results come back and I have broken bones and damaged ligaments. I will need an operation today and will stay in hospital for a couple of days to recover. The girl from the ground floor reception visits me on the ward during her lunch break. She says she hopes I get better soon. She visits me the following day and on the day of my discharge. She walks with me to my car and tells me not to rush and to put my weight onto the crutches. We exchange telephone numbers and a single kiss and she puts the crutches on the back seat.



## *contributors*

**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.

**Reggie Chamberlain-King** is a Whitehead-based writer, broadcaster, and humble savant. His first novel was received warmly by the back of a drawer. He also makes regular appearances on public transport. He is author of *Weird Belfast* and *Weird Dublin* (Blackstaff) and stories of the strange and uncanny for Swan River Press.

**Kelly Creighton's** (Editor) debut novel *The Bones of It* (Liberties Press) was nominated for the Kate O'Brien Award, and selected as San Diego Book Review's 2015 Novel of the Year. Runner up and shortlisted for numerous fiction and poetry prizes. Her short story collection, *Bank Holiday Hurricane*, will be published in 2017. @KellyCreighton

**Annie Coyle Martin** was born and raised in Cavan, immigrating to Canada in 1957. She's been telling stories all her life and continues to at 83. Her three novels (*The Music of What Happens*, *To Know the Road* and *Between Two Dusks*) were inspired by her Irish heritage.

**Alistair Graham** is completing his third book of poetry and first book of short stories. He lives and works in Belfast. Previously published in A New Ulster, Crannog, Shift Magazine, The Open Mouse, The SHOp, numerous anthologies and long-listed for the Desmond O'Grady Poetry competition.

**Geraldine McCarthy** lives in West Cork. She has been writing flash and short stories for about a year now. Her humorous flash fiction 'Lesson Plans' was published in The Fable Online (July 2016).

**Debbie (DJ) McCune** was born in Belfast and grew up in Carrickfergus. Debbie read Theology at Trinity College, Cambridge but mostly just read lots of books. She is currently Head of Religious Studies in an Integrated Secondary School. She lives with her husband, daughter and two cats with seven legs between them.

**Bernie McQuillan.** In 2015, her short stories were runner up in Emerald Street, shortlisted in Creative Writing.ie & UK in February and March, long listed in the Fish Flash Fiction Award and published in Woman's Way magazine. Her work has also been published in The Incubator (Issues 5&6 ), Spontaneity (Issue 9) and the Birmingham Arts Journal.

**Mark Mayes'** debut novel, "The Gift Maker", publishes February 2017, with Urbane Publications. He has published numerous stories and poems in magazines and anthologies, including the celebrated Unthology series (Unthank Books). @Mark\_J\_Mayes  
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**Dermot O'Sullivan** is from Dublin. He studied English Literature in Trinity College, Dublin. His work has been published in journals including *Causeway/Cabhsair* and *Fence*. He currently lives in Brazil.

**Audrey Quinn** loves writing flash fiction and short stories, and she is also working on a composite novel set in the West of Ireland. She is currently undertaking a Masters in Creative Writing with the University of Edinburgh.

**Brian Sheehan** writes short fiction and poetry. He comes from a farm in Borris, Co. Carlow, in the shadow of Mount Leinster. He now lives in Dublin. His stories have previously appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction*.

**Jack Sheehan** is a writer and photographer from Dublin. He recently completed an MPhil in Creative Writing at Trinity College Dublin. His work has appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman*. He is currently working on a collection of short stories and a play.  
<https://twitter.com/YuleGoat> <https://www.instagram.com/jackosiochain/>

**Neil Slevin** is a 26-year-old writer from Co. Leitrim. An English teacher, in 2015 he returned to university to complete an MA in Writing at NUI Galway. Neil's poetry has been published by *The Galway Review* and *Boyne Berries*, as well as numerous international journals, including *Scarlet Leaf Review* and *Artificium: The Journal*.

**Rebecca Spicer** is originally from Michigan, USA. She moved to Galway Ireland in 2015 and studied at the National University of Ireland — Galway in the Writing (MA) Program. Her plans are to live in Galway and continue a career in writing.

**Morna Sullivan** is a member of Coney Island Writers Group. She was the Divine poetry competition prizewinner. Morna is also published in *The Launchpad* and *Celtic Life International* magazine. <https://www.facebook.com/mornawriter/>  
<http://mornawriter.blogspot.co.uk/> <https://twitter.com/mornawriter>

**Clíodhna Walsh** is from Waterford and is a recent graduate of English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin. She has just begun to write and this is her first published piece.  
[www.twitter.com/\\_\\_clíodhna](http://www.twitter.com/__clíodhna).

**Marie Walsh** has 1 husband (1 is enough!), 2 children (1 year and 12 years – just to keep her life interesting!) and 3 cats (don't get her started!). By day Marie is a Lecturer with Limerick Institute of Technology and is doing a Doctorate in Social Science. By night she is a singer songwriter. Marie loves poetry and dabbling with words.

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*interview:* DJ McCune

*essays:* Annie Coyle Martin. Marie Walsh.

*fiction:* Mark Mayes. Clíodhna Walsh. Neil Slevin. Reggie Chamberlain-King. Geraldine McCarthy. Audrey Quinn. Rebecca Spicer. Brian Sheehan. Morna Sullivan. Bernie McQuillan. Jack Sheehan. Dermot O'Sullivan. Alistair Graham.