



the incubator

issue 5 | fiction | memoir



the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

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issue 5

call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(June 2015)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 6

(due to be published in September 2015)

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

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

Guidelines are at

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Please send any reviews or queries to

editor.theincubator@gmail.com

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editorial

HERE WE ARE, BACK AROUND TO THE MEMOIR ISSUE AND CELEBRATING ONE YEAR OF being online. Our public launch this time will be part of the Belfast Book Festival, which we are thrilled about.

Claire has spoken to Belfast-born writer Paul McVeigh about his journey to writing his wonderful, warm and poignant novel, *The Good Son*. It's a fascinating interview and the book itself a must-read!

We have a range of stunning short stories to delve into and thought-provoking flash fiction to stop you in your tracks, and of course it's exciting to have the chance to bring memoir to our readers once again. There is something special about being allowed into a writer's reality.

Elizabeth Dass has reviewed the new short story collection, *Love on the Road 2015*, edited by Sam Trantum and Lois Kapila.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Paul McVeigh

WHILE THERE ARE MANY WRITERS WHO DEDICATE THEMSELVES TO CREATING SHORT stories with no intention of writing a novel, those who *do* publish a book, often come from a short story background. For London-based author, Paul McVeigh, this is certainly true, as he's well known on the short story scene – both as writer and competition judge. Indeed, McVeigh's debut novel, *The Good Son*, which was published in April this year, actually grew out of a short story, and has proved a big hit with critics and readers alike. The story centres on young Mickey Donnelly, who's growing up in Belfast during the Troubles. Mickey has more important things on his mind however – like going to big school and trying to escape Belfast and not end up like his da...

"With Mickey – he was just there," says McVeigh. "I didn't have to think about it. From the moment I decided I wanted to write, the story was already there from things I'd seen, heard, read.

"Something that's always got on my nerves as a reader is books that are really lyrical about childhood - the narrator speaking in adult language, but as a child. I wanted this kid to be real. I wanted to create a really working-class kid who gets involved in certain, perhaps risky, things because they're all around him."

Describing his young protagonist as "a bit arrogant" and someone who excludes himself, McVeigh, by using a child narrator, brings poignancy to his tale through the dialogue between author and reader.

"You and I are going to watch this kid try really *really* hard to be loved," he says. "The relationship with his mum, I think, is really interesting. I'm a great believer in writing truth. I want you to taste the emotional truth in everything I write. I think as an author you need to have a philosophy. Personally, I won't write anything that I wouldn't say on my life, 'that's true'."

Having originally written *The Good Son*, which takes place over the course of Mickey's summer holidays, as a short story, McVeigh says he wanted to be very sure of his first novel. "I don't think I'm good enough yet to write something I'm not sure of," he says.

The Good Son is, therefore, partly inspired by McVeigh's own experiences of growing up in Troubles Belfast although, he hastens to point out, he's not Mickey. That's fiction. Born and bred in Belfast however, McVeigh has a wealth of memories to draw from of life in the city at that time, which is brilliantly brought to life in his novel.

"There's also a lot of stuff in the book about TV and how important it was, especially for someone like Mickey," he says. "He's a kind of TV kid, but a bit more real and rough around the edges. He thinks he's really smart."

Like most novels though, *The Good Son*, went through a fair few drafts before it made it to publication stage, with a huge chunk of the story dramatically changed along the way.

Indeed, Mickey's mum, now a central character in the book, originally barely appeared, while McVeigh hints at a much darker ending before, but won't reveal just what that was.

"The book went through very many drafts and changes," he says. "In the final changes, I took out the whole second half - all the horrible things that happened; that didn't happen. There was another really important character and the mum wasn't in it so much originally. There was also one major plot line removed..."

With such drastic cuts, what then, was the thinking behind the changes, and were they led by McVeigh or his publisher?

"I wanted to say – there's hope," he says simply.

McVeigh's short stories, as he readily admits, tend to be highly emotive and fully charged, but in fact, his earlier writing was rooted in comedy, which is threaded throughout *The Good Son*. Having studied English and Theatre at Coleraine's University of Ulster, McVeigh graduated with a desire to work in theatre, which he subsequently did with much success. Co-founding the Armada Theatre Festival and Scarecrow Theatre Company, McVeigh helped to produce around six plays a year for his company, and was soon running fringe events for the Belfast Festival.

After a few years however, he moved to London, where he got involved with an agency for comedians.

“I started off as a director, but quickly became a writer,” he says. “I had shows at the Edinburgh Festival and one of the comedians I wrote for won Time Out’s Comedian of the Year.”

McVeigh’s move to short story writing grew from this work quite unexpectedly, when someone who’d enjoyed one of his shows asked if he’d ever written prose – which he hadn’t.

“He was doing an anthology and he asked me to submit,” says McVeigh. “So, I sat down and thought I’d give it a go. I hadn’t written anything like that since school. I’d only written plays or comedy scripts until that point, but I knew it was an opportunity I didn’t want to miss.”

Deciding to write his story in the voice of a little boy, McVeigh was delighted when his work was accepted for publication in the anthology.

“They then asked me to go on tour with the book,” he adds. “It was also reviewed on The Metro and mine was the only story that was picked out, so... I decided I was going to write a novel! And it was going to be about this boy...

“What I realised when I’d finished was - I’d written a story about a boy having summer holidays and how he’d grown up. But it was like a series of short stories. Then my laptop got corrupted, so I lost it and had to start it from scratch...”

Understandably, after losing his work, McVeigh didn’t write for quite a long time, instead, teaching and producing more plays. When he *did* pick up his pen again however, he rewrote the book and very quickly hooked the interest of an agent.

“I sent the manuscript to him and it took him ages to get back to me,” says McVeigh. “He said he loved the writing but that it felt like a succession of stories. I rewrote it, but never heard from him again!”

Following a period of travelling, it wasn’t until about eight years later that McVeigh returned to his novel and decided he wanted to get stuck back into writing. He also set up his blog, which now sees around 40,000 hits every month.

“I went to every single writing course I could go to,” he says. “I started searching for obvious avenues of being published, and found out how other people did it. Then, instead of keeping all that information for myself, I started sharing it. The blog became huge, with about 40,000 people now visiting it every month. From that, I’ve been able to interview authors like George Saunders.”

As he immersed himself in studying the art of fiction, McVeigh began writing again - quite literally, sentence by sentence.

"When I started again it was really really slowly," he says. "For the first six months I was probably writing a sentence a day. Hemingway, as I later discovered, said you should always aim for 'one true sentence.'"

"I don't find it easy to write something without it meaning something. I can forgo a sentence with beauty, but it has to have meaning. I also don't like sending my work out, so I don't really enter competitions."

Indeed, although he's now associate director of London's short story salon, The Word Factory, when McVeigh first dropped by, he went as a photographer rather than a writer.

"I decided to bring my new camera to the first event," he says. "I went for four months before I told them I wrote! I took pictures and I learned and I had so much fun. And now I'm associate director of that. It's been an amazing journey."

"I went to all the classes and put the novel at the bottom of the cupboard. I also wrote a couple of flash fictions and used them to apply for bursaries and get into advanced fiction courses."

All of this learning obviously paid off, as McVeigh – now also director of the London Short Story Festival – was subsequently published in various literary publications and anthologies. He's also since written for and had his work read on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio 5, as well as seeing success at last with *The Good Son*.

Describing his short stories as "very intense," McVeigh says that he writes them for himself, as he did with *The Good Son*, and that stories can incubate for years before he commits them to paper.

"When I started on the idea for *Tickles* (commissioned for BBC Radio 4), I was about 22," he says. "I picked up ideas and images over the years. The art of writing is being able to put those things together."

"I write in my head with short stories and then commit them to paper."

As for *why* he writes, McVeigh is very clear about that, and says that every writer should know why they write – be it for pleasure, accolade or art.

He adds: "I write because it's art."

Interview by Claire Savage

short story

Sandra Coffey

Bookmark

RODDY DOYLE HAD MY ATTENTION UNTIL I TURNED ONTO PAGE 185. THERE IT WAS; A supermarket receipt from the last reader of his book. I put Paula Spencer to one side. The folded receipt caught a slight breeze and landed fully open on the kitchen tiles. It willed me to pick it up. Take a look, I heard it say. So I did.

At 5.15pm of a Monday evening in March, you bought apple crumble and Alpro Yofu Smooth Yoghurt along with three courgettes. You could have earned 10 points on your loyalty card if you had one. I pictured you, on your way to apologize for something. Another weekend of discontent had passed and you were hoping for a better week ahead. Mondays are always good to start afresh, so the experts say.

You sat outside your car at the shop in Kinvara and pieced together what you were going to say to Ann when you got home. How sorry you were and how you've learnt a lesson. You should have known better. It took a while for you to get to grips with the routine of raising a child but Emily was no bother at all. It was all about routine, and yours and hers blended together without much effort. You smiled when you thought about her and her excited view of the world. You wanted no more but Ann wanted one more; company for the other.

The view was something else. You wondered why there weren't more landscape painters in the area. Painting from photos now you supposed. You were no dab hand with the brushes yourself. You used to take Emily on photo trips on Saturday mornings, leaving her mother in bed for a lie-in. 'Picky-poops' she called them as you placed the Peppa Pig camera around her neck. You'd spend the rest of the afternoon looking through photos of flowers, trees, clouds and upside down cows and sheep. Pity you hadn't realised she was holding the camera the wrong way round. It wasn't until Pete at the factory said he must frame some photos of his children that you got the idea to do the same with the photos Emily had taken.

On her eighth birthday, you pulled the chord that opened a red curtain. 'Ta da!' It unveiled her photo exhibition. You herded everyone upstairs to the landing. You were careful to do this after she'd blown the candles out on her chocolate mousse cake. The prized politician had come to do the honours. The photos of flowers were there and so too were the upside down cows and sheep. There was a surprisingly clear close up of a Small Skipper butterfly. His brown rusty wings caught the light beautifully. You hoped she would fill the remaining blank frames as she got older. 3,2,1 and the curtain opened. Emily's friends used it as a cape afterwards, Batman and Robin style.

It was days like those that made you want to start all over. 'Let's start from that day,' you would say to Ann and off you'd go again. It would go grand for a while until the first blip. Emily got into a row in secondary school. On further investigation, she was being bullied because of her height. 'Slutscraper' they called her because she was a hit with all the guys for her endless legs that led upwards to her huge brown eyes and Hollywood hair. The rows kicked off again, then the silence and then the separate rooms for weeks.

You drove the 20 minutes to your house and pulled into the driveway. You tried to think of a point where you'd like to start over from but nothing came to mind. You've picked all the good points that were there to pick from. They didn't lead anywhere except back to the same destination.

You dropped the apple crumble beside the kettle and placed the Alpro Smooth in the fridge to chill it up some more. The courgettes were left in the bag. You decided to carve up the crumble onto two plates. You never surprised Emily with crumble. She'll probably eat it at 3am and pretend she never touched it. Teenagers.

'Don't start now,' Ann said. 'I'm tired.'

She was always tired.

'I'll leave this here so.'

You placed the crumble on the breakfast counter and walked over to pick up the TV remote. Emily's door closed. She put her headphones in at this point.

Your sister warned you against pull chords in a bedroom. She emailed you a link to a child's death in Australia. You didn't heed her. There wasn't enough time in the day to do all the jobs that needed to be done around the house. Your second child Arthur was found suspended from the green chord of his bedroom window blind. It was a Friday morning. You were at work. Ann found him. Now there is a lot of time and no jobs to be done.

Arthur was trying to look at the moon. You knew this because it was all he had spoken about that week. 'What does the moon do all day?' 'Does the moon have any friends in heaven?' Questions Emily never asked. You googled what does the moon do all day on your phone. How long he had been hanging in mid-air, you thought but dare not say it out loud. How he would have thought to use the pull chord to pull himself up onto the window sill. Did he think he was going to fly to the moon? Four-year-olds could imagine anything.

Arthur was named after Ann's father. You stood at the doorway to your own house. Neighbours whispered with teacups in their hands and your sister lathered on the butter for the sandwiches. There was no mayonnaise. Arthur Senior looked at you like an animal he'd considered selling at a mart. He took over the funeral arrangements.

That was when it began. That's when you think it began. Or is that when after reading stories online that you realised that's when it definitely began? You put it down to grief, at first. It was never physical, though sometimes you wished it were. The constant bang of knives on the table, plates being hammered back onto the shelf, doors rattled on their hinges, chairs scraped lines through the wooden floor she said was your cheap and nasty choice. She sent you links to stories about neglectful fathers and followed up with the prison sentence they got. At the Christmas party, she told your work colleagues about the time you lost your virginity with your hairy mickey. You trimmed it for her. On the morning of your interview for promotion, she burnt the iron right through your lucky shirt. You got the promotion but handed it back after a month. You didn't feel like you could lead a team. You couldn't mind a four-year-old. You must be made suffer for what you didn't do. 'Take down the blind, Mike'. The cemetery was lit by starlight. You reached into your coat pocket and there it was again, the green chord that hung your son.

Adam Bowenga from Nigeria was the same age as Arthur. Help Adam drink clean water and get an education. You saw his face in the Irish Independent. Another piece of your life that you'd left behind in this book. You rang the number, wrote down more details and waited. You had to pick the right moment to present this idea to Ann.

'Why don't we help Adam in Arthur's memory?'

You pictured Adam on the first day of school. You imagined his father's face as Adam transformed into a young man. It's what suits do, even to a four-year-old. You could hear them do the homework in the evenings. Spellings. Maths. Ten times tables. Reading. You hoped his dad might read him something about Finn Mac Cumhaill or Queen Maeve and the Brown Bull of Cooley. You pictured yourself meeting Adam when he turned 18.

'That's the joy of having a child with no commitments,' was Ann's reaction as she tore up the leaflet and slammed it into the stove. You looked at Adam's face as it disappeared into the flames. Emily couldn't wait to get away. Once she had her Leaving Cert, she would put her escape plan in action. Her diary said as much. She had a plan. The day before she was about to reveal it, you begged her not to tell her mother. Emily was going to work on a cruise ship as a performance artist, in other words as a lap dancer. It was a step towards modelling and it paid good.

Everyone had a plan, even Ann. She was taking a two week break to Italy with girlfriends. She told you as she was walked out the door.

'You got what you wanted. What you wanted.' That was what she said as she left in a minibus, the laughter and cackling the like you'd only heard off a hen night brigade.

As I walked into the library, I asked librarian Katherine if she'd ever found anything left behind in books.

‘A list of unwanted wedding guests,’ she said with a smile, like she was happy I’d asked such a question. It had the names and addresses of unwanted guests, with reasons why they were not going to be invited. ‘Too mean,’ and ‘Started a row at friends’ wedding’ were some of the reasons listed. Another book had a cheese recipe left in it. It started a small business venture.

I placed your receipt onto page 185, the page you stopped at in the book. You’d only another 41 pages to go. Katherine placed the book on the trolley.

‘Anything else?’ she asked.

D. W. Lewis

Arrowhead

IT WAS MOST LIKELY A CHROMOSOMAL ABNORMALITY, TOO MANY OR NOT ENOUGH, more bad luck than anything else, these things just happened some times. She got the impression the doctor was talking to fill the dead air, mouth on autopilot. The private consulting room shone in a way that a public hospital couldn't – gleaming chrome, polished wood, and a thick, noiseless carpet. The room dared patients to make a mess. Those with boils, abscesses, warts, tumours, eructing guts, bleeding anuses, suppurating penises, unpleasing symptoms of advanced bodily decay, not welcome here. One minute the doctor was behind the desk, the next beside the couch, then over at the dispensing cabinet – he could move this doctor as well as talk. He prowled the consulting room like a gynaecological big cat. His fingers had been ice jabs in her vagina. Of course, he had talked while invading her, as if the relentless patter would take her mind off it – talked about the weather, his expedition sea kayaking at the weekend, his thoughts on her line of business, like she gave a *fuck*. Maybe it worked with other women, but it didn't with her. All she could think about was the cold latex fingers, how unnecessary they were, pointless probing, she already knew the baby was gone, had ceased to be, to beat, inside her.

"Early days," he sympathised. "More common than you might think."

She nodded. She thought he had been about to wheel out another well-worn platitude – she could always try again – but, remembering her age, had managed to stop himself. Fortunately, the next cliché was quick to his lips.

"Let nature take its course."

He recommended Paracetamol, a hot water bottle for the cramps and to rest up at home, no question of going to work for a day or two.

“Even if you think the company won’t run without you.”

She nodded again and, taking the attempt at a joke as her cue, stood up to leave. The receptionist behind the curved space-age desk in the waiting area was more tactful than her boss.

“Is there anyone you’d like me to call?”

She must have looked confused.

“To pick you up, I mean,” the girl added kindly.

For some reason she thought of her father, sitting outside a nightclub in a beat-up, rusted Datsun, waiting patiently to run his only daughter home. He’d share a cigarette with her on the journey. Sometimes they’d stop for chips at McNulty’s. Twenty years dead and still she missed him.

“No... No, it’s fine,” she said slowly.

It was early. The busy road outside would have plenty of cabs. She chose the stairs over the lift. The old stone steps were in contrast to the ultra-modern interior of the consulting room. How many feet tramping up and down over the years had it taken to round out the edges? All of a sudden, she was standing in dusty sunlight and traffic rancour. The reek of fish from a fishmonger’s nearby made the background nausea surge to the fore. She wanted to put her hands on her knees and vomit in the gutter. Instead, she moved on up the street, pausing outside one of those 24-hour supermarkets with a stand of fruit and vegetables on the pavement outside. Plums, peaches, nectarines lay in cardboard trays, the curved fruits soft and pulpy, over-ripe, a thousand swollen stoned bellies spoiling in the afternoon sun. She put up her hand and hailed a taxi with its light on.

The cab sped along the riverfront, headed towards the newly built financial centre, where she had her city apartment. It was handy for the office. Weekends, when she had a free one, she spent at her house in the country. The car neared the locations where their relationship had played out – bars, restaurants, hotel rooms – all contained in a single, square mile of high density, human settlement. She tried to view the situation from a distance, in the manner she treated business deals, coolly, dispassionately. At the outset she

had made a vow. I will not make a fool of myself. I will not let him make a fool out of me.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she barked at the driver. “Turn around, we’re going west.”

As the streets shuttled past, she shook her head sorrowfully. Had she made a fool of herself after all?

“You want to take me out for dinner?”

She had laughed at the idea, at the impertinence, the casual way he’d said it.

“Sure, why not?”

So many reasons, like fifteen years her junior, a married man, and an employee. Yet his bravado had appealed to the risk-taker inside her, an aspect of her personality more prevalent in her youth and the early days of the business. Now, taking risks scared the shit out of the shareholders.

“We’ll see,” she’d said. They both knew it was a yes.

Their first date restaurant specialised in fish. They both ordered white bait as a starter. The plates came piled high, with a hunk of lemon. He crushed the lemon with ease, without even thinking. She was more circumspect, watching her nails, which she’d had done for the occasion though she knew he’d care nothing for such things. The droplets of lemon juice showered tails, eyes, silver bodies of the small fry. She thought of it as an offering – a sprinkle of blood, a dusting of incense – to initiate the ritual of flesh eating, of consuming another creature, hundreds of other creatures, whole. The meal was also a rite, a means of starting something. She went along with his chatter and tried to hide her impatience. His bashfulness was quite endearing. Often she pondered the paradox of modern lovemaking. She was rich, powerful, not unattractive, and independent. In older times, she would have been seen in matrimonial terms, even in her forties, as, to coin a phrase of the serial writers, *a splendid match*. She would have been able to negotiate a marriage in terms she understood and valued – portion, property, contract. The relationship would then follow under parameters agreed at the outset by both parties. Children were part of the deal, of

course, non-negotiable. Love was useful, an oil to grease the wheels, but not essential. Nowadays, things were somehow harder to pin down. Matters of the heart were inevitably more transient, illusory even, than matters of business, a fact she hated.

By the end of the meal, the transaction was completed, an agreement reached without words, through eye contact and simple gestures – fingers lingering on a cuff link, a spoonful of dessert offered and accepted. For the first and last time, she let him pay the bill.

Theirs had been a very modern love affair, a relationship of flat surfaces and little depth, she conjectured as the taxi paused in traffic, caused by a crowd spilling out of a matinee show at a West End theatre. She watched the tourists stumbling out of the stairwells, trying to find their bearings, in contrast to the confident city dwellers heading on for drinks and supper. They hadn't managed the theatre, or any other cultural outings for that matter. Their affair had consisted of evenings in hotel rooms, hushed dinners, and occasional stay-overs at her apartment. Inevitably her thoughts turned to the bedroom. They had a hotel they used, near the office, one of those boutique establishments, rooms with gaudy prints and outré vases. The staff were discreet, she had an account. Their usual room was on the tenth floor, a corner room, with large floor-to-ceiling windows on the external walls, looking out on the City. He liked to sit on a stool and gaze out at the skyscrapers, lit up like monstrous Christmas trees. She would remove his shirt and rub out the knots in his shoulders. At the time, it had felt like being in a film, that her actions and movements, her dialogue even, were stylised, written and directed by someone else.

"I could look at that view all night," he'd say invariably of what lay beyond the windows. "It never stays the same."

She had found the naiveté touching. She had promised to take him to her place in the country where the sky was dark and the stars could be seen properly. The constellations moved too, wheeling around the Pole star, in a manner that was far more awe-inspiring than a handful of parvenu skyscrapers and London traffic. But she'd never got around to it, her instinct for self-preservation, to have a place alone, winning out. After the sex, he liked

to fall asleep watching television, another habit she'd indulged. One night it was a programme on astronomy, specifically on the formation of red stars, fronted by that presenter with a boy band haircut and hard-to-place accent. She listened as the presenter explained that all the carbon molecules in his body, in her body, in everybody's bodies, were once part of a red giant star in the process of blowing itself apart. She thought about that now. The potassium, sodium, magnesium in his seminal fluid, the carbon in the genetic material in his sperm, her egg, the iron in her blood, all of those atoms, were created in a star billions of years ago, and blown apart by an explosion of a magnitude impossible to comprehend. And yet, here they were, coming back together, mixing, fusing, assembling deep within her. Had she wished it to happen? She had taken no precautions. He hadn't asked. She knew she wasn't too old, not yet. Her mother's last child, her little sister, had arrived at the age of forty-five. A woman normally so calculating, so careful to weigh up the pros and cons, she'd deliberately left things to chance. If she had thought about it, she would have rationalised the situation, would have come up with a hundred reasons why none of it, a child in particular, was a good idea, and made him use protection. *Protection*. What a way to describe it. Protection from another future... The reason she hadn't bothered to think about it, she could admit to herself now, was that some part of her had desired a baby, had wanted to begin a new life with a new life.

"We're here, love."

The taxi had stopped outside St Pancras station. The driver's offer to help with her bag nearly made her cry. People had empathy sometimes, picking up on signals in a manner which was hard to explain. Like the way her sister called on the train, completely out of the blue, a couple of months since they'd spoken. How could she possibly, half way around the world, have sensed her distress?

"Just thought I'd give my old sis a call and see how you are."

"I'm fine."

"You sound tired?"

"Just a hard week at work, that's all. I'm heading to the country."

Although she didn't tell her, the call helped a little. Before they got cut off by the train entering a tunnel, they talked about their father, about making a trip to his grave when her sister got back.

She turned off the phone and closed her eyes, willing the train's repetitive, swaying motion to ease her to sleep and away from the pain in her womb. As the train headed west through the dusky light, she remembered standing on top of a hill, some battlefield or other, her father kneeling beside her, their heads at roughly the same level. He was telling her about English bowmen, how they had fired their longbows from this very spot. His straggly hair was blowing in the wind, swept over one side of his face. It looked funny. She giggled. He turned his head to hers, serious for a moment, and she was sorry she had laughed.

"You are my arrow, you know that?"

He held his left hand out in front of him and drew the other back to his cheek, as if tightening a bowstring.

"Shot into the future..."

His fingers flew open and his left hand twitched upward, like an arrow loosed into the air. He only envisaged the arrow as rising, never falling, of course, which was impossible, but before the memory could crash to earth, she did indeed fall asleep.

The night was warm enough to sit out in the back garden with a glass of red wine – that hardly mattered now. After a while, she left the comfort of the padded seat on the decking and lay on her back on the grass. The smell of the damp sod comforted her. The sky was clear of cloud. Satellites passed overhead, moving dots of light, which hadn't been there when she was a girl. Her hand snuck under her jumper and cupped her belly. It took a while to find Sagittarius, low in the sky, towards the southern horizon, lying between Scorpius and Ophiuchus to the west and Capricornus to the east. Names of some of the stars stuck in her mind, astronomy another hobby of her father's. Media. Ascella. Borealis. Nunki. Tau. Alnasl, the arrowhead, pointed at Antares, the red heart of the scorpion. And Mira, another red

giant, the astonishing, the wonderful...

“Mira,” she whispered. “That would have been your name.”

What use such speculation now? The light she saw had left the stars before she was born. The stars were dying too, the galaxies in which they existed moving apart from each other at ever-increasing speed, systems within systems within systems, and then one day, the television presenter had surmised, after all that energy and effort, the universe would simply collapse in on itself. She pressed her fingertips against the grass, as if to push away the fear of the infinite. The contractions had stilled at long last.

“Sleep tight,” she breathed silently and let her mind wander the vast, empty spaces of the universe, between her father and the future, between the planets and the stars.

Valerie Sírr

Robbed

SO I SWUNG ON TO THE MAIN ROAD FOR LARNE, NAILED THE THROTTLE UP INTO FOURTH, fifth, sixth – out onto the open stretch of road. I felt the power of her under me.

I backed off to 60 and headed for my usual run up Shane's Hill.

Traffic got heavy with lorries, cars dragging caravans – on their way up the coast for a long weekend or heading to Larne to catch the ferry to Scotland. I wove in and out of the slower moving lanes. The cars with the moany wives and kids in the back put paid to me getting any pleasure from my ride.

I made for home before the turn off.

I'm building a chopper to take her place. I got most of the parts off eBay cheap just before Shorts let me go. I was out in the garage building a jig for the frame waiting for Peter to arrive for his weekend visit when he cycled in and skidded to a stop in front of me.

'Alright?' I said.

He sat there smirking with his arms crossed over his skinny chest. 'D'ya know what you're doin', Da?'

I threw him a rag. 'Get stuck in then.' Gave him some wee parts to clean – the chain, the sprockets.

After a bit he said, 'M'hands are gettin' all red and sore.'

'Big girl's blouse,' I said. 'You missed a bit there.'

'I missed nothin'.'

We were like a married couple picking faults with each other over the washing-up.

I set the parts out on the bench and he watched me get it all dimensioned up – where the engine mountings are going, the angle of the rake. He's quick for a twelve-year-old. I would have told him how people used to build choppers in the seventies and eighties,

but I've seen his eyes glaze before when I mention the 'dark ages'.

We went inside and watched the Cookstown 100. The camera and the whine of the bikes sped me down country roads like I was there. One of the racers came off – rider and bike separated, then crashed like two lovers after passion. He rolled and picked himself up.

'He's class,' Peter said.

When it was over I stuck my helmet under my arm and stepped up for my trophy like the riders. I fell back on the couch and nudged Peter, but he never laughed.

'Did you ever crash, Da? Ma says Andy's a bit crazy on the bike. He done a highside. He's always tellin' me stories.'

'Not me, son,' I told him.

I didn't tell him I'm lucky to be alive with some of the antics I got up to when I was young.

I asked how his Ma was.

'Grand,' he said, 'Lookin' forward to Lanzarote. Andy's bringin' us.'

He tells me too much about Andrew. Takes after his Ma.

He was fiddling with his iPod.

'What'ya listenin' to there?' I said.

'You wouldn't know it.'

'I used to a bit of a "Rocker" myself, son.'

'A "Rocker"?' he rolled his eyes at me.

I didn't tell him I used to get into a few scrapes with the East Belfast Mods. I went to school with a few of them which was a bit awkward. Nothing that went on was carried on in school mind – it was kept for the back streets later on.

'See, the eighties Rockers were a lot of things: heavy metal, rockabilly, punks...'

He put his earphones in.

'Peter!' I shouted. 'I was telling ya somethin'!'

'Never heard ya!' he said, yanking his earphones out.

I asked did he want a doughnut. He said no, so I got myself one and sat down to eat it. He just looked at me and shook his head slowly.

I took myself out to the garage.

After a while he followed me out. I showed him how to work degreasing fluid

through the grooves with a paintbrush to remove any muck and grease.

He stood there pulling bristles out of the paintbrush. 'Ma says Andy'll be doin' you a favour buyin' your bike.'

Andy knows I'm broke. Fuck Andy. I said nothing.

He kept fidgeting with the brush.

'Do you know what time it is, son?' I said.

He gave me a long look – his ma's 'you-need-a-kick-up-the-arse' look.

'It's time you were in bed. Away to bed wi'ya.'

He cocked his head at me, then he looked away and threw the brush on the table.

'Right, I'm away.'

I asked one of the neighbours to keep an eye on him.

I yanked on my leather trousers, my boots, my heavy jacket. The jacket was a bit stiff at first, but now the creases fold around my shape – fat fucker shape, you could say, and it feels like it's part of me. My usual ritual then: do up zips and catches. Slide key into ignition. Straddle her where she stands at the garage door. Pull on helmet and gloves. Kick up side stand.

She fired into life. I blipped the throttle a few times to hear that note, so aggressive yet so sweet, coming out of the race exhaust. Adrenalin pumped. I kicked her into first and wound the throttle back. I was away. That bike of mine can do 150, maybe 160 at a push, but don't get me wrong, I'm no racer – I know my limits.

I coasted out of my estate, the houses and freshly-cut grass all dark and sleek. It was a humid night, mid-June, grand for riding into the wind.

Attacking the bends on Shane's Hill, I let go and nailed the throttle again, leaving the moors in my wake.

Andrew sent his mate around to see the bike. A lorry driver from Ballymena.

'Howya doin'?' he said, 'Believe you're sellin' the bike?

'Might be,' I said.

'She could do with a bit of a clean-up.'

He pointed out the wee dent on the tank, the wee scratch on the fairing where the bike had been in a crash. 'Fire her up there til I hear her goin'.'

When she started up he said, 'I'm here to deal. I'll give you fourteen hundred.'

'I hadn't even planned to sell her,' I said. 'You can see here she's not even MOTd nor nothin'.'

He jumped up from fourteen to fifteen.

I kept my mouth shut.

After a bit he said, 'Sixteen.'

I hummed and hawed.

Eventually he said, 'I'm offerin' sixteen fifty.'

I said, 'Give me seventeen hundred and you can have her.'

Later on Andrew came with him and another bloke in a white Transit van to pick her up. The Ballymena bloke manhandled her out of the garage and pushed her over to the back of the van. Andrew took my jacket from its hook in the garage. 'That's not a bad jacket you have there. Are ya sellin' it?'

That jacket of mine is a BKS. When times were good I splashed out over 1K for my kit.

'Sure you've no bike now,' he said. 'I'll give you fifty quid for it.'

'You must be fuckin' jokin',' I said.

They all pushed the bike up the ramp, hands all over her, touching her and pushing and shoving her, laughing and joking as they went. They tied her down, cushioning her with paint-stained dustsheets.

I ate another doughnut outside the Co-Op and bumped into Hammy from Shorts.

'Fancy a pint up at the club?' I said.

'Aye. But don't walk in with me. They'll think I'm goin' for a drink with m'Da.'

I told him to go and shite.

A good night was had with the lads from the Tool Room.

I decided to go home the long way. I walked past Andrew's house, knowing fine rightly my bike was in his garage while he was away in Lanzarote. Andrew's a soft biker –

he'll hardly ride her in the summer, never mind winter. While I was thinking this, I was down that side passage like a rat up a spout, cupping my hands on his dirty garage window in the moonlight. She's a looker, my bike, but I could see he hadn't washed or polished her.

Once inside, I stumbled across the broken window glass. Bits of it poked through the soles of my sneakers. I knocked over a stack of paint tins. The clatter made my heart jump.

In minutes I was strapping on Andrew's crappy lid. Fishing in my pocket for my spare key.

I straddled her on his driveway.

I soon reached my turn off. Braking and kicking her down the gears, I peeled off the slip road and on to Shane's Hill. I blasted along the half-mile stretch of country lane taking every bend in my stride: correct entry speed, wee nudge of counter-steer. Leaning over, gliding through until the exit point where I opened the throttle. The back wheel squirmed a bit trying to find some grip, then shot me out off one corner onto another bend. The sheer precision of it!

On again at a right auld lick, the noise of the engine screamed through the throaty exhaust. AC/DC were ringing in my head with fast machines and damn good women. I pictured my ex back in the day, her riding pillion, her body moving with mine around the same bends I was heading for now. I saw her spread out on a beach mat, sweaty Andrew beside her telling Peter his stupid stories.

As I neared the top of the hill the humid smell of slurry clung to me like a blanket.

I sped on. The cool night breeze worked its way around my neck and under the helmet. My headlight searched for my turning-in point.

The rear tyre slid under me.

I felt it grip again.

The bike shuddered. She shook violently. Sent me bolt upright then flung me hard, up and over. *Easy!* My brain told me not to resist. *Let go!* But my muscles immediately gripped.

I was away. It was like I was tasered. I heard the impact – the bike ripping through hedge, the whack of my helmet on hard ground. I was out of it.

I came to, lying on my back on the tarmac like I'd landed in another life. The road shifted. It

spun about me.

I closed my eyes and let go.

I came back. Heaviness. Then panic. Then pain. I moved my hands, then my feet, my arms, my legs. I pushed at the base of my helmet. My hand kept missing. I heard a guy say, 'Leave it, man. The ambulance will be here soon.'

I kept jabbing at the helmet.

'He shouldn't be movin',' another guy said. 'Have you seen the state of his bike?'

People stood about. One wee lad was the spit of Peter. He pointed his phone at me saying, 'He went over the top! Like somethin' on Moto GP!'

I felt high when he said that. I felt like my head had been cleaned out with degreaser, making room for someone better – a contender.

I aimed my hand in the direction of his phone. 'Need to...m'son...talk!'

I couldn't get my words straight. Heard myself sounding them out, bit-by-bit, like I was learning to speak for the first time.

A version of 'Robbed' was published in *The Irish Times* in 2012 as a flash fiction piece

Schira Lane

Sky Fall

EARLY ON A SATURDAY, IN A MILD AND STORMY MARCH, DAVE IS LOST BEHIND AN outstretched double page of the Financial Times. He bought the latest and what he calls the greatest Nespresso coffee machine during the week, and I'm standing looking out the back doors to the garden with my first expressed cup. It is Lungo, a smooth blend, and the coffee is steaming and sending a strong aroma of roasted beans across the kitchen. The mug is warm in my hands and one of eight a friend gave us for our wedding. The tip of the mug is coated in buff coloured varnish, like cream on an Irish coffee, and it glints in the light as the sun appears for the first time in weeks from behind the clouds. I do not care for the black and buff pottery design.

Dave turns a page and sighs and the paper makes a rasping sound. I wonder what he is sighing about and I picture a headline about a drop in the price of his investment shares. I doubt it is a book review or an artist's appraisal in the culture spread. I don't think he reads the culture pages, ever.

I have my back to him and in the garden all along the flowerbeds are brown leaves, leaves that fell in the autumn that I never raked away. I am the gardener here, and my lazy approach to winter annoys me as I watch the breeze catch behind them and blow them like litter across the grass. They rise in the air, sway and seem to dance in a glittering spiral. For a moment there is silence until the next gust whistles down and pushes the leaves again from behind. They rise and twist into little tornados and for a moment I think they'll stretch over the wall and head for town. But they lose their power and fall and scatter as a blanket of orange and brown over the clay.

The bed is at its worst in winter when the bare branches expose how poorly I planted. What should be a uniform line from high to low from the corner is a jagged formation of

irregular heights. Here and there are gaps between the twigs as if shrubs were pulled out and thrown away. The only green is on the Cotoneaster which has grown too high in the centre of the bed. It is a Cotoneaster without shape and I remind myself to prune it with the roses before St. Patrick's Day.

The coffee in the mug is hot and the pottery is smooth in the cusp of my hands. Blowing into the cup I catch a harsh waft of the bitter tang I didn't smell at first. It is lifting out of the creamy top as a sharp, hostile, fighting smell. I take a mouthful and suck into the back of my throat. I sniff for roasted tones but the bitter undercurrent is growing. It is so familiar, even with the percolated blend so new. I close my eyes and let the scent direct me. I twirl my wedding band and it scratches on the side of the cup.

I was on a plane, drifting in and out of sleep. I was over the Atlantic, with ear buds and an eye mask pushed like a hairband on top of my head. We were at ten thousand feet and brushing the coastline according to the monitor on the headrest in front. We were starting to descend. I felt stuffy and tired after the long flight. I dosed and my head bobbed and I shot up every now and then to admire my wedding band. It was the thinnest ring of diamond chips and beside the rock of my solitaire it was pretty and discrete. The fake tan was starting to crack and fade. As I reached for some hand cream I ran *Mrs. David Spratt* along my tongue one more time. I smiled squeezing out the cream, squeezing myself, and looked across at my new husband with a look of love.

He was snoring in the window seat beside me and I nudged him. As he woke his breath was stale from the espresso he had had after dinner and I covered his mouth. I gave him a mint. "Look out the window," I said to him when we were over the brown mountains of Brazil. Following his gaze I saw rolling hills falling in every direction, with Rio in the distance full of lights. I could just make out the glow of the art deco statue of Christ. It was like a suspended star in the night sky. But over the city there were just too many lights to resemble constellations. Even the bay was full of lights with cruise ships reflected on the water and I found it hard to count them as they dropped their anchors and battened down for the evening.

A child was crying in the seat in front of me and a woman spoke loudly in Portuguese. Behind me another was kicking and a sharp pain shot across my back. I was tipsy from the

wine and I took another sip from my plastic cup of coffee, before the hostess took the cup away. Coming into land I remember yawning and checking my legs for DVTs and wondering, should I wear the elastic stockings on the two hour transfer up the coast.

The plane jumped, rocked in the sky like a swing on a rope. Then it smoothed out and seemed to glide. But there was silence, a silence new to the flight and I felt something was missing. I wasn't sure but everything was quiet and still. I looked across at Dave but he wasn't looking out the window anymore. He wasn't looking at me. He had turned pale and for an unreligious man he had rosary beads, wherever he found them. Beads of sweat were on his upper lip and he was rocking. He was muttering into his hands with his eyes shut tight. Indeed all around me people were rocking like wound up metronomes set to a mechanic beat. The muttering grew in a frantic, urgent swell of whispered voices and I suppose it made up somewhat for the lack of engine noise I was missing. The oxygen masks fell and someone screamed.

The plane started to tilt in the sky, sway over and back like the leaves in the garden. Drifting, the bloody plane was drifting and all I wanted was the hum of an engine. I felt cold. I looked over the seats and up to the kitchen where the hostess was like a lifeguard in her inflated orange vest. I thought of the Titanic. I reached under my seat to grab my own vest and thinking I was inflating it, blew the whistle. I laughed then. I actually laughed just when I felt we could drop from the sky. It was like the time Mum's granddad died and when they told her she laughed so hard she cried. It was kind of like that, laughing when the only appropriate reaction was to cry.

I laugh again in the kitchen thinking about it. And Dave looks up from the page. "What's so funny?" he says.

"Nothing."

"Could have fooled me."

"Honestly – it's nothing at all," I say. He cocks one brow and starts to laugh himself. "What are you laughing at?" I ask, annoyed he's enjoying my private joke.

"Don't really know. But it's good to see you laughing," he says. "I'd forgotten you could."

"Fuck you!" I say and drop the cup. Part of me wants to storm out, another part wants to berate him for all the reasons I don't laugh anymore and part of me wants to clean the goddamn floor. I bend down and pick up the pieces, pick the pottery remnants out of the coffee. Dave folds his paper and scowls while I piece the cup together. But there are fragments missing and I think I'll find them later under the fridge.

He has the mop out now and is shifting the grey mop head in figures of eight. The splinters and shards scratch the tiles. I want to talk to him, sit on my hunkers and ask him does he ever think we could have died. Does he ever actually think we're lucky to be alive and that only for the successful gliding into land just short of the runway we could be dust in Brazil? I part my lips and go to speak. And just when I am about to say it, he cuts in.

"What was that about?" he asks.

"Forget that. But since you're all concern – what about us?"

"Oh here we go. What about us? You tell me." He is hissing. "Cos I sure hell don't have the answer." He looks at me and his eyes are stone. "What is it you want from me?"

"Well it's certainly not coffee machines," I say.

"Bitch!" He pauses and leans on the mop, stares at me. "I told you before and I'll tell you again – I'm done!"

"Done with what Dave? Done with fucking what?"

He glares.

I open the larder and retrieve the Nescafé. I put the jar on the counter and make a new arrangement with the tins. The jar sits like an art deco masterpiece beside the new machine. He is breathing behind me and asks, "What are you at?" I want to turn and say, good question and that I feel I'm passing through. That I feel we're drifting minions without passion or goals. But my tongue won't move and I don't look up. My eye falls on the paper and I take the culture section and put it under my arm. There's a crack and a snap from the folding paper and I hear him breathing onto my back as I leave the room.

Going up the stairs to dress for gardening, I am finally rid of the smell of coffee. As I rise in the house there is lavender from potpourri or soap. I hear tins rattle, glass clinking on the worktop. Deep sighs. I hear the opening of the larder door and a jar is put inside. I hear shifting, dragging, like he's sorting all the jars from high to low. And then the larder door is closed.

I stop on the return of the stairs and look out the window. Birds are in the garden, down between the leaves and pecking into clay. I see twigs there too. So much has fallen from the sky.

I will clear the twigs and rake the leaves before I prune the roses.

Conor O'Toole

Reptiles

THE BLUE AND THE PUSH OFF AND THE STREAM OF BUBBLES SHOOTING OUT AND THE sight of a wrinkled band aid with a pink spot of blood on the white tile floor. No thoughts just emptying and up for air with the lungs out and the mouth open and spit out the bitter taste. The joy of a clear pool at this hour of the morning with only a single arm hanging over the side of the Jacuzzi for company.

Under again with the timing of the breathing, the stroke I taught myself or pieced together over the years which never ceases to amaze M.

Is it the butterfly or what the fuck?

Frogs legs behind, the action able to hit that spot in my back every time, the one where all the work of the week sits and you have to shake it out or else you feel as if your spine will curve and keep curving until you're bent over with your shoulders meeting your knees.

Hands together in front with the fingers closed and pushing the water out of the way with the air going in through the mouth and out through the nose. The rhythm you develop that might take a minute but it comes and it comes quicker the less you think about it.

The sound of underwater which is all the insides beating with the heart pumping out through your ears and floating with limbs hanging just enjoying the sound of deep nothing before rising up again to reach with the hands and kick with the legs and the room comes back to life crashing in with the swishing of the water and the faraway oonce oonce of the speakers before diving into silence once more.

And the wall and you turn under the soft blue light with the orange lifebuoy for garnish and the force of the water dragging against your chest.

The lengths back and forth and the way you can feel your body growing stronger with every kick so that you start believing you can keep going all day.

As one kick follows another the thoughts that appear one by one crowding into your empty mind, the thoughts of life and how long it is next to the thoughts of work and can it ever be trusted, with other thoughts of love and legacy and who will stay with us like one dot keeping another dot company in a universe of dots. Then swish and kick and the thoughts disappear as quickly as they came and your mind is empty again.

The lengths. Odd numbers at the lifebuoy even numbers at the clock, the one with the lazy red second hand for the elite swimmers you see in here sometimes with their churning and their white water and the thought of elegant limbs knifing and fluttering all tight and slim in their togs.

I come up for air at the clock and tighten my goggles around the sockets of my eyes and they suck into position. Jacuzzi arm still hanging and speakers mumbling. I open my mouth wide and stretch the eyes wide and fix the goggles. I breathe deep through my mouth and the heart pumping up into my head. As I dive and push the last thing I hear is the slap slap of a flip flop on the wet floor and a shadow over me and I'm under.

Back to the rhythm with the splashing first and then the muting and the warm glow underneath but the naked light overhead. Extra frog kick to reach the wall and a deep breath and turn and back under and that's when I lay eyes on him.

It's the legs I see first underwater ahead of me in the next lane. Pale legs with black hairs waving in the water suspended with a string of bubbles clinging on and the thought of plants waving on the ocean floor in nature documentaries, the ones B likes unless something is killed and has places you can visit that S would like to go and visit some day. One leg after the other, slow motion forward motion, strapping around one of the knees and the man walking through the pool carefully towards me. Above the knees the shorts flapping, dark and loose like beachwear, the thought that these are the kind the elite swimmers wouldn't be seen dead in.

Up for air and his face tight from the concentration with his arms up around his shoulders for balance and the man moving very carefully through the water.

Lungs full and we pass each other and I turn my head to see his legs framed against the blue and the white. A line through the kneecap north to south with the skin knitting around it and the strapping surrounding.

I reach the wall under the clock and my feet sink down to the floor. I turn to lever out of the

water and the thought of the reptiles crawling onto dry land for the first time with their shiny leather skins and the eyes flat in their heads. I fix my toes around the bar of my flip flops.

Did you meet our friend outside?

This is one of the regulars you meet in the mornings, one of the wrinkled white-haired gents who saunter through the gym and the sauna cycling and sweating before the city is awake. He's naked now facing me holding a towel over one shoulder with the usual grin. You can see he's had sun, plenty of it, skin well-toned but a slight sag here and there. Around the backs of the arms and along the sides of the thighs the way you see with these men and their wrinkles and their freckles. A white fuzz of fur over his chest and his penis retreating into its shell.

You mean the guy with the strapping on his knee, I say.

That's the fella, he says, you know he's above in the quare place.

You mean City Hall?

No no, says my friend, up above, in the South Infirmary.

I squeeze the water out of my togs into the drain in the floor. Drip drip slow drip. He works the towel around his lower back in a sashay with the elbows.

Brain surgeon like, he'd be in with the top knobs in the neurology department.

I feel my eyebrows lifting. I didn't know that, I say, he looked like he was doing rehab out there.

That's right, says my friend and he tells me that he had a knee replacement a few weeks ago so that's why he's in the pool now suddenly every day.

He says, that softened his cough I can tell you because before he had that he was full of it.

My friend tells me a story about the man, the doctor, how he met him here in the changing room a while back when he had two of his own knees and the doctor was filling him full of shit about his latest trip to London and how he had to go into the bank to change some money.

My friend stops with the towel and looks over his shoulder in case we have company then he switches the towel to the front and pats his testicles. I pat my own to keep my hands from hanging. He leans in close and speaks in a low voice.

And you know he was obviously buying property over there because he goes to me, I asked

them in the bank what they could give me for a hundred and fifty thousand.

My friend looks at me then he throws the eyes up to the ceiling, not quickly but taking a few seconds for them to rise and fall, then he brings them back to mine and his face opens out in a grin, the same grin he always has and he holds his testicles in the towel for a second and pauses. I smile in return.

I mean what a langer, he says. What a langer to be giving me that information, he didn't need to tell me that, he could have just said he was going to the bank for sterling and leave it at that but that's the thing with that bollocks, he always has to be putting it all out there, fucking lording it over you at every opportunity.

Now I frown and nod. I understand then I smile a thin smile without opening my lips and I shift the towel to my shoulder. His eyes are glassy, speckled green and the grin from cheek to cheek and the thought of the reptiles with the eyes flat in their heads. He points a finger up in the air between us and shakes his head with the grin.

So I'll tell you I was fucking delighted when I heard our friend was going under the knife, fucking delighted I was, let him deal with a bit of that now for a while and see how he likes it, let him come back down to earth and taste a bit of reality for a change because there's no doubt like that he thinks he's some kind of a god above there, no harm for him to see how the other half lives for a change.

His words move up and down as he speaks the way they would if you were singing, the words run away with him and he scratches his chest through the fuzz and we are done with the story so he half turns his head and throws the eyes up to the ceiling again but this time in a quick way and he walks away from me back to his locker with the towel between his cheeks.

People are funny alright, I say which is the kind of thing you can say when there is nothing else to say.

Complete acting the bollocks, he says and he puts a foot on the bench and rubs it with the towel and an arch in the back and the sun skin sagging with the wrinkles and the freckles. I am heading for the shower when the man from the pool comes through the door and walks towards us with a limp on one side where the strapping is and water falling in drips from the baggy shorts. I pass my friend and he winks at me.

How's the good doctor, he says, how's the knee holding up, you're looking well on it, well wear now.

I stand under the shower and let the water run down my face. I can hear the two friends prance and parry at the other end of the changing room. The thoughts of life and work and love and Jaysus but I let the water run down my face and it swishes everything out. No thoughts just emptying.

Daniel Soule

The Grappler

IT WAS THE SECOND PUNCH, BOUNCING MY HEAD OFF THE CAGE FLOOR, THAT brought me too. He was on me, swarming, stepping between my legs and lowering his level to ground-and-pound me out, to finish the fight early, to pick up his win bonus, to shock the world, to be champ. It looked all but over. However, ‘but’ is a pretty big word.

I still can’t remember the left hook; I didn’t see it coming. You never see the ones that take you out. On the playback it was like I’d been shot in the head, my legs buckled immediately, I dropped straight down, and then back, so that I lay with the fence behind me, my head thudding into canvas for another concussive blow. The logo of a “great tasting, crisp, all American beer” beneath me. If it hadn’t been a title fight the ref would never have let it go so long, but John had seen me though my career and gave me the benefit of a big-ass-doubt. Playing his part in this all but over fight.

Momentum more than anything left me slightly on my side, taking away Marcos’s clear shot. Instead, a four-ounce fingerless glove cracked the top of my skull, giving me a wakeup call. My eyes rolled back into focus, and the world rushed back in. It was like when I was a kid and my dad dragged me to the dentist to get a tooth pulled. I was terrified and he held me down in the chair screaming. One large, manly hand pinning my chest, while the mask suffocated me. I writhed like a puppy drowning in a bucket until the gas took me. I woke up in a recovery room. The impersonal smell of cleanliness assaulted my nose, and sound came back as an unstoppable wave, screaming, then pounding with base tones and a high pitched whine. Pops was sitting in the corner of the room thumbing through a hunting magazine as though nothing had happened. “Shudda blocked that one,” is all he said after this fight.

Like I said, I was on my side. I could taste the copper of my blood mixing with the smell of chemicals from the newly printed canvas under hot lights. Marcos was a Thai boxer, and a good one – inter-continental something or other – and had okay Jiu-Jitsu but wasn’t much

of a wrestler. This means he should've stood back-up, but – that word again – who could blame him for thinking he'd got me, and the title?

I knew what my Pops would say, "In Jesus' name, Mike, we're Republicans: don't just lie there with another man on top of you." Usually, my wrestling means I can throw my hands and not fear the other guy shooting under my punches to take me down. It would be a special wrestler to put me on my back and an even more special kind of guy to keep me there. I'm not a drowning puppy anymore.

Usually it doesn't matter how good a striker you are, if you can't wrestle you'll end up on the floor with the grappler on top of you, then all your skills mean nothing. And yet there I was put on my ass by striker who would hardly even make the high school wrestling squad.

Right after the first bell, I could feel I was no match for Marcos on the feet. Don't get me wrong, I can bang too, put people to sleep; I've a highlight reel full of them. But Marcos was something else. For the first few minutes I could tell he was measuring, playing me, neutralizing my strikes and takedowns with his footwork. He wouldn't set his feet to put weight behind his punches. This meant he was on his toes and mobile, hard to catch.

He'd adapted from previous fights, where he'd gone on a tear, knocking out three in a row and earning his shot. I hadn't drilled for this. He usually circled to the left, his right, to the outside of my left jab, where unless I have some tricky spinning techniques, which I don't, he'd avoid my big right hand and a power-double. But I'm a different class of wrestler – three times All American, highest ever number of pins in a season. I've snatched up single-legs off God knows how many opponents with similar movement and put them on their asses. One guy I hoisted so high and slammed down so hard his collar bone fractured.

Instead, now Marcos would half-check to the left, draw my footwork and then change direction, retreating in a wide loop to the right. He was winning the foot-battle, baiting me, and as I set to throw a jab or lead-right or shoot for the takedown he was gone, stiffing me with his jab, finding his range.

It was frustrating. To an outsider it looked like he was running, that I was the one chasing him down and controlling the Octagon. The crowd booed what they couldn't see. It's the invisible stuff that matters at this level. Whether you're a striker or grappler, it's the small details that make the difference between good and elite. On the feet the art is about faints within faints, drawing your opponent with your body position, showing him your right

hand to stick him with the left, or going low with a kick to open up the head, or winning the foot battle so you're only hitting a ghost. The boy wasn't running; he was setting me a puzzle I couldn't solve; he was teaching me and I knew it. In the back of my mind I felt the presence of that hand on my chest. It motivated me, made me search for an alternative way – always has.

I'd just worked out what he was doing when that left-hook landed right on my jaw, whipping my head. I know this from the replay and I know Caesar, my boxing coach, would roll his Mexican eyes at me and swear. I carry my chin too high, a tic left over from wrestling, but no one had been good enough to make me pay for it. I thought he was slipping left again and timed the over-hand-right, only to hit air. My body was set to deliver force in front of me, not to take it from the side: my balance was off. A sweet check-hook and he spun off, pivoting on his front foot.

More than time, that practiced-footwork of his bought me space. If he hadn't spun off he would have been right on top of me. Instead he had to come in, drawing him to the mat, away from his open space, away from his footwork, away from the illusions of the striking game, into the mysteries of the ground game.

Like I said, he had one leg between mine, down on one knee, while he postured up, his other foot planted on the cage floor near my face, as if he was trying to combine a marriage proposal with a parking lot brawl. My hands came up and John hesitated to stop the fight. "Fight back," he said, looking for me to intelligently defend myself. Interesting way of putting it. There isn't much intelligence involved. Not in that kind of bleeding-heart-liberal-never-watched-a-fight-never-trained-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about assumptions of our sport. What I mean is that it is a conditioned response from hours, upon hours, upon hours of training. "You don't drill until you can get it right, you drill until you can't get it wrong," my college wrestling coach used to bark, while we puked at the side of the mat into waiting buckets, convulsing with fatigue.

Another punch and another rained down but now hit my guarding hands, protecting my head. The screaming wave was still rushing in at me. I didn't know fully where I was, only that I was in the shit, under that hand which wanted to push me down. I was familiar with this place, come to accept it; I knew its ways and how to beat it. Every cell in your body

wants to struggle, like the puppy in the bucket, like the boy in the dentist chair. But that ain't how you win. Never meet force with force.

Marcos's blood was up and he changed from straight punches to a swinging left hook. Fighting on the ground takes away a lot of leverage; he could still generate power from there, but – always about the 'but' – it was at a cost, a tiny imperceptible cost. You see, the left hook brought his weight forward and I felt the easing of pressure on my bottom leg. A wrestler, a good one, would sit his weight back on the leg he'd trapped between his own legs to control your movement, while he unloaded his ground-and-pound. Without the weight on my right leg I had space, just a little, but it was all I needed and my body reacted. No thought, just training.

My left hand snaked away from guarding my face at the price of eating another punch. The crowd roared; John told me to "fight back" and stepped closer, preparing to separate us, to save me the beating and give Marcos the victory. My arm slid around Marcos's waist, like that marriage proposal had gone well for him. I gripped his far hip and sucked the space away, clamping my shoulder to the other hip. I came up on my right elbow, which started to change the angle, moving me to the side of Marcos. He should have stopped here and tried to put me back on the mat or just got the hell out of there, instead he punched twice more. I heard his corner screaming, "Whizzer, whizzer," at him. But – I love that word – it was already too late. There was no chance of getting his right hand threaded under my arm pit to help break my base. There was no space left. He was the puppy now and I was the bucket.

I span to my knees so we were now hip to hip. Marcos still had one foot on the mat, another mistake and the reactions weren't automatic for him. A wrestler would have battled to be the top man and we may have ended up standing in the scramble, and back to his striking game. A Jiu-Jitsu guy might have done the same or spun to his backside for a butterfly guard or full guard if he was a step behind. Marcos finally decided to go for a guard, any guard, but it was too late. I'd already begun to change the angle of pressure, shifting my orientation to drive obliquely through the weakness in his line of balance. As he yielded the position I felt that familiar feeling of syncopation, of forces aligning, of leverage transforming into centrifugal force. It is a feeling of balance and control and I knew he now felt the opposite. I used chest pressure on his right hip and cupped the ankle of his foot

planted on the mat with my right hand as I turned him over, rotating him away from the cage, where he might use it to defend.

He floundered. My left hand swam for head control. There should have been an arm there to defend but there wasn't and so my bicep pressured across his face, as my fingertips found his opposite armpit and I rotated my shoulder into his sternum, forcing his face away.

He bucked and bridged, pushing his feet into the mat, trying to lift his hips, but now I had control of his elbows: one isolated by my hip movement was now pinned between my left thigh and left tricep; the other I pulled across his abdomen. If you can't put your elbows to the floor you can't bridge.

Breathing tells you a lot. Marcos was panting and even by this I could perceive what level of grappler he was. Everyone loses in the gym or in competition but a good grappler never pants. Their heart could be going one-ninety but their breath would be slow and steady. Marcos wanted free and would do anything now. I rotated my left shoulder a quarter of an inch, increasing the pressure on his throat, heard the grunt, and waited to see what he wanted to give me. Sure enough he struggled to get his left forearm away from my controlling right hand, so that he could try to push my face away to create breathing space. But – and this was really Marcos's final 'but' – that was just fine with me.

I let it go and as he pushed the forearm towards my face. I simultaneously pushed his elbow in that direction as I swung my head out of the way so that his forearm found nothing and carried on. My cauliflower left ear swung back behind his tricep, and I then shucked it down to my neck, trapping his arm across his face, securing the head and arm choke. I locked my hands together and waited for the inevitable bridge. He bucked. I rode the bridge, keeping my base. As his hips came back to the canvas my right knee was already sliding across his belly into the full mount, like a school yard bully sitting astride the chess club captain.

We were chest-to-chest and I levered forward to feel the response. He was strong and fit and this was still the first round so I didn't expect to submit him from here: the leverage was poor. He bucked again, as I hoped, and when he settled once more my left heel kicked tight to my ass and span to his opposite hip avoiding his legs, and I slid off to side-control on the other side of his body. It was all but over.

One last struggle came from the puppy. He'd put up a brave fight. He'd come so close. Maybe this would break him. Maybe it would be that motivating hand, always looming in the back of his mind. Either way there were no more 'buts': it was over.

I rotated perpendicular into him, focusing all the force of my leverage through my chest against his tricep, as I squeezed my bicep that lay perfectly across his right side jugular. His hand waved in the air like the Queen of England, hesitating while he did the calculations of pride – "tap or nap," that's what we say. He decided to tap. Three panicked slaps on my left shoulder before consciousness would leave him.

"Let him go. It's over," came John's booming instruction and he lay hands on me, letting me know to stop and I'd won.

I sat up, hands on my knees taking a deep breath. I looked up at the big screens overhead, already replaying the submission, and took the gum-shield out of my mouth. I could hear Logan's voice from the side of the cage, breaking down what just happened for the audience at home, like an ADD kid on coke. Then I looked back down to Marcos, who was still lying on his back, the arm I used to choke him now covering his eyes. I knew what he felt. Like his whole life built to this one moment, that his whole being was about this moment, that he had one hand on the belt but – you can't escape the 'but' – he'd made a mistake. Maybe he didn't know what it was yet, maybe he'd put it down to not being good enough or think maybe I was just lucky, which one he chooses to believe will determine whether he is going to be the puppy or bucket.

He is being swarmed now. They are all over him: trainers, doctors, athletic commission marshals. I put one hand on his chest to console, say thanks. I could feel the pain; I didn't need to be a grappler for that. I was ready to leave him to his sorrow but just as I was about to pull my hand away I felt his glove over mine. We gripped for just a moment and understood each other.

My corner were ecstatic, pulling my sponsor's t-shirt and hat on me. Caesar slapped me on the back and rolled his eyes. "That fucking chin of yours hanging out in the wind". He smiled but he won't let it go back in the gym. I hope he saw the footwork too and understood it better than me. It's then I saw my pops in the front row, still wearing a flannel shirt like we are back in the dentist's, shaking his head. He wasn't impressed then or now.

Logan bounds up to me after the decision, twelve pounds of gold pinned to a leather belt hung around my waist again. Time for the interview. “What an incredible comeback. Talk us through the finish here. It looked like it was all but over after that left hook.”

I dip a little to the microphone: “But is a pretty big word...”

Noel King

Analysis

THE BOY PLAYS A GAME OF VEHICLE ANALYSIS: HOW MANY PASS AND HOW MANY colours, how many people in each car, as many different registrations as he can process in a ten minute-period statistic. His eyes don't catch every number plate, don't get the count of crowded cars' passengers.

His father warns him not to go too near the open road. He scoffs. I am thirteen, he says to himself. But yes, I know, 'the example,' he has to lead a good example, being the eldest. He *is* being 'good' these summer weeks because his cousins from London – all younger, all girls – are here on holiday.

His mother calls him to eat. He glances his watch: only three minutes gone. She calls again, has poured and milked tea for him. He sighs at his watch; the concentration gone. He'll have to start all over after the picnic. Sitting on browning grass in a babble of females, he bites into the white and pink sandwich. His 'baby' sister – four years old – opens hers to peer at the smiling face on the meat – made to make youngsters that age eat it. Kids' meat. His parents eat ham sandwiches, but he won't ask for one, knowing she bought just three slices of ham, one for herself, two for his father. By next year she'll have to buy a fourth slice of ham for his sandwiches, not this processed kid's stuff.

His cousins never stop smiling, have flushed cheeks all the time. They spend the rest of the year in a flat in London, unlucky suckers – get taken to the park by their father, the boy's uncle, at weekends, have to be escorted everywhere; England isn't a safe place for children. The cousin's grandmother is here too. She is their grandmother only, not his. The boy doesn't like her, she has a shrill accent, a sharp tongue and studies him too much.

He must be very nice to the cousins, all the time. That's not easy. Maybe when he grows up he'll visit them; might go to get summer work over there, so he must be nice, get

to know them if he wants to lodge at their flat. His baby sister is playing up to her mother because the cousins are here. She is such a strain for the Mammy and Daddy, but then it's their fault she is the way she is, or so his grandad is always saying. Now she wants Coca Cola with her sandwiches. 'No, love,' the Mammy says, 'you must drink milk now, the Coke is a treat for after.' Her voice is being firm, but scratching just under that she is relenting. The cousins keep munching, study their aunt and cousin, can't understand the sulking here; they think everyone in Ireland lives in paradise; wish their parents could move back.

'But, it's sour,' the child says.

'No it's not,' her brother shouts at her, 'we're all drinking it. See!' He gets a warning signal from his father and flushes slightly at the cousins' interest now turning on him. The sister sulks. The boy recalls the choice earlier: he could have been playing football now at home but because of the visitors he felt he had to come and besides it makes his mother sad when he doesn't come on the Sunday drive. She both loves and hates his growing up.

He hates this picnic place, a little lay-by area beside the main road. Why can't we go to a bloody proper park, he wanted to ask, like everyone else does, this is too 'touristy'. A German family have pulled in now. His father doesn't like Germans, so the boy has a mistrust of them too. But there's a girl of fourteen or so with this crowd of Germans. Her tits are developing nicely, thank you. He watches her and imagines them. Then she looks back and he away. Don't stare, don't stare. But he can't help glancing again. She's lovely. His sisters and cousins have no sign of tits yet, but the oldest one – the one he likes – of the cousin's will surely be sprouting soon.

He spots a car he knows: John Brosnan, Philip's dad. Philip is probably not with his parents, is surely at home playing football, but just in case the boy dives for cover, can't be seen with all these females on a picnic.

Now he needs to go to the toilet, but each time he makes for the bushes, the girls want to follow. Eventually he runs fast and far enough ahead to leak behind a tree before they catch up.

Leaving the girls to their after-play in the copse wood they pretend is a forest, he returns to his traffic game. He fetches a pencil from the dash of the car, but the point is wearing down. On the clean back of a betting office ticket of his father's he lists the colours,

registration numbers, numbers of people, in wide, faint writing. Then he adds up the number of cars, the variety of colours and the number of people that passed. Next he averages: how many people to a car, how many cars pass in a given ten minute-period, how many people pass in a given period, how many different counties, countries and colours. He places the paper in his jeans pocket. Later he will compare this to the same exercise he did at home last Sunday and outside his grandad's the Sunday before that.

He knows his father laughs at all this but is pleased too that that the boy is keeping his mind active. The mathematician, he calls him. The mother is happy too, gets great mileage with her friends at her son's prowess at mathematics. 'You can be anything you want to be,' she's always telling him.

The girls have come back from the 'forest'. The eldest one of the cousins – the one he likes best – has blond hair, long blond hair, the kind his sisters would like if their mother allowed them to grow it. The cousin picks an interest in his car game, wonders why he does such a thing.

'It's grand, passes a bit of time, somethin' to do.'

'Emmm,' she says, 'could it be useful, could you give the information on to local government, perhaps?'

'Nah, well I wouldn't mind if they paid me!'

'Can I try?'

'Sure, but you must have your own equipment.'

She borrows a page of Basildon Bond paper and a Bic biro from her Grandmother and starts, her head rabbiting at the cars as they approach and writing information down without looking at her hands.

After two minutes she gets bored with it, shrugged and said she had no brain for maths at all. That disappointed him, she doesn't *look* like a blond bimbo. He knows she's intelligent, but girls can be like this at times, not using themselves enough, their brains that is. But then sometimes they don't have to, if they marry and stuff.

'Come on,' he calls all the girls suddenly, 'show you something,' and the passion of the shout makes them all drop what they're doing and follow him. He keeps ahead in the run. 'A SECRET,' he shouts back, his face flushed. They get to a little church. It is locked, unused, overgrown outside. They hear something inside.

‘Is it haunted?’ one of the cousins asks.

‘No, stupid. No. No it’s a choir rehearsing,’ he reassured her, but is unsure himself, doesn’t actually know what the weird sounds are, knows that a man hunted them away from playing near the church the last time they had a picnic here.

‘Why would a choir be practicin’ on a Sunday *afternoon*?’ the eldest cousin says. ‘Service is over, and it’s sunny out?’

‘Weird,’ the second one says. Then his baby sister gets frightened, wants to go back to her mammy.

He lets out a roar. They all get frightened and run. He disguises that he’s a little scared himself. The parents hear breathless details of the haunted church from all voices at once, are given more Coca Cola to cool them down and shut them up. The cousins’ grandmother says they’ll give her a headache. They run out of steam; for a while, before the next burst.

The cousins have plenty of money and they ask to go to the shop. Permission to go to the shop is a daily request, wherever the location. Here it’s down the road a bit, towards the tourists viewing park. Daddy warns the boy to look after the girls. He shrugs his ‘yeah, yeah, I am thirteen now’ bit and keeps walking.

He doesn’t know how the car came on so quick, why they or she didn’t see each other, but the girl, the lovely eldest cousin, eleven years old, went into slow motion in the air before his eyes and slammed flat onto the road.

He remembers most the sight of her blond locks in flight; an almost beautiful sight. And she being used to being on the Tubes and everything in London was what he found incredulous. It nearly killed her English grandmother too. The people who hit her were English tourists, an elderly couple on an average speed.

The boy didn’t cry until telling his wife about it. He will use it as an illustration for his own children. He never played his vehicle analysis game again.

It was a blue car that did it, sky blue colour you didn’t get in Ireland. With a GB sticker on the window and two persons.

flash fiction

Jessamine O Connor

Stop Digging that Hole

STOP DIGGING, HE SAID, TOO LATE.

The room was turning cold, as I was just getting warmed up. The visitors were starting to gawk around anxiously, wondering where I'd put their coats, and the hole was there in the floor, small but so out of place we all ended up stood at it, staring.

Then I couldn't help it, I had to dig again, flinging the next spadeful of dirt in their faces, waiting, bated, for a reaction. They coolly brushed their skin and clothes, and the dirt fell frozen, crystallised, to the ground. They had begun speaking a foreign language between themselves, not looking at me.

I bent and dug faster, flung harder, heating up, and the air tinkled with falling dirt.

Time passed, the hole was almost to the walls. The visitors really balanced well, clung on to the light switches, tippy-toed at the edges, certainly keeping their cool, still carrying on the conversation I couldn't understand.

Looking up at the room from the pit of the hole, flagging, resting on the spade, I saw them finally notice me, and watched ruefully as they started pushing at the mound with their shoes, and understood that I was at an extreme disadvantage, being steadily buried under a roomful of dirt.

Abby Oliveira

Bleached

MICHAEL SAT TRANSFIXED BY THE PRISTINE WHITE WALL OF THE PRISTINE FAMILY KITCHEN. He had not moved in twenty-eight hours, and was wet though, stank of piss, all memories bleached-out – so long as he didn't move. Any movement could cause a shit-storm. A simple glance out of the corner of his eye could throw up an abandoned hair-clip, the final demands tacked to the fridge door, an abandoned sock...

A daddy-long-legs gyrated like a drunk across the black granite work top, legs giving way beneath it, each fall echoed. It came up against an obstacle; a silver-plated picture frame.

Mum was right... Michael thought; Show-room, fierce cold, needs lived-in.

He imagined the angelic white emanating from the confines of the plaster, showering him in light. This had been an effective method in business; a ritual white-light cleanser, affirmations on the futility of guilt, fifteen minutes of yoga, every night.

The constant pitter-patter of the insect – demented by the silence of the place, launching itself repeatedly against the smiling, grey faces of Moira and the kids – chipped away at his resolve like water torture, splintering his concentration. He felt a pang of pity for the thing.

He couldn't say with certainty what had happened that day; a week, a month ago? Drunken stupor; pouring his heart out; no more money; arse gone out of the market. Then a suitcase bursting in the driveway; fury in Moira's eyes; kids calm; little Dylan's eyes filled with gladness.

Then the creature was dead. Crushed.

...For the best. Put the poor thing out of its misery.

He surveyed the tiny streak of innards on his fist, felt nothing, returned his gaze to the white wall.

Tomorrow, he thought, I'll sort everything tomorrow...

...White light.

White light...

Brian Mallaghan

Last Christmas

TYRES BALLROOM SLICK ON BLACK ICE I COAST DISGRACEFULLY TOWARDS A STURDY wooden fence. I almost correct the wayward dance but my headstrong partner breaks free. I tense, waiting for a sudden stop that does not come. The fence, not so sturdy it seems, throws creosote Roman candle splinters into the morning air. A hoar-frosted tree, barely a teen, slows me further until its grip falters, releasing me to the grassy bank.

I close my eyes and wish my ears blind to the sounds of bending metal and breaking glass until the world rocks to a standstill in a farmer's December field. My eyes re-open, glasses broken, my body mostly whole.

The grinding, whining engine offends the quiet until I think to turn the key. Silence, like iced water, shocks me back to the present. A fence post has pierced the windscreen, a wooden exclamation mark to my carelessness.

Shouldering open the driver's door I stumble-step onto ice hardened sods and turn timidly to assess the damage. In the distance a picture perfect farmer's wife waves flour white hands above her head. My thoughts turn to fresh baked soda farls sweet with damson jam and I imagine I hear a kettle, lid rattling, on the range. I can ring a garage from her Countryfile kitchen.

Closer now, I watch the picture spoil as the farmer's wife bellows and hides her face behind a floral cotton apron. Suddenly louder, the kettle's hot steam train snorting startles me. Blood warm air explodes from my lungs as an innocent, frightened bullock drives me

forcefully face-first back into the broken vehicle.

And in the farmhouse, spreading butter jam thick on warm soda bread, the farmer wonders what has startled the cattle in the top field this time.

Katie McCabe

Back to Ardnacassa

- SO GO ON, TELL ME, ANNE, WERE YOU STUFFING YOUR FACE WITH CHOCOLATES ALL Christmas? I'm a terror for the Black Magic and I always have been, once it's opened, I have to finish the lot, honest to God, even the Raspberry heavens. I tried to hide them under the couch just to save sharing them but mammy's dog, Bailey, the spotted collie, you know him, well he sniffed them out and gave the game away and – hang on now. What's that you're after, love, a single from Longford to Sligo is it? Well that's no bother that'll be £22.50 please, love, yes I know pet it's pricey but that's written in stone I'm afraid, Irish Rail takes no prisoners. On with you now, there'll be a train along in 45 minutes. What's that? Oh, you're right, I tell a lie, the next one is in 5. Anyway sorry, Anne, what was I saying? The chocolates.

- Tell you the truth, Brid, I've never been one for chocolates myself, toffees now, toffees I could eat until they're bursting out my ears, but I wouldn't be moved by a box of chocolates.

- You wouldn't be moved by much now, Anne, if we're being honest, you need to get the limbs moving in this job, stuck in the magazine hatch all day scoffing toffees

- I got my stone in Weight Watchers this last October...

- Well, that's a start I suppose. Haaa now. These sleepy days after Stephen's love to drag their heels, don't they? I had to shuffle like an unshorn ewe the whole way to the station this morning to save snapping my neck for all the ice that was beneath me.

- Do you think that's what happened to...?

- The O'Dogherty girl? You know I have no idea, all they said it was, was a fall that got her in that state didn't they? Terrible thing, all over RTE over the Christmas, very gloomy altogether. And her already with two children. But did you know she wasn't married? Had a boyfriend alright, but not married, 14 weeks gone. But he still brought it to the High Court with the rest of the family. That's the problem though, once it's in Court it's everyone's business, everyone out having their say. But sure don't the doctors know best, and the woman can't speak for herself now, after all. A third on the way, you don't see that very often with young women these days.

- That's true, Brid, you don't. But the devil makes work for idle tongues, everyone's an expert is right.

- Thumbs, Anne, idle thumbs. Anyway, it's the doctors I feel sorry for, only doing their duty after all, trying to do the best by both.

- Though I suppose if they'd laid her to rest on the 3rd of December, this would all be done with and the family could have peace.

- Yes, there's that. But they got to spend Christmas with their daughter at least.

- You're right there, Brid, Christmas with the family is very important.

Nollaig Rowan

Flame

EVERY FEW YEARS MUM'S FRIEND, VALERIE, VISITS US FROM NEW YORK. SHE'S AT THE kitchen table now, all earrings and burnt orange hair, flailing her arms while she tells my parents about her patients in the Women's Clinic in Harlem. I'm watching her eyes, trying to figure if she wearing false eyelashes. She's a petite woman who looks younger than Mum, although they're both fifty. I never say much to Valerie, mostly because I'm in awe. My older sister, Kate, is quiet too, although she'll probably ask a question – a profound, intelligent question – to show that no one intimidates her.

Valerie is laughing, great snorting laughs, as she recalls her youth in Dublin with my mum. She's slapping the pink table-cloth while her eyes dance.

"Do you remember that time, Eileen...we took off our knickers..."

Mum's lips are tight, her eyes steady. I wonder if she knows what's coming next.

"...and mooned from your gate! What a hoot. What were we? Six or seven?" Valerie shakes her head as if to rustle up more memories. Mum relaxes. Dad clears the dinner plates.

"So, Sinead, tell us what you're up to?"

I hate this question, especially from Valerie.

"Any hot dates?" she adds, in her acquired American accent.

Well, Valerie, I'm in Third Year in secondary school. I'm a nerd. Want to do Medicine, like you. I've a science exam tomorrow and I'd much prefer to be upstairs studying right now. And, by the way, I know I'm different. I could say this, but I don't. I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket pretending I've received a message. Just then, Mum serves her pavlova meringue and everyone oohs and aaahs.

"This is *the best!*" Valerie is prone to exaggeration. "Eileen was always great at Domestic Science. Sr. Xavier's favourite pupil ..."

Funny she doesn't notice that Mum is not joining in on these reminiscences.

Now Valerie's talking about her partner, Chris. My heart leaps. I imagine Chris with short, grey hair, full breasts and a row of silver studs on her left ear lobe. I see them driving across the States in an open-top car and...

"Sinead!" It's my mother. "Valerie's talking to you."

"Honey-buns, I've brought a few things for you girls. Just some stuff you might get a wear outta." She's pulling Macy's bags from her hold-all and poking her face into them. "Kate!" She throws a plastic bag at my sister. "Sinead!" A bag lands on my lap.

My present is a jumper in loud colours, striped like a deck-chair. I predict it'll be too tight for me, now that my body has filled out, what Mum irritatingly calls "puppy fat".

Kate is sliding something long and silky from her bag. It's a dress, deep-red like fuchsia, with tiny pearls. "Wow, Val," she coos, "this is amazing. I'm going to wear it to Pete's twenty-first."

So now it's 'Val' and her boyfriend has suddenly become 'Pete'. I'm sick. Kate studies Drama in Trinity. Fair enough. But does she have to be such a drama queen at home? She holds the red dress up against her slim body and parades around the kitchen.

"Honestly, Kate, you're welcome to it," says Valerie. "That dress has seen me to balls and award ceremonies. It owes me nothing."

Later, when the adults (and Kate of course) are having coffee in the sitting room I spy the red dress, folded on a chair in the hall. Stuffing it into my school-bag I rush to my bedroom. Inside, I lock the door and strip to my skin. I pull from the back of my wardrobe a lycra body stocking which I secretly bought last month. I haul it up my body, smoothing the bumps and securing my breasts into the cups. Then I step into the slinky evening dress which clings to my new shape. The neckline has a soft scoop. The side slit is open to the top of my right thigh. I adjust the pearl cummerbund above the waist. I let down my hair. I twirl. Rummaging in a drawer I find one of Mum's old lipsticks, *Flame*. I touch it delicately to my lips. I tie up my hair again. Finally, I have the nerve to approach the long mirror on the door of my wardrobe. I like what I see.

I close my eyes. There is a waft of expensive perfume mixed with a whiff of cigarettes coming from the fabric and I am drawn into another world. I imagine this dress in

Manhattan, in important places doing illicit things, enjoying itself thoroughly. Something of its power is seeping into my skin and I am ready to embrace it. Ready to be different. I see Valerie, in this dress, dancing with her girlfriend, an orchestra playing behind them. I imagine a tall woman at my elbow. We're entering an ornate assembly hall where The American Medical Association is holding its annual award ceremony. We're both...

"Sinead...open up!" It's Kate. I rush to unlock my door forgetting that I am wearing her dress. "Take it off, you weirdo!" she shouts, pulling at the delicate straps. "How dare you! It's mine."

I evade her clutches but she continues to stand there hands on hips. I'm crying now as I pull the dress over my head, fearing my tears will stain the fabric. She snatches the dress.

"Who do you think you are!" she sneers at my underwear.

Stripped of the red dress I look ridiculous but somehow its aura remains in my bedroom. I have inhaled confidence and the nerve to be myself. Taking off the lycra underwear I throw it to the back of my wardrobe where I am happy to let it remain. I pull on my old jeans and hoodie and settle down to my books, although I know I won't concentrate on science tonight. Without a mirror, I paint *Flame* deliberately on my lips.

Grace Guy

The Hairdressers

SATURDAY WAS PROBABLY THE WORST DAY TO GO TO THE HAIRDRESSERS. EVEN AS SHE approached the massive automatic glass doors, she could feel the energy behind them. A flurry of movement and pace. Too much foundation and too many smiles. Some real, some fake. A subtle but underlying sense of something a bit nasty. Survival of the beautiful. A Darwinian scaling of merit based on hair, based on what you looked like. She wondered why it had never bothered her before.

There was sunshine outside but glaring floodlights lit up the massive basement and the sound of clicking heels pounded the wooden floors, merging with the heavy base of a techno soundtrack. It was almost like a nightclub, except for the fact that it was Saturday morning. The three groomed receptionists broke their huddle as she approached. They eyed her tall slim frame and glossy dark hair and smiled approvingly with too much lipstick. She answered the standard questions about where she was going tonight and surprised herself with how easy she could lie.

In the waiting area, she felt like a battery hen, huddled amongst the chattering women. Dressed in black, one by one, the hairdressers came to collect them. She started to flick through a magazine and found her eyes consistently drawn to the long haired women. Tall, thin beautiful women. Their hair was blonde, dark, red, auburn, brown, honey, caramel, mahogany, straight, curly, thick, thin. They smiled or pouted back at her. With ease and youth. They had beauty and beauty was power. Before her diagnosis, she had that.

She could feel the receptionists eyes on her again as they pointed her out to a middle aged bald man. He wore the standard black uniform and thick rimmed black glasses. Typical, camp hairdresser. She caught herself judging and felt sick. She knew what people were

going to think about her. "I'm Emmet." He sat down too close beside her. He reached out to touch her glistening pony tail. "What are we doing with this amazing hair today, please tell me you're not planning on getting too much taken off?"

"I want a really good wash, a treatment and then I need you to shave it all off." She had been rehearsing this sentence for so long in her head, it felt strange actually coming out of her mouth. She wasn't even sure if she had said it because it sounded like someone else's voice. But she could tell from his face that she had. Poor Emmett. She felt sorry for this man she had just met him. He didn't sign up for this. Saturday at work, was supposed to be a fun day, just bitching and laughing and living in a bubble where everything was on the surface. Nobody wanted to know about what was underneath. Especially if it was something uncomfortable like cancer.

He stared back at her and a pinky red hue started to rise up from his neck and spread all the way up his face and over his bald head. He knew from her face she wasn't joking. They looked at each other without blinking and everything seemed to go quiet. "A bit like yours Emmett." She tried to smile. He brought her to the basin, passing the trio of receptionists who chattered non-stop oblivious to the fact that real life had broken its way into the salon.

She felt the warm water and his hands on her scalp. They were gentle and nervous. Some people in the support group had suggested focusing on the image of the cancer being washed away by the soapy water so she tried to do this. He brought her over to a seat away from the main hysteria and she was grateful. At first, she gave the instructions. He wasn't sure about brushing out the tangles or even drying it off properly but she made him do all this. He took out the razor machine and switched it on. "Ready?" She nodded at him in the mirror but couldn't speak. He inhaled deeply and straightened his posture. "I've done this a hundred times, don't worry." He firmly applied the razor to her scalp and she looked down at her magazine until the sound of the razor stopped. The silence was deafening. She looked up and saw herself in the mirror. She put on the hat she had brought and Emmet walked her back to the reception desk. He tried to be all matter of fact and business like as she paid but he couldn't cover over the gasps from the three receptionists and then the silence that followed. They all smiled at her. Big kind smiles, nervous smiles but they didn't really see her anymore.

She wanted to be courageous and proud and walk out of there with her head held high. But she felt sick and wanted to scream. The counsellor had told her to connect with who she really was behind it all. She was so much more than her hair and what she looked like. It would grow back and she would be better and everything would be ok. But they didn't tell her about how people would look differently at you and how you would lose your power.

A Joseph Black

No Corners

MY GRANDFATHER EDDIE TOLD A STORY ONCE... ACTUALLY, HE TOLD MANY, MANY stories, and most of them more than once, but he knew the true storyteller's trick of keeping your strongest stories for best. And so I can only ever remember him telling this particular story once.

His entire adult life Eddie was a lighthouse keeper. His brothers, of whom there were many, were all priests, and it was an enduring family conundrum how Eddie had come to such an unusual calling. Unsurprisingly, it formed the basis of a good number of his brothers' sermons down the years, with John 1:5 in particular being worn threadbare ("God is light; in him there is no darkness at all").

When he was home on shore, Eddie's brothers would probe him gently on his solitary life, so much more like their own than they seemed to realise.

"What is it...like?" they'd ask. "On the lighthouse?"

"No corners," he'd reply gnomically, with a conspiratorial wink to me as the brothers pursed their lips and returned to their scalding tea.

The events in the story occurred when Eddie was stationed at An Truscar, off Wexford. An Truscar was known as one of the most punishing commissions in the service, seven miles offshore. Then. Five men had died in its construction, Eddie reported with a relish implicitly sanctioned by the hundred years since passed.

It was a balmy August evening when he found the first dead turtle. Turtles weren't unknown in the area, but they were uncommon, and it was the first time Eddie had found one washed ashore, alive or dead. He didn't have to wait as long for the second, which appeared the next day, along with the third and fourth. On the third day there was half a dozen. Unsure of what to do with them, Eddie removed the shells and burned the carcasses, using the same

paraffin oil he used to power the lighthouse.

But the bodies continued to wash up, twenty a day by the end of the week, and the burning of them was becoming increasingly impractical. That Saturday night, as he retired to bed with the smell of seared turtle flesh smarting his eyes and nose, Eddie resolved to contact the Commissioner for guidance.

In the event that proved unnecessary, as in the early hours he was woken by a sound he described as unlike any he'd ever heard before. Like thunder, he said, but louder, and longer, and deeper – so deep he could feel his stomach vibrate and his teeth rattle.

Accompanying this deafening sound was another, one which bewildered and terrified Eddie in equal measure. It was the sound of water, to which Eddie had of course become well attuned down the years. But this was not the sound of water lapping or lashing the rock on which the lighthouse stood: this was the sound of water rushing around and past the rock. And that made no sense.

Running, tripping, falling down the spiral staircase Eddie raced to confirm what he didn't want to – what he couldn't – believe: the lighthouse was moving.

He burst out through the front door, and what he saw left him struggling for his breath. The lighthouse and the rock on which it stood – all three acres and God alone knows how many tonnes – were gliding serenely through the water, away from the already distant shore. Like a comedy drunk, the wind and spray whipping his face, Eddie closed his eyes and rubbed them violently, so violently that on reopening them he had lost focus. As form and substance returned to the scene before him he realised that the rock and lighthouse were actually borne aloft above the water. Crouching low, his fingertips pressed to the rock, Eddie crawled to the nearest edge of An Truscar and looked over.

Ahead, in the direction in which they were travelling, he could see a black mass breaking the water. It wasn't another rock. It had a form, and a shape, and a movement he immediately recognised as being that of the head of a turtle. The rock, the lighthouse, and Eddie were travelling on the back of an enormous turtle. After perhaps twenty minutes – although it may have been two and it may have been fifty, Eddie freely admitted – their pace slowed and An Truscar descended, not without grace, to meet the rising waters below and come to a gentle halt.

The turtle carved a giant elegant arc through the water in front of him as it turned to swim back and past him before disappearing beneath the black waters.

Eddie never saw another turtle, never told how he explained to the Commissioner why his lighthouse had moved four miles, and never told the story again after that one time. It was, after all, one of his best.

Louise Kennedy

Grace

LISA MURRAY HAS TWO DAIRYLEA TRIANGLES AND A WAGON WHEEL IN HER LUNCHBOX.

The egg and onion sandwiches my mother made eighteen hours ago are damp and sulphurous, sweating in faded yellow Tupperware. We each take a small glass bottle of milk from a crate that is up against the big radiator near Miss Mc Kenna's desk. We peel the foil discs off the bottles. The cream at the top has thickened almost to butter and we have to stab our tongues into the bottles to reach the tepid milk underneath. A slick of cream escapes and makes a perfect oily teardrop on my jumper.

We go outside to the playground. Jackie Calvert is standing on a step near the pitch, a dozen or so of our classmates around her. She is tossing her red curls and pointing at Brian Fagan. Jackie McCusker is at her right hand. Brian is flushed. His wide soft frame is folding itself inwards and away from their short laughs. He fusses at the football under his arm and inclines his head at the goal posts, but none of the boys moves. The Jackies haven't finished with him yet.

Every day at lunch hour we slip through the rusty gate and take refuge in the church from the Jackies. We say prayers. When we have gone through the glorybes and actsofcontrition, the ourfathers and hailmarys, we say the prayer for peace that Miss Mc Kenna made up. We move around the Stations of the Cross. Sometimes old women sit in the church, all softly clicking beads and troubled whispers, rapt. They don't see us. When there is no one else there we act out scenes from Charlie's Angels and light candles without leaving any money. Lisa says this might be a mortal sin and rubs at a patch of eczema on her hand.

Lisa's mum goes to Mass every morning. My dad says that once a week is bloody plenty and that Lisa's mum is probably trying to make up for Bobby, her dad, who says

religion is balderdash. My family has a pub and Bobby goes into it every day.

I check my Timex watch with the red strap to make sure that we get back to the playground before the bell rings. Three minutes later we are at our desks, and Jackie Calvert is leaning back in her chair, eyeing us. She must have noticed we were gone. Before Christmas I was off school for two days with a bug. When I came back Lisa was with the Jackies and wouldn't look at me. She came back to me the next week but if she leaves me on my own again she'll be sorry. Bobby Smirnoff, I'll tell them. They call Lisa's dad Bobby Smirnoff.

review: Elizabeth Dass

on Love on the Road 2015

edited by Lois Kapila and Sam Trantum

JANE AUSTEN ONCE WROTE, “THERE ARE AS MANY FORMS OF LOVE AS THERE ARE moments in time.” If any collection encapsulates this feeling it is *Love on the Road 2015*. Tales covering the globe take you on a literary road trip, from the Acropolis in Greece to the mouth of a volcano in Nicaragua. The journey is tough, love in these stories is not the perfect superficial love depicted in so many films and novels. The beauty and strength of this collection is that love is shown to be manifested in all its guises, the charm of an upbeat stranger, the manipulative hold of an abusive partner, the source of strength of a mother or the kindness of a passing traveller. The different connotations of love each author brings, forms a picture of a cracked, potholed road, with poor markings and an unclear destination. You begin in a hot and dusty queue, getting frustrated and thirsty as the vivid description of Tendai Huchu brings you to a post office in Zimbabwe. The next is Marlene Olins’ glorious road trip across North America; this tale is darkly mirrored in the collection’s final story. As the stories continue love seems absent, or deluded. It changes, it is not the charm, or kindness or self-sacrifice that the reader has just experienced. It morphs into a deceptive and abusive power.

The *on the road* part of the title feels like the root to this section. There is travel involved, but the lack of stability, the rocky relationships, the uncertainty, all combine to make the reader feel that they are in transit, perpetually moving. Both Shirley Fergenson and Stanley

Kenani create seemingly passive female characters, each damaged by their partner, but the women in these stories seem to have a strength and grit that is revealed through these manipulative relationships. Amongst these, the editors have placed *Janus: A Path to the Future* by Nod Ghosh which covers the greatest distance, New Zealand to the United Kingdom and looks at the physicality behind love. The transformation of the body, but the steadfastness of the heart.

None of the short stories give you the whole picture: both *Enfolded* and *In the Heat* look at the uncertainty of men who have grown unfamiliar to their partners. Either through time or an act of unfaithfulness the women who we follow have to find their footing in a new relationship context and work out where love is and what draws them in.

There are stories about discovery or rediscovery, in *At the Mouth of the River*, our protagonist is a snobbish book reviewer whose inner monologue is in sharp contrast to the beauty that surrounds him, back in the home of his wife his journey seems crucial for their relationship to flourish. Another bittersweet tale is *Honeymoon in Mata de Limon*. The clichéd idea of retiring in paradise is given new life and colour in this eccentric, but ultimately endearing story.

Lily Mabura's *Kaveh Mirzaee and the Woman from Lashar*, is one of the shortest in the collection, the beautiful description and subtlety of feeling in this tale stays with you long after its ten pages.

The collection ends with a bareness, the final tale echoes the road trip of the beginning and the unease of *Manila Envelope*. In *Manila Envelope* the reader sees through a child's eyes, and with foreboding we follow a child with her golden ticket. In the final story the protagonist is an adult, however he is imbued with a childish innocence. This tale is a fitting end and leaves the reader with the sense of having travelled a great distance, and come a long way to rest.

The beauty of each of the authors' creation takes you, hand in hand through the lives of the characters. Each tale is gripping and challenging. No one author gives you the satisfaction of clarity, nor an omnipresent insight into the complexity of the characters relationships. Love and travel combined here, create unique and captivating results. The title of the collection initially threw me, imagining a collection of devoted love stories, but I could not have been more wrong. These are stories of adventure, betrayal, hope, disappointment, life and death.

With all its hidden depths the title seems so fitting now, as my connection with the word love shifted and transformed through each wonderful tale.

Love on the Road 2015 is published by Liberties Press.

memoir

Susan Lindsay

Athens Tee Shirt

TO DO IS TO BE – SOCRATES. TO BE IS TO DO – PLATO. DO BE DO BE DO – SINATRA

Outside Arrivals at Athens airport at 18.30 hours, we're crossing on diagonal white lines – her imperious hand held up to the traffic – while I chant, 'I'm writing My Own MEP poem - a la Paul Durcan'. A personal MEP, or a Maggie Smith, can be useful.

She Who Knows (SWK) leads off sharply to the left, then right – to the Metro that will bring us straight to the hotel from which we will head off in early morning for the hot thermal waters of the Loutra Edipsou Spa, via regional bus and ferry. On a closed door, in the eerily silent concourse, she translates: the Metro is closed.

Back on the pavement things hot up. 'Trust me; we have to go down for information'. SWK wants to go down – into a silent station, and the airport is the other side of the road. She Who Does Not Know – me – has collapsing knees, sore feet and wants to conserve energy. 'No, not until you give me an explanation. I can't run around in circles.'

'Excuse me, ladies, can I help you?' An attractive dark-haired woman stops us. 'There is a transport strike. There are no trains or taxis. I am not sure about a bus.'

We end up on a private bus having gone down the stairs that lead to the outside world *and* an airport entrance below the road above. We are delivered to a stop close to the Titania Hotel. In the sister land of myth, the queen of the faeries has offered us hospitality. Irish, we are welcome – austerity bedfellows, 'But your austerity is not so austere.'

The ferries on strike, we enjoy an extra tour of Evvoia before receiving a warm welcome at

the red-brick family hotel on the corner where the bus stops.

We walk the promenade beside clear water: find the thermal, steaming and sulphurous spouts that flow down the hill and into the bay. Tired out, I still can't resist getting into the sea straight away. Clamber, in ungainly fashion, over sharp stones and rocks to the welcoming water. Without SWK, I wouldn't have had the courage – I haven't swum for a year. It works. I am restored.

The next day we try the Spa Hotel. While SWK mud baths, thermal soaks, scrubs herself and swims in the blue lagoon heated pool, I head for the sea again. Shakily, I realise that hospital experiences have left me averse to clinical treatments and white coated attendants. Besides it's Celtic Tiger. I want the Aegean elements. 'It's called wild swimming now,' SWK tells me later. I am in my element. Former uncertainty dispelled, I swim around lazily. On the beach I sun myself and read the airport Penguin about the redemptive friendship shared by cat and busker, a formerly homeless addict.

We knock back Ouzos; eat Greek salads with, or without, cheese; stuffed tomatoes with rice; fish Meze; a full fish harvested earlier that day; drink wine. We fight: does she have to know everything! We make up. 'Sorry, I can be very vehement.'

'No, it's okay. I know when you're tired. I can't leave some things well enough alone.' She listens to what I have to say. 'You have a unique slant on things. You should write a column.' This is not entirely a compliment but it's meant as one this time. The pavements change levels as we pass each shop, they have holes. She falls – almost flat on her face. They bring a chair. I hug her, watch her.

Back in Athens I have second Ouzo before heading, with Conference delegates, to the Metro. We're en route to a party. My legs shaky, I can barely find my bearings. I grab SWK's arm as she discusses business with a colleague. Fortunately, she keeps a tight grip. We have a lovely meal. I recover, grab us a taxi when it's time to go.

Back home in Ireland, I am grateful, renewed. The challenging gifts of true friendship put aside for now, I open my letter box. It holds a heavy pile of bills and notices and a damp and

bedraggled scrap of paper. Blotched ink scrawls: *Hi, I was just passing*, have a signature of one word and a mobile phone number.

A man who, 'doesn't want to be confused by friendship' has left a calling card after twenty months of silence. I should have bought the Athens tee shirt for him, as I once did the fridge magnet *Warning: I have character defects and I'm not afraid to use them*. He laughed when I told him. He's proud of his character defects. But I kept it. I need more confidence in mine.

Wearing the Greek tee shirt I've earned, I'm off to an Irish town to put a missive of my own through the hole in a formerly out-of-bounds door. 'Hello, thanks for your note. I - wasn't – passing.'

Anna Foley

The Coldest Room

I EXIT THE BACK AND ONLY DOOR AND THERE ARE TWO WINDOWS TO MY LEFT. THEY ARE old, grey and rotting. Beneath them are flower beds hosting pink and yellow sweet williams and thyme. Turning the corner, the blank face of the windowless gable overlooks a gravelly potholed driveway. The grass and shrubs on the opposite side always smell divine and the peach tree I planted as a stone has grown tall but will always be barren, never bearing fruit in this atmosphere.

The lawn is in front of me now as I stand at the corner, by the big blue barrel that overflows with greasy rain water. I often sit here with granny and granddad on summer evenings as I play with my doll and tea set. There are shrubs in the bed at the front of the house and it is difficult to get close to the windows to see inside. At the end of the bed I turn the corner walking again toward the back of the house, passing more windows. Through one I see the big twin tub washing machine, with its grey rubbery appendages. If I turn to my right I am confronted by a hedge, and beyond, the acre. Immediately inside the here is Grandmother's rhubarb patch, stinking of manure provided as board by the ponies that holiday for the summer with us. There is a faint tick tick tick from the electric fence which keeps them in their resort.

At the back of the acre is the huge clothesline, and nettles where I was stung during a game with the dog. Closer to the house are more buildings, including the outhouse, the dog's shed with leather bridles and saddles suspended from hooks out of canine reach and the big shed where I am not allowed to go.

Across the road is an immense field and when I was very young there were bulls in here.

They were ferocious, bellowing at anyone coming too close to their vast sanctuary. I can still see my grandfather running on his arthritic legs, clutching his cane, sprinting for the safety of the gate. I wish I could remember why he had gone in there, though I suspect a lost ball may have been the cause. As time went on, it became a commercial orchard, trees heaving with cider apples.

Further down this side of the road is the pump house, a concrete monstrosity with higgledy piggledy steps to the top. It was magical to play here, especially in the company of cousins as we whiled away our days pretending it was a shopping centre or a hospital.

My grandparents do not have a car and the nearest shop is two miles away, and so I make the daily trip with granny on her rickety bicycle to procure essentials like bread, milk and Carroll's cigarettes. I usually get something for my troubles, a lollipop or bar of chocolate. On our treks here we pass the parish church, and in the yard beside it my grandfather's family in their eternal sleep salute us silently.

Back to the house and entering the door again, we are in the musty hallway, with the raised pattern on the wallpaper just right for maiming. The combined kitchen, dining, living room and wash room is to the right and here we are greeted by the old model Kenwood Chef atop the fridge, the mixing bowl full of junk and letters. Next to this is an old wicker chair housing newspapers, and on the other side, a leaky sink, and behind the door is the cooker and next to this is the open fire. There is a fireplace in every room of this house, central heating an elusive luxury, but this is the one used to boil the pigs' heads in a big black pot. There are gold ornamental plaques on the chimney breast depicting horses and hounds in a hunt, with riders straddling the faded wallpaper. Beside is a dresser, containing cups, plates and various condiments, including a congealed jar of Bovril. There is an oak sideboard heaving with mystery and photographs, some of people I have never met, some of our family.

The room next door is my grandmother's bedroom. It holds an iron bed, her chest of drawers and a wardrobe, bursting with clothes that I never saw her wear and the fireplace

with its posy of paper flowers. Next in this series of chambers is Granddad's room. It is small and holds a bed, and a dressing table, upon which rests his antiquated shaving set and a brass hunting horn. The fireplace in here is covered by a painted wooden guard to keep out the chimney draught, and any other unwanted visitors.

The largest and coldest room of the cottage is mine. There is a beautiful writing desk in here that I am not allowed to poke about in, housing photographs and documents of immense importance, so I'm told. I like to imagine that this is my office and I am writing letters to someone, anyone. The fireplace here is blocked and there is a red and black speckled woolen sofa where no living soul ever sits and two windows on opposing walls. Many times, I sensed something peering around the yellowed net curtains, or hovering by the dressing table that I could not see or touch, but could hear with my child's ears. Sometimes now, though I am far away from that room, I still do.

Bernie McQuillan

Aloof

'THEY THINK YOU'RE ODD.' TED COCKS HIS HEAD TOWARDS MY FELLOW FACTORY workers from his eyrie, perched high above the printing presses. The afternoon shift is half way to delivering tonight's deadline but someone has failed to order the green ink. Ted doesn't know this yet and I feel a certain pleasure in withholding the news. 'Aloof,' he adds, triumphantly. 'So, what do you say to that?'

He looks over at me, one pudgy hand stroking his patchy moustache. He looks like Mr Potato Head, my son's hero, with his shiny, bald head and thick neck bulging over his collar. I look over his shoulder at the clock on the wall. It is five to four. Ted has squeezed my personal review meeting in between a health and safety inspection and a visit by one of the company suppliers. If he is going to meet his bonus payment, he has to tick the staff one-to-one box.

I sit there for a minute. Aloof. It means reserved or remote, at a distance physically or emotionally. I know the word because I've read it many times in reports about my son, David. I know who gave Ted the word. Gina. She works alongside me and swears she's slept with half the supervisors. So what if I prefer to go out for a walk at lunchtime rather than sit in the plastic cafeteria staring at the brightly lit performance screens, trying to tune out the chit-chat from a bunch of girls who can't form a sensible thought. I know that my manager's mind is on his four o'clock appointment, wondering if he'll get away in time for the football tonight. I am following the second hand on the clock and I can hear Ted's hand tapping impatiently on the table but it's like I'm not really here.

Twenty years ago, my brother, Owen, wrote crime stories in his bedroom next to mine. His handwriting was tiny, three of his handwritten lines between every pre-printed blue jotter line, a total of ninety scribbled lines on every page. There were hundreds of

notebooks filled like this and no-one, bar me, had been allowed to read them. His stories fizzed with action, a murder was committed every two pages or so, but there was no resolution, because that wasn't what interested him. His enthusiasm was for the description of the murder weapons and how the victims looked after they had been bludgeoned. 'Trails of innards' and 'headless, battered bodies' were some of his nicer descriptions. Owen would record in the page margin the total words he'd written every day. I never heard him despair about the plot or how his characters were behaving, only about the word count. He didn't finish any of the stories. New, more lurid images would flood his brain and he would start again, anxious to get it all down whilst the blood was still bright beneath the latest corpse.

We had an older brother, Paul, but he was too cool to be at home with us. He hung out with the big lads in the village, playing pool in the back room of the pub and drinking a pint. Then he'd polish off a packet of mints before pulling on the mechanic's navy boiler suit in Dad's garage to tinker with the underbellies of the local farmers' cars. He could do no wrong. Dad presumed he would teach Paul everything about the business, then he would go to university to learn some new tricks before returning, in triumph, to take over the reins. It was a year before they noticed his grades had dropped and that he was skipping off school, sneaking back into the house after everyone had left to nurse his head from the night before.

Back then, parents didn't play with their children. Mum and Dad would never have thought of kicking ball around the garden. As long as you were fed regularly and had somewhere to sleep, the rest was up to you. From the age of nine, I would cook supper for everyone when Mum was out working in the hospital. Vegetable roll and crispy pancakes, grilled, because Mum didn't want the kitchen to smell of fried food like the houses in the village. Her hospital was a rehabilitation centre for old people, but no-one ever seemed to leave it, except in a coffin. Mum said it was because none of the resident's families wanted them back home. She would never want to end up the same way, she said, she'd sooner kill herself than end up reliant on a care worker. Quite a strong statement for a practising catholic. I still feel guilty for the way things turned out.

If I missed the last bus, I would call into the hospital after school to get a lift home. As soon as I opened the door, that acrid smell of stale urine, overlain with disinfectant, would hit me, making my eyes sting. I remember the sparsely furnished sitting room and dormitories, the absence of paintings, the lack of visitors popping in with bunches of flowers and stories from the outside world. It was a mausoleum. I was surprised that Mum seemed to enjoy her time working there, even though there was a lot of heavy lifting and hauling old ladies from their commodes. Mum wasn't particularly demonstrative with us, which was good, because I used to imagine where her hands had been when I saw her touching food at home. She would talk to the old ladies about their wartime memories and play Old Maid with them for hours, with the television whittling away in the corner and the few old men snoring in the wingback chairs.

In the summer evenings, with no one at home except Owen, shut up in his room, I would cycle around the country roads for hours, with a cardigan and a bar of chocolate stuffed into the bike's wicker basket. There were a couple of piebald horses in a fallow field a few miles away and I would pull armfuls of juicy grass from the neighbouring farm and let the horses eat it out of my hands, the soft pressure of their prehensile lips the closest anything had gotten to me in years. Odd men, out wandering alone, without the cover of a dog, would slowly pass and nod to me and mutter about the need for rain. The men would walk that same route all through the summer. I thought the horses and the men were relying on me so I kept going back so as not to upset their routine.

I liked those old men, as long as they kept their distance. Once, when we were on our annual beach holiday and I was sitting on the rocks overlooking the Atlantic, an old man with a saggy, sunburnt face came over and sat beside me and told me stories about his days fishing at sea. I must have been ten or eleven. His hand, which had been pointing at the threatening grey waves a moment earlier, suddenly landed on my thigh. I looked at it resting there, with its grimy fingernails and calloused knuckles and wondered if he realised his mistake, because he was still talking. From the side, his face was blotchy, with white, short hairs sprouting from his ear and nostrils. I don't like hairy ears. His chin was bristly and I thought it would feel like the sandpaper we used in the garage sometimes to take paint off cars. I held my breath and felt my stomach tighten as I waited. It would be rude to push his hand off but something wasn't right. After what felt like an eternity, his hand sneaked

further up my thigh, right to the top and I levered myself back, scuttled to my feet and escaped, my heart racing, gasping for air. I ran home but never mentioned it to Mum. Just locked myself in the bathroom for an age, with some sort of vague notion that I'd brought it on myself.

I spent most summers entertaining myself outside, while Owen sat in his room counting his lines. I played tennis against the wall and roller skated around the house. My Dad sold cars and often new stock would arrive en masse, from the Larne-Stranraer ferry and the cars were all lined up in our driveway, like the contestants in a beauty pageant, waiting for space on the catwalk, in the salesroom. I remember going too fast around the corner of the house, falling over and the roller skate scratching a long line along the car doors. Mum thought our house was an eyesore and accused Dad of wanting our drive to be like Tom's place.

Tom Mason stripped old cars for parts, which meant that his yard was a dumping ground. Dad didn't really have many friends. There were people, like Tom, that he would call out to see on his own and there were others, mostly relatives, that he would visit with Mum. Dad had a speech impediment so he could start a joke but could never get the timing right to hit the punch line. If he was out with Mum, she knew his stories so well she could finish them for him, but sometimes he'd forget that she wasn't there and he'd start to stutter, then pause and his audience would hold their breath hoping he'd get it out next time. Dad would call with Tom on a Sunday when Mum was in the hospital, on the pretext of finding a spare part for some old car he was fixing. I was fascinated by the way the cars were stacked on his front lawn, four high, like dismembered bodies in a mortuary. Ignoring the wind rushing through the valley, Tom would climb between the wrecks, searching for an old gasket, balancing and swaying alongside the creaking metal. He was a fairly fit old guy. 'Howl on there, we'll get you sorted,' he would say and Dad would stand there patiently, pulling his cap down over his ears. It's no surprise that wind farms have sprung up on the hills around there.

All the car dealers in the country had to take the same number of vehicles, regardless of whether the garages were rural or urban. The solid diesel stock sold well but no-one wanted the racy red sports car, which only had space for two short adults and one child in the back. Dad had to advertise that car for months before he could get rid of it so he

drove it across the country when he was chasing money owed, with Owen and I stuffed in the back. The problem was, everyone could hear the car's rotary engine for miles around so we mostly came home empty-handed. I tried not to look out of the car window, for fear of being spotted. The worst thing in the world was to be different from the other school kids.

Dad's business did well and he was regularly in the top ten dealerships, with the reward of a trip to some far-flung destination. I've always assumed that I got my wanderlust from him. Dad returned from the Bahamas with a sea-horse necklace and a Bermuda hat, just as the film about The Bermuda Triangle hit the cinema screens. From Japan, he arrived home with a silk-embroidered kimono and pictures of these elegant Japanese hostesses in traditional dress with white made-up faces. He called them geisha ladies. At the time, I didn't realise that the name was also used by Japanese prostitutes, the only difference being that the ladies of the night wore the bow of their sash, or obi, in front of their kimono, but true geisha wear their obi at the back. Something to do with being able to disrobe more quickly. Some of Dad's pictures showed the fat western car dealers with their arms draped around the delicate geisha. They would probably have preferred the hostesses to oblige them in this other role. Mum told Dad off for bringing back completely useless 'foreign' presents but I loved them.

A couple of years ago, I read about a boy who discovers, years after he had left home, that his father and sister had suffered from schizophrenia throughout his childhood and his mother had never mentioned it. He hadn't realized that their erratic, dysfunctional behaviour was abnormal. Likewise, my Mum cast aside concerns from well-meaning teachers about Owen's strange behaviour, on the basis that God had made the world for all sorts of people. Owen couldn't hold down a job and ended up working for himself, making garden furniture and selling it from his house. I think Dad was secretly pleased that at least one of us ended up with a front yard like Tom Mason's. Owen only got married because a local girl, who wanted babies, determined his future for him. He was so attached to his routines that, when his wife went into labour in the middle of the night, he packed his breakfast bowl and cereal box to take to the hospital. Part of me despairs that this is what will happen to my own son when I am no longer here and part of me thinks that at least he would be safe, with this sort of wife/mother. It is too far removed from what I wanted for

him, when he was born, to contemplate further.

Dad finally sold the business when Paul was too hung-over to get up in the morning but he still walked down daily to the shiny new supermarket, which replaced the garage, because he thought of the land as his. The highlight of my Mum's day was morning church, where she found out who had died or was about to die, courtesy of the health centre nurse. Between them, they ensured that villagers who hadn't spoken to their neighbour in thirty years, since a fallout about land, suddenly found reason to call and settle old scores. The nurse avoided Mum for a while when Paul landed up in hospital with liver cirrhosis and jaundice, although the talk was that he could still recite the poetry of WB Yeats after a dozen beers. A year later, Mum and Dad walked behind Paul's coffin to the family plot, six weeks before his forty-third birthday.

Like Owen, they accepted their grandson, David, without question. The fear I developed, after the old man on the cliffs, has lasted all my adult life and David was the result of a sudden and single encounter with someone I have not seen again. I never thought my son would develop strange behaviours, like his Uncle Owen, but at least now it has a name, autism. Trying to hold life together for David on my own, and earn a living, meant that after Dad died, I couldn't keep Mum out of the care home she had so despised. Last week, she was admitted to the same hospital she worked in for all those years and her thick white hair is being brushed occasionally by someone who doesn't speak her language. I dread going to see her, because I know I will see the question in her eyes as I turn to leave – why did you do this to me?

Finally, I look up at Ted's impatient glare and smile. I nod when he asks me to commit to being a team player. As I get up to leave, I tell him about the green ink and how the delivery cannot happen that night, as he has promised, and I walk back out to the factory floor and take my place on the line beside Gina.

Paula Matthews

Pitch Black at the Golden Moment

IT WAS 2005. I HAD JUST ATTAINED MY FULL QUALIFICATION AND SUCCESSFULLY followed my father into the profession. He was so proud of me. I was winning my life-long battle with calories, 27-years-old and looking good. To cap it all off, one of those nights, my boyfriend and I went for a walk on the Bangor seafront. He took me by the hand, and said, 'We'll have to get a ring on your finger.'

I had it made.

You may be starting to get the idea that I was a bit vain, especially when you hear what we planned to do next. We (meaning I) decided that my boyfriend would ask my Dad for my hand in marriage. On my birthday. So, on 10th November 2005, the night before it all happened, I stayed at my parents' house. I can remember the exquisite tension of keeping my romantic secret for just one more day. I was going to be a bride. A thin one. Everyone would be so happy, because of me. As I lay my head on the pillow that night, I felt like the cat that got the cream. I was having a golden moment.

'Help!'

It was pitch black. And cold. I sat bolt upright at the shout. It was my Mum and I knew what it meant. Just like you know what your baby is crying for, if they are hungry or cold or lonely, there was no mistaking this cry. I found myself racing down the stairs to my parents' room. Passing my sister at her door, she asked me what was happening.

'Just come,' I said. I was too busy running and I couldn't put it into words. I burst through the door, shouting, just like my sister, 'What's happened?'

My mum was shaking in her dressing gown and I looked to the spot where I knew the answer would be. There, in his usual place, with half-read books and crumpled lottery tickets on the cabinet beside him, lay my darling Daddy, stone dead in his bed.

I don't know if I can really find words to tell you about what happened next, it all just sort of happened. I can say that there was a period of time when my mum, my sister and myself stood with our arms around each other and screamed. I thought of my auntie, Dad's sister, and realised she would have to be told. So, with a shaky voice at an ungodly hour in the morning, I rang a close family member and dropped a bombshell on her that would resonate for the rest of our lives. The police came, a post-mortem was required and they had to stay with my Dad's body until a van came to take him away. By this time, there was a gathering of frightened people in the house, all trying to make sense of what was going on. Someone very kindly got in touch with my boyfriend and he was on the way to comfort me. One of the most significant spousal duties, performed before the marriage licence was granted. I couldn't say it then, but it was stark to see my parents' life together ending so suddenly at the very moment when ours began.

It was a massive heart attack. So big, Dad could never have known and would have suffered no distress. That is what they made a point of telling us, and I know that the professionals involved were making sure that they offered some sort of comfort in the darkness of it all. Truth be told, it is a comfort. I hear it is the best way to go, and it means that my dad will never suffer the indignities of old age, he will never have to sense death coming upon him, will never be afraid again. But at the same time, he will never know his grandchildren, doesn't know what I have done with my career and he wasn't there to walk his daughter down the aisle. In fact, he didn't even know we were getting married – and he came so close.

I would like to say that the months and years that followed were as you might have expected, but (and I am really sorry about this) there was more. On 18th November, my now-husband's 37th birthday, we were sitting in my mum's dining room having a very sombre 'celebration' when the phone rang. It was news that his brother had taken ill and within a couple of weeks, we were facing the hideous reality of burying him as well. Another untimely death and hardly a chance to prepare ourselves.

What would you suppose a man might do in a situation like this? A grieving girlfriend and a shocking loss in his own family? Things were so sad that we felt like we would never be normal people again. None of us had any concept that we might ever recover. Some people would turn to drink, or drugs, or run away from the woman who was compounding

the grief for them. My husband brought diamonds on Christmas Eve, proposing to me sensitively and quietly in my mummy's backyard beside the wheelie bin. Ok, the presence of a wheelie bin might seem to you to take away from the romance a bit, but for us it was a miracle. We were truly the people in the gutter looking at the stars.

You couldn't say it was a conventional engagement. When I was taken to meet the in-laws, they remarked kindly how quiet and pale I was and acknowledged that basically, since my dad died, I wasn't actually able to talk. I should probably have been on a charm offensive. Then I forgot to tell my new work colleagues that I was engaged to be married, and on the day I returned to work from sick leave, my boss just noticed the ring on my finger and scooped me up in an enormous hug, tears of joy in her eyes. So incredible to find people in your life who are rooting for you. And if you have something to recover from, please note, the sole reason I am writing this is that I am on your side in this. In the battle of You vs The Darkness, I want You to win.

There were many, many bleak moments when I looked down at my husband's tender diamonds sparking on my finger and realised I was not alone. These days, I never really wear that ring – it brings me back to something I have had to move on from. I don't want us to be defined by our tragedy, so I can't wear it on my finger.

You don't have to have diamonds to look at to be aware that you are not alone. I have discovered that since the events of 2005, I have become a member of a sacred club of broken people. They don't always have much confidence, and some of them don't like to tell their story too often – but they are there. And I am drawn to them like a magnet, everywhere I go. They always build me up again, because they can see that at one time, I fell down. I tend to think that once you have lived in the truly pitch black, you start to really, really long to shine a bit of light for other people. Clichéd or not. It's just who you become. If you are in the dark, take note. Some of us are trying to shine a light for you to find your way back out again.

In time, we did find our way back out, although that's not the whole of the story. During our engagement we spent the weekends at my mum's and there were lots of times when my husband, who was so strong and comforting during the day, whimpered like a little child in his sleep. We turned to food for comfort and by the time our wedding rolled

around, I was losing my battle with weight again.

The day Mum and my sister took me to buy my wedding dress, I just wanted to get it over with. It was overwhelming to think I'd be processing in this thing without Dad and I didn't want to look in the mirror and see the evidence of dead-Dad chocolate ice-cream. So, I took the first frock I tried on – and it probably wasn't the nicest. I don't really look at the wedding photos now, there is a close up one of my face and it just looks tired and worn – no nuptial radiance at all. And the dress, if I am honest, very closely resembled a Christmas cake.

It's amazing how, if life provides you with an exit from the darkness, you might have to let things get a bit crazy to really go with it. I say this because, although I had been uptight about what would inevitably be a wedding tinged by sadness, wishing that my dad could give me away, or just to be his daughter again for one more moment, when the time came a different spirit altogether possessed me.

It was the culmination of hours of just sitting with each other's grief, of a man with the remarkable to strength to propose in death's wake, of planning to live on and have a marriage, of bringing everyone back to the same church where we had buried Daddy, exactly two years later to the day. The result of deciding to show them something good, not something bad. New life instead of lost life. There we all were, the bridal party standing outside the church, music striking up to walk us in – and people were probably feeling sorry for me – the fatherless bride. But all I was thinking was, *if I want to marry this man, I am going to have to parade up this church in front of everyone we know dressed as a Christmas cake and there is nothing else for it.*

And I did.

They should have changed the music to Flight of the Valkyries or The Storm Troopers March from Star Wars. I was no pretty, floral, angelic bride wafting up the church like a little fairy. I was a warrior woman on a mission – to move my life and my husband, damn my whole family if they'd let me, out of the darkness and into a new life. So I married my Wheelie-Bin Diamond and a few days later, on honeymoon, I convinced him that it was time to found a new generation.

We have two children now. Their births into our severely depleted family were like two solar events for us. I can honestly say I've never laughed so much in my life as I have since they were born. Even in the times before the pitch black came down. These days we live the sort of ordinary life that you might not even notice. I have no complaints, last time we were noticeable we were the cast of a morose melodrama. And there is no time for my former vanity, which has been left behind. I know what really matters now.

If your life turns pitch black at the golden moment, please remember that that is not the end of the story, even though it looks like it is. Remember the wheelie-bin diamonds, the Christmas cake bride and the two solar events. Remember that people who are enveloped by darkness conspire with one another to bring some sort of light back. Remember my desperation to tell you that I somehow managed to grapple my way out and no longer be consumed by the pitch black that caught me. If you remember nothing else of this at all, remember that you will grapple your way out someday, too.

contributors

A Joseph Black is from Carnlough and writes Flash Fiction and short stories. His work can be found online on various websites, in print in Belfast literary journal *The Incubator* and in translation in *HESA Inprint* magazine, Finland. He will eventually get round to sorting out www.ajosephblack.com at some indeterminate point in the future.

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 last year's Fish Short Story Prize.

Sandra Coffey is a writer from Galway. She is a former journalist. Sandra's upbringing on a farm has influenced some of her writing but she is also inspired by human nature and human tragedy. She is the founder of Oscar Wilde Festival, Galway. @SandraCoffey

Kelly Creighton's (Editor) debut novel 'The Bones of It' is published by *Liberties Press* (May 2015). She was runner up for the Michael McLaverty Short Story Award and shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Award, the Cúirt New Writing Prize and the Fish Short Story Prize. 'Three Primes' is published by *Lapwing*. @KellyCreighton

Elizabeth Dass is a recent graduate of a Masters in Journalism and a freelance researcher. She has worked with a variety of different organisations and loves to hear people's stories. Elizabeth loves to get lost in a book and constantly seeks out new and engaging story-tellers.

Anna Foley lives in her native East Cork with her husband and daughter, and an array of pets. She is a writer of fiction and memoir and has recently had work published in *Sixteen Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *Word Bohemia* and *Silver Apples Magazine*. @annaonf

Grace Guy is a lawyer in real life but dreams of escaping and becoming a writer. She took her first evening writing class this January in Rathmines Senior College in a New Year attempt to fulfil her dream. She is from Bray, county Wicklow.

Louise Kennedy spent her childhood in Holywood, County Down. She was shortlisted for both the Fish Memoir and Short Story prizes 2015. She lives in Sligo with her husband, son and daughter.

Noel King was born and lives in Tralee. His poems, haiku, short stories, reviews and articles have appeared in magazines and journals in thirty-seven countries. His poetry collections are published by Salmon Poetry: *Prophesying the Past*, (2010), *The Stern Wave* (2013) and *Sons* (forthcoming in 2015). He has edited more than fifty books of work by others. Anthology publications include *The Second Genesis: An Anthology of Contemporary World Poetry* (AR.A.W., India, 2014).

Schira Lane was shortlisted for the 2014 K Award and 2015 Gem Street: Beyond the Axis with distinction of Honourable Mention. She was recently published in *The Galway Review* and *100 Words 100 Books*. She is drafting a novel and has two others she hasn't tried to publish. @schiralane

D.W. Lewis is a writer based in the north west of Ireland. https://twitter.com/d_w_lewis

Susan Lindsay moved from Dublin to Galway in 2004. She read for Poetry Ireland Introductions in 2011. Doire Press published her poetry books *Whispering the Secrets* and *Fear Knot* (2011, 2013). She facilitates Different Conversations mediated by poetry and has recently completed a related full-length Memoir. www.susanlindsayauthor.blogspot.ie @susanhlindsay

Katie McCabe is a former Occupational Therapist from Sligo who abandoned a very sensible career to pursue journalism. She now works as a magazine editor and freelance feature writer in London town. By night, she writes fiction that has only recently been allowed out of the secret short story drawer. @KMCCabie katiemccabe.co.uk

Paul McVeigh. *The Good Son* from Salt Publishing, was published on April 15. Visit Paul McVeigh's website at <http://paulmcveighwriter.com/> or his blog at <http://paulmcveigh.blogspot.co.uk/>

Bernie McQuillan completed her MA in Creative Writing in Queens, Belfast. In 2015, her story 'The Voices' was runner up in Emerald Street's Short Story competition, 'Grass is Greener' runner up in Creative Writing.ie & UK and 'A Friend Indeed' was published in Woman's Way magazine. Her first novel 'A year in the life of Maggie Sweeney' is looking for an agent and she can be contacted at @BernieMcQuillan.

Brian Mallaghan is a writer and music lover living in Newtownards. He has studied creative writing at the Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast and Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart. Brian has contributed to a number of publications and websites and is currently working on his first novel. [Twitter.com/@brian_mallaghan](https://twitter.com/brian_mallaghan)

Paula Matthews has been published in *A New Ulster*, *Four x Four*, *Editfy* and *The Honest Ulsterman*. Paula chairs Fickle Favours Drama Company, is on the steering group of the Northern Ireland Mental Health Art and Film Festival and recently completed a mentorship with Moyra Donaldson through LitNet NI.

Jessamine O Connor's chapbooks *Hellsteeth* and *A Skyful of Kites*, are available from www.jessamineoconnor.com. Facilitator of the Wrong Side of the Tracks Writers and The Hermit Collective; winner of the iYeats and Francis Ledwidge awards; widely published, she is usually a poet. This is her first flash fiction. www.jessamineoconnor.com
www.hermitcollective.weebly.com www.jessamineoconnor.blogspot.com

Conor O'Toole is a music teacher and DJ from Cork. He is also an award-winning short story writer (RTÉ's Francis McManus Awards) and radio documentary maker. He presents the weekly alternative music show, and accompanying blog, *The Underground of Happiness* on UCC98.3FM. twitter.com/Conat1

Abby Oliveira is a writer and performer who is primarily known as a performance poet. She was 2014 Lingo Festival (Dublin) poetry slam champion, and her play 'Without a Paddle' (devised with Fahy Productions, Belfast) was performed to great reception at the 2014 Pick n' Mix theatre festival (Belfast). twitter.com/OliveGroov
facebook.com/AbbyOliveiraSpokenWord soundcloud.com/abbyo-1

Nollaig Rowan's stories and poetry have been published in journals and broadcast on radio, including the Francis MacManus radio short story on RTE 1. One of her stories has been adapted for the screen and will premiere as a short film in 2015. You can find Nollaig on Facebook.

Claire Savage (Features Editor) is a copywriter/journalist who has been published in The Incubator, A New Ulster, NI Community Arts Partnership poetry anthology, and the Blackstaff Press website. In June 2014, one of Claire's poems was performed in Belfast as part of a Reading and Writing for Peace project. In July 2014, Claire received a National Lottery-funded grant from the Arts Council NI. Blog: clairesavagewriting.wordpress.com

Valerie Sirr's debut collection of short stories received Arts Council of Ireland funding and is currently on submission. Her widely published works have received national and international literary awards, including 2007 Hennessy New Irish Writer Award, Arts Council literature bursaries, and an M. Phil in Creative Writing from Trinity College, Dublin.
www.valeriesirr.wordpress.com @ValerieSirr www.facebook.com/valerie.sirr

Daniel Soule - 'The Grappler' is Daniel's first published short story. However, in a previous life he co-authored a long, dry research monograph and papers about Scottish national identity. He lives in Co. Antrim, keeping the wolf from the door by travelling across Ireland, the UK and Norway teaching academics about writing research. @Grammatologer

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