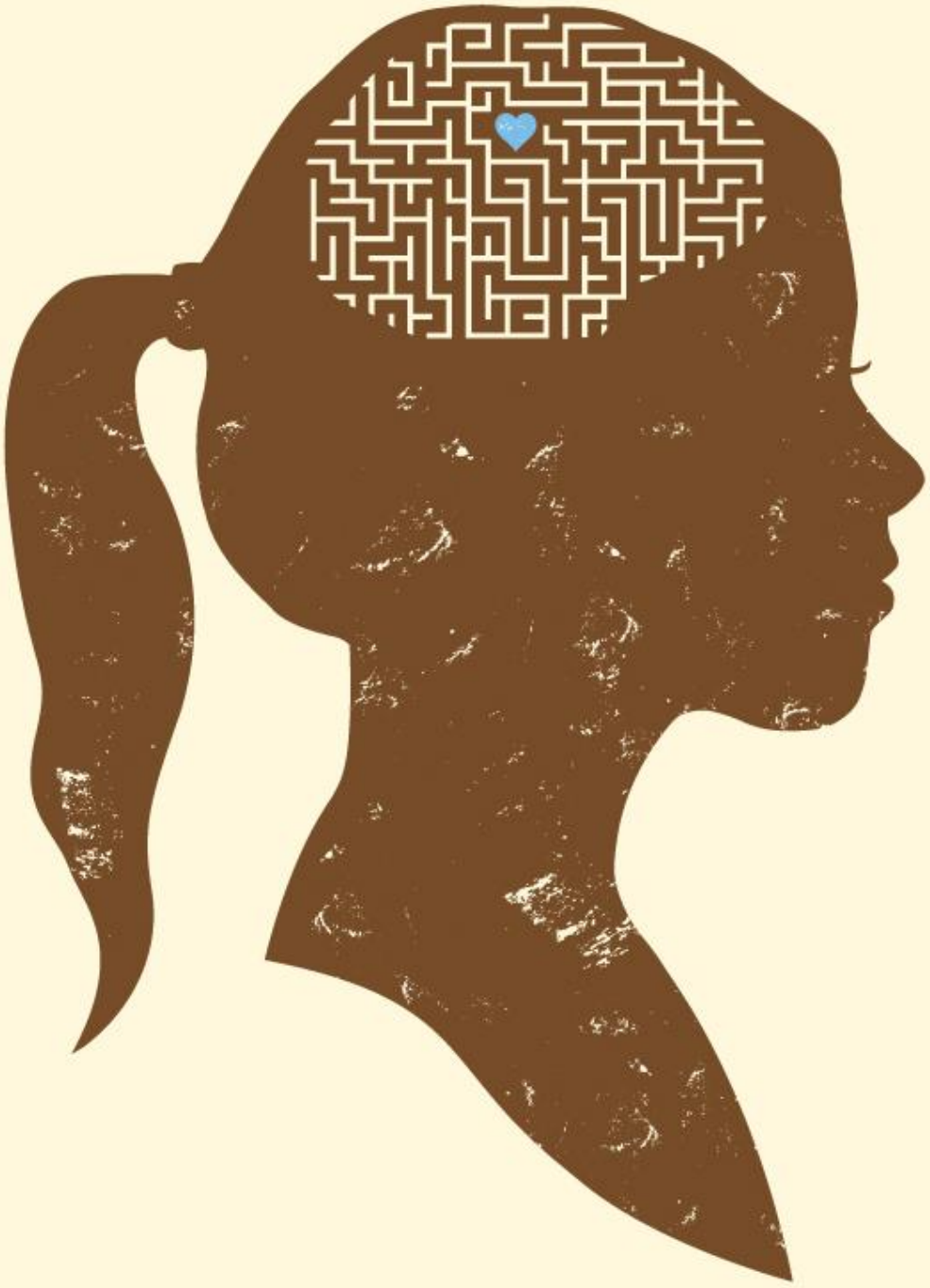


THE INCUBATOR

ISSUE 6 | FICTION | PLAYS



the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(September 2015)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 7

(due to be published in December 2015)

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

*and **essays** (2500 words max.)*

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editorial

I AM DELIGHTED TO SHARE THIS ISSUE, WHICH FEATURES WONDERFUL NEW FICTION AND one scene plays. Anne Caughey has chosen her favourite pieces of flash from the ever increasing amount of submissions we receive here at the journal, and I was blown away by the short stories we were sent. It is getting more difficult to choose the final contributions and we have to redirect a lot of great work, but thankfully submissions are not long in coming round again, and we are sent new fiction that we can't wait to start reading again.

In this issue I speak to Claire Savage about my debut novel The Bones of It, and three recently published books by local authors are reviewed: The Good Son by Paul McVeigh, The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories by Jane Talbot, and Aloysius Tempo by Jason Johnson.

Issue 6 is something of a bumper edition, with plenty to read in these lengthening September evenings.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton
Editor

in interview: Kelly Creighton

author of The Bones of It

AS EDITOR OF *THE INCUBATOR*, AN ARTS FACILITATOR, WRITER OF POETRY AND A BUSY mum, Kelly Creighton has many talents. She can now add 'crime novelist' to her repertoire, as she celebrated the launch of her debut novel The Bones of It – published by Liberties Press — in June this year.
She's also working on a short story collection, as well as her next novel, which will also be in the crime genre. Kelly's work has previously been published in a range of literary journals, including The Stinging Fly, Litro and Lampeter Review. She was also shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing in 2015 and was named runner-up for the Michael McLaverty Short Story Award in 2014.

With a compelling first-person narrative, plenty of twists and turns and a poignant insight into the lasting effects of the Troubles, The Bones of It is a page-turner from start to finish. Initially destined to be a play, Kelly first got the idea for the foundation of the book after observing two rather heated encounters quite closely to each other.

"I was travelling by train a couple of years ago and a young man sat beside me," she says. "For a good hour, he had a succession of heated phone conversations and what really struck me was that he wanted everyone to know he was fuming. Then I got off the train and there was an older man yelling at his little boy in the street.

"From what I could make out, both reactions seemed highly overblown and I knew there had to be something much deeper going on. It gave me the idea of writing a story about two angry men — one younger and one older — as I want to understand where that anger was

coming from. I didn't have characters or a plot, but I had a topic to revisit."

It was Kelly's subsequent trip to the John Hewitt International Summer School (JHISS) in Armagh in 2013 that cemented the story in her head. Here, she attended a number of prose and poetry events, including some playwriting workshops, where she developed her two central characters — Scott and Duke McAuley. During this time, she quickly realised that her busy role as a mum would restrict the time she could give to a play, so began entertaining the idea of a novel. A subsequent talk on the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report at the festival then prompted the structure of her story and she had her hook.

"It was a talk that stood out for me," she says. "The statistics about children of the Troubles – people my age – were stark. I wrote down the phrase, 'swept up by terrorism'. It had me thinking about the way young people get into trouble nowadays — the different influences — and if it's any easier being a young man now than it was during the Troubles. I pictured a father and son living on two different planets…"

That father and son are brought to vivid life in Scott and Duke, with Kelly immersing herself in the mind of her young male narrator to ensure an authentic voice. Indeed, it is the voice of a story which Kelly considers the most important aspect of any tale – if it isn't believable, then the story falls flat.

"For me, voice is everything," she says. "Writing in the voice of a 22-year-old man, I had to analyse every sentence, and continually ask myself if Scott would really say or think that. But I was attracted to the challenge of this. Who's telling the story is the only thing that matters to me — and why they're telling it to me in that particular way."

As for character and plot, these are "as important as each other," she adds. They must feel real and in writing a crime novel, the plot has to keep up a suitable pace. You can't, says Kelly, rely on "beautiful language to awe the reader."

"Things have to happen," she says. "The reader has to want to turn the page. I don't see plot and character as having formed separately at all for this project. I think they came with the

dialogue braided in."

Dialogue is something Kelly particularly likes to write, which is why, perhaps, a play was her first choice for The Bones of It. It's also part of what makes her debut novel so accessible and compelling to read.

Set in Co Down, The Bones of It is a psychological thriller which tells the story of Scott, who's been kicked out of university and is now living with his father, Duke, for the first time. Scott, whose mother died when he was young, subsequently recounts his childhood and the year past in a series of diary entries, weaving 'a tale of lies, of paranoia, of rage'.

"Originally, I thought of it more as a father and son story, so I was surprised when it got billed as crime," says Kelly. "I didn't know how broad the crime genre was."

A lonely character, Scott couldn't be more different from his father — a counsellor who was previously in prison for double murder. Told in the style of a diary, the novel subsequently unfolds over six months, Scott recounting the story of his upbringing and what's happened since he's come home.

As a regular writer of both poetry and prose, Kelly subsequently sandwiched the writing of The Bones of It between her other writerly pursuits. She also used National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) to kick-start the physical act of writing the book, challenging herself to pull all her thinking and notes together in just one month to produce, well, the bones of a story.

"After the JHISS came three months of sitting on the story, wondering which angle to come at it from — I knew there was more to it than a short story," she says. "Then NaNoWriMo came around and I impulsively went for it and got the first draft down in less than three weeks. It was almost like writing a stream of consciousness, so it worked well to write it really quickly, and it also ensured that the voice was consistent."

Of course, it took a little longer to produce the final draft of her book, but NaNoWriMo resulted in a body of work which Kelly then redrafted, edited, wrote and rewrote. This took about a year, during which time she launched The Incubator.

Fusing together the key themes of conflict, masculinity and nature versus nurture, The Bones of It quickly caught the interest of Liberties Press, after Kelly submitted her manuscript. Indeed, the publishing process then accelerated at almost warp speed, as the

finished book was on the shelves within a few months.

As co-founder of the Square Circle Writers' Group in Newtownards, Kelly says the support of other writers along the way definitely helped. Indeed, she says being part of such a group is a great way to get feedback on your work and to gain confidence in your writing ability.

Inspired by authors such as Annie Proulx and Margaret Atwood, as well as Raymond Carver and Claire Keegan, Kelly adds that it's important to write what you really want to write. After all – if you don't care about the story and the characters, why should anyone else?

As for her writing style? She says: "I'm definitely a planner when it comes to telling stories!"

Interview by Claire Savage

The Bones of It is published by Liberties Press www.libertiespress.com

short story

Diana DeCesaris Champa

She Called It the Old Man Trick

THE FOUR OF US WERE STUCK HOME DURING A BLIZZARD ONE JANUARY NIGHT. IT WAS me, my roommate Sarah, our upstairs neighbour Charlie, and my old friend and neighbour Eve.

We were living in an old brownstone that was cut up into small apartments. Charlie moved in first and lived there the longest. There was a long attic apartment that Eve rented. It suited her and her daughter Lily Rose. Sarah and I had a corner apartment on the second floor, a steal at four fifty a month.

Outside the snow was coming down hard, hard and fast. All day the weathermen called for caution; early school closings, city office shutdowns, park and driving bans were in effect. Even the bars were closing.

"Is it sticking?" Charlie asked.

It was. Almost too thick to see through, soon it would be too heavy to walk through. In between the plow run, with the gaslights on and no cars it could have been 1899 not 1999.

"Lily Rose is asleep. Can I plug the monitor in over here? My power's still on, isn't yours?" Eve asked. Eve and I met when we were teenagers and had one of those childhood friendships at seventeen. She did the family thing early, right after college, and it was only after her husband died and she moved back that we reconnected.

"I feel guilty, leaving her up there."

“Eve, she's only upstairs and I wouldn't worry about it. Besides, people had kids before baby monitors.”

Sarah handed Eve a drink. “Here, have a drink and try to relax.”

Eve always needed help loosening up. At three years older than my twenty-four years she seemed much older and wiser. I was only just getting my heart broken for the first time.

"I'm done with men," I said. "I'm off 'em. Sex, love, the whole thing, I'm not getting obsessed anymore. It's winter, it's snowing, it's all about hibernation now. I'm dating myself and spending time, energy, money all on me.”

"And sex with yourself then," Sarah said. Sarah had a way of poking fun at my grand and ridiculous statements, trying to help me out of my dark moods. Sometimes it worked.

"Sarah, I'm serious," I said.

"Oh Jackie, I know you're serious. Serious about your sadness, solitude and sex," Sarah said with slippery s's punctuating her sentences.

Sarah and I were suited to be roommates; we joked and said it was because we were both a size 6 making our wardrobes double in size the day we moved in together. But really, she was light and easy to my serious and melancholy. Like when I lamented my teenage acne and complimented her on her nice skin. She was half Asian and I said she must come from a long line of beautiful women. She said she used baby lotion because if it was good enough for a baby’s bum it was good enough for her.

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend, I'm sorry you broke up," Charlie said.

"She's been dating this old dude, but she's done now," Sarah explained.

"Like how old?" Eve asked.

"Who is it? How did you meet him?" Charlie asked.

"It’s over,” I said and poured pink cosmopolitans in everyone's glass.

"Just like you Jackie, you're having sex with someone who uses a sugar substitute and

gets a senior discount and you're trying to glaze right over it," Sarah said.

"He was a visiting artist at the art school always and I answered a call for models. His name is Richard."

"Clothes on or off?"

"Did you call him Dick?"

"When did this start up?" Eve asked.

"We went out for dinner and this professor came over to say hi and asked him if I was his daughter. He said no, then afterwards said 'can you believe he thought I was your father?' so I said 'yeah, I know, you're older than my dad.' It sort of made us, I don't know, get over the whole age thing."

"Sounds sweet, romantic even," Charlie said. Charlie dates a guy named Frank, Frank plays the trumpet in a local band and gets paid in beer and said he wasn't ready for a relationship. I could see how Charlie might want some romance.

"She calls it an old man trick," Sarah added, "I call it Viagra."

"Trick?" Eve asked me. I saw her now; her hair was all tucked up in a twist with little red fine curls at her neck. Her nose was marvellous and she had nice cheekbones and I could imagine her dressed in richly patterned robes and against dark velvet backdrops. Eve would make a good portrait model I thought, better than me.

"I didn't say trick, I said it was different. Like when he holds the door open he like puts his hand on my back, as if he's gliding me through, it's all kind of Ginger Rogers Fred Astaire. When was the last time someone did that to you? Guys our age, they don't know whether to hold the door, not hold the door, they're so wishy-washy."

"Forget doors, they fumble with words," Sarah said. "What I hate the most is when you don't know what they're saying. Are they asking you out, do they want a girlfriend? Or is it just a hook up? A phone call and sex -- no sleeping over, no breakfast -- just sex."

"Well what I'm saying is there's none of that confusion. He calls and asks me to dinner, it’s a date. That's part of the attraction."

"And he told you look like Sophia Loren and wanted to paint you. There's a good line," Sarah said.

"But even with a good line, I don’t know if I could have sex with a blue haired old man. But that's just me.”

"So, did you have sex with him? Oh my god I can't even,” Charlie said.

"Yeah come on tell us," Sarah stopped to take a sip of her drink. "Is it, you know,” she raised her eyebrows as her brown eyeballs looked at my crotch, "Grey. Down there?"

This triggered peals of laughter and giggles from everyone. We emptied the glass pitcher but weren't done yet. Neither was the blizzard. When I pulled the curtain aside to look out the window it was like looking through gauze, the wind begging to come in. I was glad we were inside and warm.

"You're talking about dating people with blue hair, when you dated that guy Ryan who dyed his hair to match his outfits? Blue, pink, mauve, black. Really Sarah? He forgot your birthday. He doesn't get points for that," I said.

Charlie said if we were taking points away for things she could one-up Sarah. Her last boyfriend was gay. She took a greedy sip from her martini glass and poured another for herself. She started fingering her pendant. It was a flat round piece of bronze with copper wires holding bones in place, real bird bones, a gift from her mother.

"Ever date a guy who comes out of the closet after you break up? I mean I know it's not me, it’s timing and all, but really? How do you think that makes someone feel? I'll tell you - shitty. Now there's a point for me. Two actually."

"That happened to you twice?"

"The first one came out years after, so not while we were dating. Whatever. But the other one, I should have known. For a while it was nice. I seriously loved him even though

but we hardly ever had sex. Obviously now I know why, he played for the other team."

"Sounds like he wanted to play with the other team."

Charlie drinks again. "It's probably not even my worst sexual experience."

Sarah said, "Jackie, you should write this down."

Sarah was always telling me to write things down. I was the Paul Varjack to her Holly Golightly she said. She was reading Breakfast at Tiffany's now and had blond highlights in her dark hair, which she was trying to grow out. You'll want all this material some day, she told me.

I went to look for pen and paper. I suddenly felt like I didn't know what I wanted. Was meeting Richard nothing or everything? Outside, the cold air was pulsing out through the thick snow, like dancers at a hard-core rave. It was accumulating fast.

When I went back in the room I taped a piece of paper to the wall and started to draw lines to make a chart.

"What are you doing?" asked Eve.

"Your stories," I said. "I'll make us a chart, whoever has the most experiences wins."

"Wins what?" asked Charlie.

"Why?" Eve asked.

"Well I figure someday I'm going to be like eighty and Sarah and I will be living in an old people's home, totally out of it and we'll need this to remember our good times. And since we'll be all cracked out on old people pills and blind by then I should probably make the letters really big," I said and I began documenting.

"I don't want to do this," Eve said. She put her drink down and her mouth tightened like she was sucking on a grapefruit. "I don't see the point of telling people stuff like that. It's too personal," she said.

"Who's going to know? This is just for us for fun," Sarah said.

"It's different for me."

"Because you're a mom?" Sarah asked. "For sure you've had sex."

"I don't want people to know what I've done and not done," she said.

"Eve, it's long past the day when we have to pretend we don't have sex before marriage. Or after it." I regretted it the minute I said it. We all knew she hadn't had sex since her husband died.

"I'll tell you what, if I write a novel someday I'll change your names. In fact I'll change them now. Here."

Across the top of the paper I wrote names: Angie, Melanie, Tuggle and Mare.

"What the hell is Tuggle? Is that some kind of sex position?" Sarah asked.

"They're the names of the four girls in the movie Where the Boys Are. It's like the quintessential chick flick, way before Sex and the City or any of that. They go on a road trip to Fort Lauderdale to search for boys. But for them it's more about negotiating how not to have sex. They're all so afraid if they say yes, before they get married, they'll be damaged goods or used up or something. And of course the one girl who does have sex totally gets screwed. Well, you know what I mean... I can't believe you're never seen it, it's like a classic."

When I lived at home I watched it with my mom dozens of time, always guessing which character I might have been had I been a co-ed in the 1950s. I suppose we all do that when faced with female archetypes, put ourselves in the shoes of one of them, the one we most resemble. Or the one we'd most like to be.

"Ok, so for categories, let's see..."

"Ok if we're going to do this we should have some rules," Sarah said, "And open the categories up a bit, like, I should get some points for phone sex. Ryan and I did it all the time."

"Does internet sex count?" Charlie asked.

"Who have you had internet sex with?" Sarah.

"No one," she said, "but I wanted to know if it counted."

"Sure it counts," I said, “it all counts. That's the point."

Eve was quiet.

Phone Sex, Internet, Gay, Painter. Poet. Boy Band, Fred Astaire.

Sarah said, “Don’t forget your old man category? Why don’t you call it Sweet and Low?”

"Add Foreign or International as a category," said Charlie, "like when you're one of those students visiting."

"Like an exchange student?"

"Yeah that's it,” Charlie Said, “I did that it university, Europe for my junior year abroad. It was great."

"I always wanted to do that," Eve said.

"The museums, the hotels, the people, I had so much fun. And it means I rack up a few points here: Germany, Holland, France. Germany again."

More drinks passed.

"So Charlie, would you say that you were liebe machen?" Sarah asks and starts to thrust motion with her hips though she falls over from laughing so hard.

"I'm going to run out of room on this poster and we haven't even gotten to the good stuff yet," I said.

"Do Canadians count?"

This time we all laughed. And drank some more.

I checked the weather. The snow hadn’t stopped and the wind was still going. I watched the treetops, their long naked arms shivering under the weight of the wet stuff.

"Sarah, you must meet a lot of actors working in the theatre?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, but I haven't dated any to be honest," Sarah said.

"Do you remember that guy from the play that you hooked me up with?" I motioned to Sarah, "The beautiful one, I mean Greek God gorgeous with really nice arms and chest and an ass that was like... like good enough to chisel that shit in marble. Well that guy was, definitely, on the small side."

"Speaking of small...do you remember the guy who used to live downstairs? One time, I can't believe I'm telling this, one time we were together, yes Jackie, we hooked up for a while, anyway, one time I told him, 'okay go ahead put it in' and he said 'I did' and, then," Sarah stops mid-sentence.

No one can tell if she's laughing so much she's crying or if she's just crying over the small penis which is making her laugh. Either way she's lost the plot.

"Okay so back to my small dick story, because it wasn't small that was the problem. That can be dealt with," I said.

"Michelangelo’s David isn't actually, ah impressive, in that way,” Charlie said.

"With the actor the thing was the sex not the size. Ugh, it was all quick and clean, like he needed to be clean right afterwards. As soon as it was over, minutes mind you, single digit minutes, he jumped right up and showered. Right away. Like, like he was trying to clean the sex right off him. Gorgeous yes, but I couldn't deal. "

"That's weird."

"Maybe he was embarrassed? You know nervous because it was your first time together."

"I went out with him more than once, it was always the same. I can’t believe how badly I blew him off. The sex was so bad I didn't want to see him again I don't think that's

normal, to be that jumpy and clean about it."

"I knew a girl whose her husband cleaned up right after too. He kept a tissue box and a cup of water by the bed. She would shower while he cleaned up, you know, by dunking in the water," Eve said.

"By dunking what?" Sarah asked her.

"Dunking it, in the glass. She told everyone in our mom group about it one day. It's weird, right? I mean maybe I'm just not that experienced but it seems weird."

Eve ended her story with a sigh that seemed to signal something to the storm and icy chunks fell from the roof to the ground.

"That is sooooo not romantic," Charlie said.

"How fucking bizarre."

"Um, I'm experienced, way experienced. And that is strange," Sarah said. Sarah took a sip from her glass.

"Did they ever mix up the clean-up glass with a real one and drink it in the middle of the night?"

"Ew."

There was an awkward laughter while the wind whipped against the house.

Maybe it was the old house, or the drink, but I was starting to feel like we could be anywhere, any year, sitting in the kitchen talking about boys. But then, I thought back to Eve's hesitation and to Where the Boys Are. We couldn't really be anywhere else.

"Everyone has bad sex," Sarah announced. "And there's loads of reasons it can happen. It's like school lunch, no one really likes the stuff but everyone has it at some point. More than once."

"Bad sex needs to be on our chart."

There was more drink.

"This can't only be about the bad sex, it's got to be about some of the good stuff as well. "

"Well you could have a big dick category."

"How big is big? I need a visual," I said.

Charlie rummaged through her bag, her silver bracelets rattling on her arm. "Like this big?"

"Oh my god that's a dog's chew toy. Please put that away."

Sarah left and came back with a few objects: a cordless telephone, pencil, carrot and a stick of butter.

"Okay, so I think if it's like this pencil or smaller than this stick of butter no points," Sarah said. "But the carrot or bigger..."

"Is that carrot organic?" I asked her.

"Does size really matter?"

"I once knew an Irish guy who claimed his could touch the bottom of a pint glass," Charlie said.

"I guess it does tonight."

"Well, I'll take good head over a big dick any day."

"Fair enough. A man who's willing, and good to go, deserves his very own category," I said and drew another box: DOWN.

"What about a P.A.?"

"What's that?"

"A Prince Albert, it's a piercing, on the penis."

"What does that feel like?"

"On the tip. He had one, Prince Albert, that's why it's called that. Apparently he did it so he could button it out of the way."

"Oh. My god. My high school history teacher would be so offended that it's named after a monarch."

"They have to hold their fingers over the hole if they take it out, when they wee," Charlie couldn't make it till the end of the sentence before laughing.

Vanilla, ménage, al fresco, break-up sex.

I left the girls and went over to the window and blew on it, my breath fogging it up. I moved my head up a little higher to see out of the window rather than rubbing at the fog; I didn't want to disturb it. Now we were losing track of the hours, the lovers and the rounds. Soon the neighbours would be out shovelling pathways to their front doors and the plows would carve out space for the cars.

It was over. I wouldn't see Richard anymore. Twenty-five years is too much. I could fit between us.

Diarmuid Hickey

A Man and A Mountain

HE COULD NOT BRING THEM ANY FURTHER. THOUGH HE WANTED TO. STEERING THROUGH the oblivion with them. His passengers. The blank expressions, those hooded lids. But his breath sometimes caught. He would be mid-word and suddenly gasp and it would all come back to him. His blood seemed to rush then always like it was in a hurry but had nowhere to go.

"Sir, are you alright?"

The hands were the funniest things, how they would lose all use. A tingling sensation, pins nicking at the pudgy flesh. He felt that if one of the passengers were to lose it finally and hijack the whole thing and strike his hands in one extremist's strike with a hammer or some other instrument of the imagination then he would not feel a thing. They could nail him through the palms of his hands and he would linger there for them as an idol to adored and spat at in equal measure. But still his hands would not feel the wounds, so numb were they.

He feigned control in times like this. The authoritarian, imbued with knowledge. But it was an uneasy structure. He knew the children knew that the whole thing was dependant on their lazy agreement to conspire. It was why he didn't slam the ruler nor wag an extended finger in their faces. The hierarchy of authority in a school was blurred by uniforms and acne. And truly they believed in him. They believed his knowledge dwarfed their own. They believed in the levelling of essence of education, that all were offered the same opportunity. They were curious of everything, every outbreak of disease every pop star meltdown every lying politician. And he was the centre of their burgeoning curiosity.

Because teachers always always were. Tradition is only the limits of the reality that people settle for. When he didn't have breath he still had her. Sometimes he would sit with her before he left it all and it all left him.

"Come away with me."

"You have no plan. Why would I leave everything I have here?"

"Love?"

After that she did not sit with him anymore, preferring the company of other men and women who found it easy to always maintain their breath. He mourned her like autumn mourned the disappearing sun. He promised himself that he would come back to her with a plan, and so compelled, he began to think and think and think. He thought so hard he feared the gears of his brain could be heard by all around him. But his thoughts were shrouded, by chalky breaths coughed up from the oblivious faces in front of him.

He sought perspective. An opportune day came when all the others marched the streets of the town with placards expressing insatiable disgruntlement. The day was finer than any other he could remember in recent memory. He walked from town toward the mountain in a north-westerly fashion. He was carrying a ridiculously large backpack, full of ridiculous things. He stopped in shame and embarrassment by a stream that babbled idiotically like a curious child's questions. He took from his backpack a small travel iron, seven tins of baked beans, examples of ballot papers, a drawing T-square and silver cufflinks. Carefully, he bundled the assorted items together and found a space in the ditch surely made by a rather voluptuous badger. He made a nest there for them, covering them in the wispy heather that grew by the road until they were invisible. He smiled and promised to pick them up on the way home. They were forgotten and will remain there still until the heather will likely rot and magpies claim the cufflinks and everything else rust or fall into a natural disrepair.

There are two ways to climb the mountain. One is quite easy, the side that is bare and only rock that you bring your grandfather up at the start of every summer to plant the county flag. He took the second way through the wood. It was not a yellow wood but

coniferous green and thick. Branches poked out from every conceivable angle prodding against his pudding flesh. His feet shifted through the soft brown needles discarded reluctantly by their former hosts. He broke a fresh needle from a tree and put it in his mouth and chewed carefully. Tasted like Christmas at home always a real tree. His bag became caught in the branches three times. Each time he despaired at his decision to bring such a bag in the first place.

Everything was quite obscured in the wood. He checked his breathing a number of times, but thought of how trees exhale oxygen and joy rose within him as considered the O2 bath he was surely in. This was quelled with the worry that perhaps there was too much oxygen and he would overdose so he began to claw his way through the needle branches until his bag caught and he fell on his back like an overturned turtle in a traffic accident. He was knocked back into a sense of calm.

The woods broke some halfway up the mountain. A thick gorse covered the west face he sought to climb. Later in spring this gorse would be a vivid yellow, each bush burning. However everything was still dead. Worse, a fog had descended. Chilly moisture caught in his throat as he walked through the thicket. He could not see the wood behind him, nor the town and civilisation beyond that. He felt so utterly, terribly alone.

He stopped awhile. Sought some food from his backpack, which he used as a seat (crunchy granola bars that did not taste of anything, thank you for asking). He wondered at his esteemed and educated colleagues walking the streets in organised disgruntlement. Were they thinking of him? Was she, wherever she was? Would they worry if they saw him covered in fog and gorse on the mountainside, with his obscene backpack and the crumbs of granola caught in his beard?

He thought to go back. But he could not face the forest and the gloom and the oxygen.

He could only go forward. He would have to go forward.

He found a ram skull resting near the summit. It was clean, almost whitewashed. Two cavernous eye sockets and a full set of teeth. He imagined eyes for it and gave it a

tongue.

"Have you anything to say now?"

Silence. The wind. The droplets of fog dribbling off the gorse.

"Coward."

He stopped one last time before the peak to urinate. He wished he had saved it for the ram's head to wipe the smile off the bastard's face.

At last he came to the top. The gorse was sparse here, and there was a small rocky circular clearing. He stood at the centre of the clearing.

He saw nothing. No townland below him, not even the woods he had walked through. The surrounding fields were all obscured cloud, wispy, waifish. There was only the steely blue intricacy of the sky above him.

It took all breath away. There was no God. He used to console himself, when his breath caught in the lungs and refused to come out and the children would chide him sympathetically that at least there was heavenly reward. He imagined it as a pastoral scene like this, but the clouds forever lifted.

He could no longer drift into oblivion with the children he steered. These realisations washed over him, a catatonic bliss. He must find her.

They were still walking the streets though the light was fading and the public lamps were beginning to twitch into action. The school was dark behind them, the gates dramatically padlocked by Farragher, the geography teacher. The public was apathetic of the demonstration. Most drove or walked past, incurious. The erstwhile children of the school had wandered down earlier for a look munching on chips and slurping their sugared drinks. One woman approached Farragher.

"What is this all about then?"

"Your children's education!!!"

“Well shouldn’t ye be teaching them so?”

“That is exactly our problem. We are unable to do so!!!”

“Doesn’t say a lot for ye.”

He came and saw the dejected faces of his colleagues. The signs in their hands were held slightly lower, as though they weighed more now than they did at the start of the day. The descending gloom suited the grim mood. He found her by the padlocked gates.

She had once been a delicate thing and when he had first fallen in love with her it was this sweet fragility that had lured him. He had not been alone in his admiration. The students too adored her, how lightly she would address, how she could joke easily with them. But she bore the brunt of the competitive demands of parents. She found education increasingly pressurised, and became nostalgic for the ease of her own learning as a child. He found her beautiful even though she had hardened. Her hands had hardened. Her eyes had hardened. Her civility and her very smile were strained. But he could not blame her for this. He too could have hardened so easily and they could have stayed, sharing nicotine and complaints until neither was listening.

The evening was dim and the padlocks rusted and her hands were hard.

“Come with me. I have a plan.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I shall be a pilot. I shall arrive for flights in starched shirts and neatly pressed trousers that are neither tight nor too loose around the ankles. I shall smile calmly and in a familiar way to all that I see. Because I will ooze control people will feel relaxed around me, believe in me. I shall tell my passengers where they are going, at what speed and height. I shall inform them of the weather in their destination. Just what they can expect in the locality. And then I will take the controls, inform my co-pilot of intention to fly and shall tilt the nose of that plane to the sky. And above the clouds I will be completely at ease. I shan’t struggle for breath. I will look God in the eye, in the great mirror of the sky.”

He watched her carefully as he spoke but dark as it was her could not see her

reaction. So he imagined a transformative effect, the eyes brightening.

“You have finally become completely mad. What becomes of me in this plan? Am I to steward for you on trips through the sky? How can you see merit in this idea? We are teachers. We have a duty to young people. We have a duty to society. How worthy is it to pack some holiday makers off to Alicante? You disgust me. I have listened to you for years and years and your complaints and your worries and the strange feelings in your stomach and the rash on your foot and now you tell me this. There is something incomplete in you.”

They sat there in silence for one two three minutes.

“For once I’d like to tell people I’m taking them somewhere and know I can deliver them there.”

She thought it the most stupid thing she ever heard and told him so. She stayed with him for a few breaths and she left him, walking toward town her back straight and head upright like she walked the school corridors every day. As usual her posture was absolutely exemplary. He looked at the clouded night sky. He imagined a north star. He started to walk towards it.

Bernie McQuillan

No Friends at Home

'JIMMY WAS A STRANGE ONE,' DESSIE SAID, NODDING TO A COUPLE OF YOUNGER LADS who'd followed us into the parlour of the wake house. Villagers were coming and going, up the narrow flight of stairs to see the body and give their respects to Jimmy's mother and then down to accept a cup of tea from the local women, as they swept in and out of the tiny scullery. Now that the formal part was over the men opened the stiff, top buttons of their Sunday shirts and loosened ties, hoping for something stronger to wet their lips. Mick and I were standing with Dessie by the fireplace, sipping the milky tea in the delicate china cups. They had been a few years ahead of me in the Meath community school, in the same gang as Jimmy. Mick said that Jimmy had been the serious type, usually with his head in a book and you would never have seen him out gallivanting with the girls. He winked at me.

'Sure Dessie, you and him were one of a kind, weren't you?'

Dessie's face flushed and he looked away to the blackened sticks in the grate and the shelf of old carved oak above, with its stack of mass cards, still in their envelopes, propped up by a heavy brass cross and two pewter candle holders. The candles flickered every time the front door opened so that the wax had dripped to the side and formed a creamy icing on the mantle. The younger men took a few sips and set their cups down discreetly, before slipping away to The Stag's Head. I waited for the women to find the half-full cups and say 'there's another one gone cold.' Just like Jimmy.

After Mick had left and we were biding our time to go, Dessie broke the silence.

'Jimmy tried it on with me, you know.'

'Really?' I said

He looked at me, sharply, before turning his gaze back to the fireplace. 'I caught him watching me when a couple of us were skinny-dipping down at Quinn's quarry one night, coming home from bringing in the hay.'

'Is that right?'

'Me and the other lads half-drowned him. We held him under, 'til he was gasping. Turns out he'd been outside with one of the McGoldrick lassies the previous Saturday night after the dance and he'd felt nothing, nothing at all. And she wanted him to walk her home and he'd claimed he was too sick, that he'd had too much cider. You don't cross the McGoldricks, if you've any wit.'

'You must have terrified him, to get that out of him?'

'Sure if we'd known what he was like, would we have stripped off in front of him all those other summers?'

I looked at Dessie's long, slender hands, the white line on his finger where the wedding ring had sat for those few years.

'You must have had a late conversion,' I said.

That's why Jimmy went off to England so young. I can still remember standing outside the chapel with my mother one Saturday night, she clutching my hand, as Jimmy's ma told her about the collection for his trip, to give him a bit of a sending-off. 'Going to make his fortune in Liverpool,' she said, her eyes misty and my mother nodded her head and squeezed my hand even tighter.

I liked Jimmy; he had taught me to fish the previous summer, patiently showing me how to rig my rod and bide my time. When I held my first brown trout, I was so proud I didn't want to eat it. Then he'd gone away with everything he owned in a small, battered suitcase and when he'd come home, twenty years later, in a plain chipboard coffin, there was just the one bag with him still.

He dropped me a few lines occasionally, telling me how he'd gotten a job as a delivery driver in a mill. He had big plans. He was going to night school to study for the exams he would need to get promotion. He exhorted me to stay on at school because he said it was harder once you were away from home and had to pay for everything yourself. The letters became shorter and then infrequent. His mother would ask mine, from time to time, if I'd heard anything from him.

I heeded Jimmy's advice and passed my exams, using dad's small life savings for the college fees. All those years, dad had set aside his contribution for the insurance man who called every Friday evening, wearing the same brown suit and dyed hair. I was certain he spent the cash on a couple of whiskies in The Stag's Head but dad was convinced that he was preparing us for a rainy day. He'd have been better off just stashing it under his mattress, like the neighbours. When the tractor overturned on a high ditch the following year, flinging dad out and rolling down on top of him, he didn't stand a chance. My older brother got the farm and I did his books for him, as soon as I was qualified.

I went to England once, for a job interview. I'd seen it in The Irish Times and fancied myself as an accountant for one of those big firms. I told Jimmy's ma that I would visit him and she said he'd be chuffed; no-one had been over in the decade he'd been away. His address was a lodging house in a run-down street in Liverpool. I took the boat over on the Friday night, planning that I would get down to Birmingham for the interview on Monday and called to his place on the Saturday morning. He'd always been slim but now he was gaunt and stooped, as if his days of physical labour had long passed. His flushed face smiled in recognition and he shook my hand and I noticed the tremor after he'd released mine.

Over a pot of tea and a bacon sandwich in a cafe a few streets away, he said he'd lost his job the previous month and had been living on his savings. That was why he was a bit strapped. I strained forward to hear him; the softness of his voice was at odds with the new arrivals, younger men with unshaven faces and fresh denims, jocular and still full of hope. Everyone looked expectantly towards the door every time it chimed and Jimmy explained that the builders dropped by to choose their labourers every morning. He couldn't compete any longer.

I filled him in on the goings-on back home. He asked after his old gang and I told him that they were nearly all married, except for Dessie. I said he travelled a fair bit, the village lads thought he was exotic. Jimmy smiled at that, said he'd known that was the way Dessie would turn out and he didn't bear him any grudges. I said why didn't he come home and he looked at me and said he was no prodigal son. I said she would love to have him back, no matter how things had turned out. When I said I was going down south for a job and it was thanks to him that I was even in a position to do so, he said that I shouldn't move, that I should stay near the family and marry and have children of my own. In England, there was

no-one interested in you, he said, it was all about money and what people could get from you. He said he was moving to London to try his hand at something new but, if things didn't work out, he'd definitely come home. He said he missed his Sunday morning angling on the Boyne banks, immersed in the fragrant coconut scent of its wild yellow gorse. He promised to send me his new address and I said I'd visit. When he went to the toilet, I paid up, slipped some money into his jacket pocket and left.

And that was it. I went for the interview but my heart really wasn't in it and I didn't get the offer, so I went home. Jimmy's words weighed on me and I got a job in the county and started looking for a wife. I did as he'd said and, over the next decade, had four children and worked six days a week, toiling away with my sums, just as dad had on the land. Then, last March, Jimmy's ma sent a message that he had been beaten up and admitted to hospital and could I go over? I eventually found him in a grimy north London ward and it was an awful shock, because I had to read his name written above the bed before I accepted that the battered face in front of me was Jimmy. A young doctor with a stethoscope was listening to his chest and, after he left, I could see Jimmy's ribs rising under the skin as the cough rattled from deep inside, a hollow sound as if he was just a shell. He lay wheezing for a moment before he saw me and tried to smile.

'Will you come home with me, now?' I said. His wasted body made me feel unbearably sad.

He shook his head. 'It's too late for that.'

I racked my brains for some amusing stories from home but there was nothing. I got up and went out for a smoke, on the pretext of getting him a glass of water. What was I going to say to his ma? I met the young doctor along the corridor, told him I was Jimmy's cousin and asked if he thought Jimmy would be well enough to travel home. He said it was a tragedy that people like Jimmy were beaten up by bigots, just because they were sitting in the park at night. He pointed out the window towards the busy road and a green area opposite, with cherry blossom trees lining the perimeter fence.

'That's where they found him,' he said. 'Looks like Happy Valley during the day but at night—' and he grimaced. I nodded, even though I wasn't sure I knew what he was talking about. I loosened my tie, starting to feel uncomfortable. The doctor leaned in closer to me and I felt sweat seeping along my collar.

'They hate immigrants and homosexuals and, if you're both, you're buggered,' he said. 'He hasn't told you, has he?'

'Told me what?'

'He's got lung cancer and it's terminal.'

'His ma would like him to come home.'

The doctor nodded. 'He knows there's nothing more we can do. I'll speak to him.'

I walked on outside and smoked two cigarettes in quick succession. When I went back to the ward I found Jimmy, slumped against his pillows and, in the easterly light, his skin tone reminded me of the buttercup game we'd played as children. A tray of uneaten lunch lay on the trolley before him.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I said.

He pushed away the trolley and the tomato soup slopped over the side of the bowl.

'Are you meaning the cancer?'

'No,' I said. 'You know what I mean.'

'What was the point? There was more like me, but the rest of them kept quiet.'

'Like Dessie, you mean?'

'Aye, just like him, courting favour with the big lads.'

'He got married, you know, but it didn't last. She left him, got an annulment on account of the non-consummation—'

Jimmy's face creased but he was too bruised to laugh and the wheezing started again. 'That's the best ever,' he said. 'I watched him, you know, with one of his gang in the quarry. He held a knife to my groin and told me to make myself scarce if I wanted to stay capable, if you understand?'

'But the park? Even I know that you're asking for trouble in those sorts of places.'

'I never got another job again, you know. Only what I earned out at night.' He sat up as the coughing took hold and I reached out and rested my hand on his wasted shoulder. I was as guilty and useless as the rest of them at home. I helped him into the bathroom next door and waited in the corridor, looking out the window past the cloudy bird droppings to the park opposite. Through the pink candy floss, I could make out a couple of girls sitting on a bench, their heads close together and some children on a bright yellow climbing frame

nearby. A man in a suit wandered in with a take-away coffee and I watched him take a seat and pull out a newspaper.

Jimmy was still in the bathroom and I slipped an envelope onto the trolley. Enough to give him a decent send-off. I knocked the door and heard him retching.

'I'll go out for a while, Jimmy,' I said. 'Get something to eat and a bit of fresh air. I'll be back later, all right?'

Jona Xhepa

Western Winds

MOUNTAINS ZOOMING IN FROM THE WEST REMINDED HER OF THE AMERICAN SHORT story. They came with a hurry that brought thoughts of Sadie alone in her apartment with a wounded leg as the top 40 channel on the bus radio blasted songs she didn't hate. A circle of fear held her feet as she stepped down and collected her bags from the sighing storage and, without any warning to herself, she missed the connection bus to the peninsula instead making her way down the close lined with guesthouses and shops taking the railway/bus station as namesake.

He answered the door patting his wet hands on a tea towel to see a woman in a maroon jacket too flimsy for this weather as the Angelus sounded, noticing the backpack with yoga jargons and Shakespearean insult pins. A bright smile hung on her face like a horseshoe and yes, he did have a room for the night but she'd have to pay the full price of a double. He watched her pick up the bags enthusiastically waiting for him to lead the way upstairs.

"This one's for the telly and this one's for the satellite," he showed her the remotes and placed them on the bedside table.

"Just three more beside you tonight, nuns they are."

"How do you know?"

"Oh I can just sort of tell," he smiled. "Also they told me. Came here to see the statue I'd say, people have heard it talking in its sleep. Also getting up at night and walking off – sleepwalking like."

“Does that happen often?” she laughed clutching the string of her tote.

“Oh now and again, it’s not advertised much as you can imagine.”

She tried to imagine why it wouldn’t be advertised much when she was left alone, but the creamy duvet filled her all up. First she walked into the bathroom that was spotlessly clean in a mild spark of exploration then she began to lay out the take-away from her tote bag on pages from the brochure advertising trips to the national park. Unlike her own building that was sacrificially immersed in the grey and blue of the city, this house made no attempt to connect to the outside or the rest of itself. It made her feel vulnerable and certain. The first hour she spent sampling one of the ale bottles she’d brought with the food and sweets from the corner shop before deciding on this guest house, and laying out a few things from her bags not bothering to hang anything up.

Her mobile fell from her coat pocket to the bottom of the bed. She read the text for the eleventh time, “Sure, no problem at all Jojo. See you tomorrow so, lots of hugs!!!!” Transfixed for a minute as the heat started filling the room, she imagined her brother laid out on a concrete slab on the beach with nice pebble arrangements all round him, stirring himself up to reach for a bottle of something like a sea potion, kneading his broken foot smiling. His asthma rising up suddenly to rouse the attention of sand walkers.

The news when she turned on the telly was of a shipwreck in the Mediterranean somewhere. Her gaze from semi-reclining on the bed with the food left the small screen and moved to the window where night fell on the hissing railway/bus station. She grabbed another bottle and semi straddled the heater to look at the last buses shuffling into a darkening alcove. Traces of homecoming came and left her with the gurgling on her throat and the static from the window towering over the town. An occasional seagull gave it the air of a postcard, the last night walkers seemingly mild-mannered, probably begrudging her a night of chemically infused food in a foreign bed. Leaning closer the heat ran up her thighs until outside was properly dark and free, the telly gurgled with her and the last public announcement came from the station. She snatched away her burning thumb and sucked on it watching the neon sign from the Italian chipper she’d visited.

The room became an animal then and she smacked her mobile on the bedside table falling into bed with another bottle and a packet of crisps. The first sounds she didn't hear because the crisp packet squealed but then she heard the voices when she had been chewing for a while.

There were footsteps up the stairs and voices louder when they reached the landing – when they reached her door she timed her munching to fall in with the conversation outside. She held her breath and turned up the telly when keys dangled and muffled voices entered the next door, a herbalist was visiting a village near where her brother was staying with wounded foot and a stack of magazines that would have been collected for him around the family home. Poor Sadie staring at her as she was leaving with paws straight on the chair, unblinking. She was probably chasing rodents along the fenced gardens beside the building complex and got tangled in the vines.

In the echo of thinning footsteps she finished the bottle wafting the empty packet from the bed, and a thin memory made her conscious that she had decided to leave the cat as she closed the door behind her. She had unwanted Sadie.

Blue tinted crockery met her in the breakfast room and kayaking brochures on the cupboards. The landlord came in from the annex. She didn't feel nauseous from him, he would only be with her intermittently. Coffee then nice colours. Fluffy light yellow with carmine pudding, liquid and firm tomato congealing beans. Savouring a sausage the same footsteps came down and she looked up at the station across which she'd slept with anticipating mouthfuls of soda bread sticking to her even if the room wouldn't.

There was nothing of the nun about their entrance. She smiled up brightly and gave a little wave. The three women smiled asking after her health and said it was good fortune the weather was meant to hold this afternoon and she agreed though she would be inside a bus. She was going to ask if they had visited the sleepwalking, sleep-talking statue, but decided against it. They had shared their sleep and now they were going to share their meal and never see each other again. With gallopings of coffee she hurried herself along, an odd hurry in a place she didn't want to leave. She wanted to slip into the unmade bed again hearing the buses below carrying people away that weren't herself.

The next evening only she managed to get out on the bicycle after which she took to sipping stew by the fire for a few days before she walked all the way back to the mainland and took the train home. First there was the room that wasn't her guesthouse room. It was her brother's convalescence room. Smoke drizzled on his high bed from the window sheen. He would have met her at the front when Paul dropped her off but there was no point being self-deprecating with her.

The neighbour Paul had collected her from the station behind the convenience shop. He came from Germany, his wife an American. They'd met on the peninsula years ago and she never learned German which meant their English turned into a pidgin so that she mightn't feel left out when he spoke German with visitors. Besides which there weren't many here besides himself, his wife Anya and the temporary invalid Jed, their houses along the coast only a kilometre or so away. Paul never told her on the drive over how it came her brother broke his foot assuming she knew, and Jed saw it as superfluous to tell her, so she never found out. Anya had come out on the stony path to say hello and she'd waved brightly from the car — she'd missed communal lunch at the family home having lain down one last time before packing.

"What time did you get in?" Jed laughed as she hugged his shoulder in the hushed house. "Sorry I couldn't come up to meet ye." He didn't ask her where she'd stayed the night or why she missed the bus and she didn't tell him. She stood beside the bed with an idiotic smile as he got on with his dressing gown and slippers doing what she should have imagined him doing but didn't. As the light went out from the ocean she watched him, leaning on the big purple chair with his fisherman jumper on her shoulders feed the fire in the bathroom oven so they could have showers later, chop up the meat and veggies Anya had brought over for dinner, get the sheets for her room from the dryer.

"What a wasted journey! I don't need taking care of you see. You musta needed a break though."

After he lit the fire, she leaned into her repose while he lounged across her on the couch tapping the toes of his broken foot gently towards the warmth. He talked to her then about waking up alone in the old house and thinking of getting the back garden ready, the

western winds that frightened him the first days he was back here before he broke his foot when the radio stopped working, the Dutch tourists that had kept him company and said they might have a job for him if he made it back to the city. Paul and Anya not having a child after all and how funny they were sometimes when you caught them alone in the kitchen, and she leaned into his words until her corners began showing and she smiled more. After midnight he told her,

"Jojo I'm going up ok, you stay up as long as you want, there's actually loadsa stew left, I've got the CDs on the counter there if you want..."

and she fell asleep on the armchair rocking her knees to fall into the bits where fire twanged the most.

After a late lunch the next day, they strayed into the fields behind the house, saying hello to the new lambs. When he got too tired she led him back up the tarmac road holding off for the occasional car, Jed mumbling hellos to people he knew. She pulled him up into the house and on his couch where he dozed rubbing his knee with sweat beads collecting on his hairline, and she put on a CD for him he'd like. She sat on the armchair for a minute chewing a piece of cheese. The bicycle was still where she'd left it in the shed, next to the rusty Singer and conglomerated junk she didn't look through.

A prickly air lifted up her skirts with every turn she managed on the deflated back wheel. At first there were the sloping blue hills that had seemed like mountains, and then the spiralling road between the endless hedgerow that led to the lighthouse housing only the occasional straying dog and farmer. Manure smell hugged her pores. Limeflecks followed her in the whooshing path where men stooped in their taking outside thatched houses.

Then the coastline scurried on the rocks with bits of kelp and moss. She struggled to push the bike up and then down again before a field of cows and the lighthouse came into view. Staring and staring her eyes turned wet drinking the wisps of sea crash and inaudible sun rays splashed her back with salt. She leaned the bike at the base of the hedge by a fence and walked down to the coast, skipping lightly on the black and green.

There was no one else. She heard when the clink on the slabs grew louder than the pounding on the lighthouse wall. Outside of the body she felt loosening with struggling muscles the wind drew circles around her arms and legs then went off somewhere for a bit. When she found a flat rock with bristles of moss, she sat down hugging her knees, the slanted view of the world sending rivulets from her sinuses down her trachea and through her bowels and genitals. This wasn't a homecoming. The same hurry to reach the unwanted made her carry on before it got colder. The shape of her foot when it reached forward seemed pleasant making her step into green sludge, and she fell sideways bending her right leg on the rock she'd been sitting on.

Her ears rang feeling salt stinging the bloodied elbow and pulsating feet, holding her breath to numb the pain hearing the uncaring sea inside her throbbing wound. She managed to lie down on a bit of moss her discomfort lifting her from pain, protracting her view again letting the kletts handle her, her hand reaching toward the lighthouse and down her stomach between her thighs hovering in wind silence and stirring her shivering in a rush of sea smoke. Until she couldn't hear the silent spots when the sea stopped beating.

She held the bicycle lightly uphill limp-hunched beside it, humming between grunts until a song came out of her that she directed to the cows and lambs on either side of her. At the top of the hill she squealed her leg into shape so Jed wouldn't ask what happened.

When he closed the door after the three women and began clearing the breakfast things, the rain came gently and his rheumatism pleased him as he patted his knee. Too long on his feet. He put the kettle on and ran the tap to do the dishes; the long season would start soon, his wife would be down every day to help, more money to look forward to until the heavy clouds streamed past with autumn. A ping-pong trill came from across the street the railway station announcing the arrivals from the east.

Marie O'Halloran

The Return

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I SAW YOU, ON THE BEACH PLAYING FOOTBALL WITH YOUR friends. I sat nearby with my mother, wearing my black polka dot bikini, very conscious of the woman I was becoming. The ball landed on my lap. I never asked you if it was an accident, or if you sent it in my direction on purpose. I looked up at your face, having to shield my eyes with my cupped hand from the glare of the sun. It seemed to shine brighter that day. I'll never forget your mischievous smile as you retrieved it. I felt my cheeks get warm. That vision of you, tall, handsome, against a glowing backdrop, it was amazing.

I thought about you day and night after that. Believing it was a one-sided crush until you invited me for a walk one day and so began our beach strolls. I can still feel how the frothy water rushed around my ankles. They were our special Sunday mornings. We loved it all taking in the scent of clean air, a nothingness that was everything, it was everything to us there and then. We were everything to each other. Life for us was very tasty and we were devouring it, living it to the full.

I remember my feet kicking seawater to splash across your legs, the salty drops sticking to the hairs, it made us both laugh. Do you remember when I tried to run backwards? Silly decision really because I lost my footing and tripped. I thought I'd escaped with being a little damp but the flow of the tide had other ideas and gushed around soaking me. You'd doubled over laughing, unable to speak, pointing at my dark hair plastered to my face like seaweed scattered across an odd shaped rock. When you were eventually able to get a few words out you asked if I was all right and used your strong arms to lift me to my feet. I felt light as a feather and melted into your embrace.

“There, we’re both damp now. We’re in this together, like always,” you’d promised. You kissed me tenderly on the forehead after brushing off the wet sand and fixed my hair behind my ears. We strolled along as the waves continued to wrap around our ankles, the wind blow-drying us. You hugged me close as we strolled. I’d wished that moment would never end.

We didn’t have a car to cuddle up in, just your bicycle, with me plonked on the bar as you did your best to balance. We managed it though, to cycle the short distance to the next village. Despite laughing through every pore, we didn’t fall once.

Nature’s engine purred as it wrinkled the smooth sea, dancing to form fleeting soft white lace. The sunshine caused specks of glittered delight on the damp sand, our view along the route. It stole our breaths. Our cheeks were stroked by the breeze, tickled by the heat, they battled for us. My hair would flow as we freewheeled the last few metres. You’d blow it out of your way, sending shivers along my neck and spine.

Ah, then we’d get to the shop. It had every kind of treat, from apple drops to clove sticks, sticky time bars to fat frogs. We loved getting ice cream cones. I’d lick along the creamy swirls, saving the rich chocolate flake until last. I loved biting it slowly, letting the chocolate melt on my tongue. You’d sink your teeth into the flake first, eating half, holding the rest between your thumb and forefingers. In less than six bites you’d have yours gobbled down. We’d race to see who’d finish the cone first. If you weren’t quick enough, I’d steal a bite from what was left of your flake. If I succeeded, you’d chase me, punishing me by licking my cheek, bits of cone still clinging to your tongue. I grimaced as I wiped my face with my cardigan covered hand.

You were full of mischief and romance, playing jokes on me, then saying, “I love you so much Lisa Greene. One day I will marry you.”

Our conversations were light. I listened to your stories but longed for the feel of your soft lips on mine. Then, it happened for real. I couldn’t believe it the handsome Philip Harrington was kissing me, full on the lips. I shivered so much with anticipation. I’d feared my inexperience would put you off. Every time I saw you butterflies invaded my belly, going

crazy. Each one of those beautiful creatures died within me, one by one, murdered by you when you left me.

Did we meet too young? Maybe we did. Sixteen, sure we hardly knew the ways of the world or how cruel life could be. It was your family in the end that were cruel, sending you away from me. I tried to lay the blame solely with them at first but you had a say in it too.

“I’m sorry, Lisa. They’re insisting.”

“But what about what you want, Philip?” I remember pleading with you.

“What my mother says goes. This is what she always wanted. I have to give it a try at least. I can return if it doesn’t work out.” You did your best to explain but it wasn’t good enough.

No wonder your mother never liked me. She had your future all mapped out and I wasn’t included in it.

I should have seen it coming, six months before you left you began to change, became withdrawn, troubled. You wouldn’t talk to me. I couldn’t figure out what I had done wrong. You got distant when we kissed. Our Sunday morning beach-ambles became less regular. You walked along with your bicycle as I strolled beside you. You stopped holding my hand. I longed for those strong arms to hold me tight, to protect me and love me. I blamed myself for a long time. That wasn’t fair.

You told me not to come but I did, hid among the bushes to watch you leave. It broke my heart to see your father drive you away in his big car. I stared at the tail lights. It wasn’t long before they disappeared over the hill. Then, I stared into the empty space your departing left.

I prayed every day you would come back to me, ironic wasn’t it? I wished for you to return, run in and sweep me off my feet. I posted letter after letter, you never replied. I waited and waited, six months drifted into a year and before I knew it, two years passed and

then I lost count.

Had you ever any intention of returning to me Philip Harrington, did you? No, instead you left me broken hearted. Did you think of me even once?

Eventually, I stopped waiting. I presumed it worked out for you

Now, at last, you have returned and to fanfare, delight and celebration, ten years after you abandoned me. In my hands I hold the only letter you ever sent me, full of questions and requests. It took you a decade to find a pen and paper?

Time has been kind to you. You look as gorgeous as I remember. Your mother glows with pride as she parades you around. I watch as you greet old friends. Firm handshakes, slaps on the back, "good to see you, hope you're here to stay." That seems to be the general consensus.

The sight of you transported me back to the day you left. Do you know that I cried for months and months, a saturated pillow greeting me in the morning? Mother scolded my sullen moods over breakfast. Her initial sympathy changing to impatience as time moved on. The mention of your name would be enough to send salty tears rolling down my cheeks, plopping easily to my lips. I didn't care who saw. I had pictures of you and of us together, all over my bedroom. Did you take any with you to remember me?

It took a long time before I could walk along the beach without longing for you, without bursting into floods of tears. I started to enjoy the stunning views again. I even cycled to the shop alone to get an ice cream cone, with a delicious chocolate flake stuck on top. I was ready to take a bite out of life again. Mr. Murphy, the shopkeeper, noticed my return.

"Ah Lisa, it's been a while. It's good to see you. How is your young man getting on?" he enquired.

"He's no longer my young man, Mr. Murphy," I replied with all the strength I could muster as I continued tucking into my cone.

You have to understand, I needed to move on and try to be happy again. I put all thoughts of you out of my mind. You said one day you would marry me. In fact you promised. Now that you're back, I didn't think it would ever be a possibility.

I look at my reflection. I am so happy in my white organza wedding dress. The diamonds adorning my neck accentuate the crystals on the skirt of this stunning strapless gown. The pale cream and pink roses in my bouquet emit a wonderful scent. They remind me of the flowers you gave me the first time you told me you loved me. It takes me by surprise. I shake the memory and clear my mind. My thoughts return to the present. I look demure as my white lace veil covers my face.

I chose my favourite song as our first dance. We used to hum along to it together. My love for that song remained long after my love for you faded. Do you still sing it?

I take a deep breath when the musicians strike up the first chords of the wedding march. My Dad looks at me proud as any father can be on his daughter's wedding day. I see you glance down the church and I take another deep breath. I pray that my white satin stilettos will hold me upright as I begin to walk. I look at the flowers adorning the edge of each row of seats and take in the smiling faces as I make my way toward you. The butterflies are back, they have multiplied in my stomach. I smile at my Dad and take another deep breath. It settles me.

Am I doing the right thing? I think, for a solitary second. Where did that come from? I don't panic though. Of course I am! I reassure myself.

I feel my Dad squeeze my arm in support. Surely he can't read my mind? Maybe he can. I pray my temporary uncertain thoughts do not show on my face. My future husband mustn't doubt my feelings. I don't need to be reminded of the love in my heart for him.

I make my way up the aisle to my future life, one that is full of love and happiness. I know I will never be abandoned again. I have absolutely no regrets. My Dad helps me slip my veil over my head.

You thought that all you had to do was sweep back into my life and I would change

everything for you. You were finally prepared to give it all up. Why didn't you do that in the first place, ten years ago and stand up to your family? You are keeping up a good pretence. Everyone believes that you're happy with your life and the path you chose to follow. I can do nothing about that. All I can do now is live mine to the full. You made your choice. I waited long enough. The wait is now over.

I was glad I said no to your pleas. I do not regret my decision. You lost your chance a long time ago. This may not have been what you had in mind when you used to promise you'd marry me. Was it? I know you have little control over where you are sent. It wasn't old Fr. O'Brien's fault he died suddenly, the parish needing a rushed replacement.

I turn to my future husband and away from you. I prepare to take my vows and smile, the day seems brighter, the flowers more beautiful and life tastes pretty good. I am exactly where I want to be. Now, do your job and marry us, Fr. Harrington.

Gary Hunter

World Without End

'GOOD STRANGER,' I CONTINUED, 'I AM ILL AND LOST. DIRECT ME, I BESEECH YOU, TO Carcosa'.

Ambrose Bierce: An Inhabitant of Carcosa

George sat at his kitchen table, smoking a rollup and flicking ash into a half-filled coffee mug. The kitchen was tidy, spartan. Cereal bowl, spoon and cup soaked in the sink.

He lived alone. His wife was long gone. The youngest daughter phoned him on birthdays and at Christmas. The eldest girl blamed him for the separation and never called. He knew she remembered the rows and the drinking, the missed school plays. He didn't blame her; didn't blame any of them. He had time to take it easy. The match wasn't until three o'clock. He had plenty of time.

'Sure isn't it great?' he muttered to himself.

Had he been right in selecting the kid to play? Maybe it would take his mind off what was happening at home. Get the wee man out of the house where his father lay dying and give him something else to think about, for a while at least. God knows the kid was good. As George smoked, he closed his eyes and let his mind drift back over the day thus far.

*

The harsh strip lighting hummed and crackled in the cold of the Leisure Centre changing room. The boy crouched on a bench, bulky sports bag on the floor at his feet; the tracksuit

top he wore over his soccer kit drowned him. The narrow room smelled of sweat, wet towels and chlorine. A thin jet of steam hissed from the broken seal of an overhead heating pipe. George leaned against a locker and yawned. He could feel the chill of the floor tiles through the soles of his shoes.

'I remembered you like to train early on match Sundays so I wanted a word. Only if you've time,' he hesitated and studied the top of the boy's head. 'Listen, I know things are tough at home. Do you think you can do this today? That other gang has a good striker and centre forward; we need defenders or they'll slaughter us again.' The boy didn't respond.

'You're good' he continued, 'Since you were a wee boy. Better than you think you are. I've managed this team for what? Two, three years? Your dad and I built it up. Believe me, you've talent.' The boy didn't speak but nodded, a corner of his mouth twisting into the ghost of a smile.

'How's he doing anyway?' George asked. 'I've been meaning to call with him and your ma and drop some magazines or something in but, well, you know how it is. Not enough hours in the day eh?' He knew how pathetic, how pitiful he sounded. The boy, whose name was Ally, looked up. George noticed the dark smudges beneath his big eyes. Ally was fourteen, tall and skinny, a shock of black hair framed his long face. He looked like his da at the same age.

'Brenda, the nurse from the health centre reckons he hasn't long to go. He's just lying there in bed all the time now, rambling on about stuff.' The boy picked at a piece of lint on the leg of his shorts. 'Last night he was singing "The Rose of Tralee" and going on about Tall Stalwart Lancers dying on battlefields in the olden days.' He paused, frowning.

'The drugs make him talk all kinds of shite. He scratches himself, sometimes until he bleeds. The nurse gives him this white stuff to put on the scratches. The bedroom smells of medicine and sick but I go up and sit with him every night, even though I don't want to. Mum likes it.'

George eased himself down onto the bench, rubbing his right knee and sighed. 'It must be hard on you all. I lost my da when I was about your age.' The boy looked away before replying.

'It's bad. At first I prayed. Prayed hard every night until my head hurt and my throat got sore so that I couldn't breathe. I get cross then I feel awful for wishing it was over. '

‘They tell us to have faith son; never give up hope.’ He felt his face flush. ‘Oh God I don’t know what else to say. You’ll get through it. How’s your mum holding up anyway?’

‘She’s mad, crazy-like. She had the faith-healers round the other night; three of them, from that meeting she’s started going to. You know that old hut out by the railway bridge. The one with the tin roof and the signs and posters about Hell and the time being short so you better repent?’

‘Oh I know the place alright. Been a while since I’ve been over that way though. Miserable oul hole.’

He remembered the nights when he and Paul, the boy’s father, both fourteen and looking for mischief, hurled stones and clods of earth onto the tin roof of the Meeting Hall during services, hoping the caretaker they called Queerfish would come out and chase them. ‘I’ll get the peelers for yous’ he’d splutter, hopping and spitting with fury, shaking a fist at their backs as they ran to their bikes, cackling with laughter.

‘Go on ya stupid oul get’ they taunted. ‘Yer ma’s a darkie! Ya big fruit!’ Poor Queerfish. Steel plate in his head from the Easter Blitz. Not wise. Dead now. Long gone.

‘Yeah,’ Ally broke into his reverie, ‘the ones from the meeting came. Old fellas in suits. They stayed in the front bedroom for ages, praying, singing hymns and banging about.’ He bent to untie the laces of his sodden, grass-caked boots. ‘They were there for about an hour then they went; Dad’s still sick so they’re all a shower of... The room still smells and he’s still sick and he’ll die.’

George struggled for something reassuring to say but the words wouldn’t come so he began to talk about tactics for the match. After a while he went out into reception and drank a greasy, lukewarm coffee from the vending machine while the boy dressed.

They left together and walked back into town. When they reached the bridge across the little river they stopped. Ally shuffled his feet. Across the street a man walking a dog stood with his back to them, staring into the window of an empty off-licence. A faded poster for a Christmas fete was plastered on the glass.

‘Right then’ George said. ‘I’ll see you later. Don’t be late alright?’

‘Yeah see you later,’ the boy answered and head down, walked away without looking back.

*

George went to morning Communion. He often wondered why he persisted in coming; he supposed he liked the routine and the service was comforting. The liturgy never changed. As beaten down and old as he felt, he thought he was probably the youngest there. At the altar rail he turned his head and looked at the elderly woman kneeling beside him. Her eyes tracked the progress of the priest who floated, large and stately in his vestments, slowly along the line, pausing briefly before each pair of gnarled, outstretched hands.

When it was George's turn, pieces of the dry wafer stuck in his throat; he swallowed hard and coughed to dislodge them.

'You all right there? You OK?' the priest asked.

'Yes Father, thanks. Went down the wrong way; I'm fine. The wine'll shift it, he replied, embarrassed. 'Blood of Christ,' he whispered. Sunlight stroked the stained glass windows of the small church and cast blood red and cold blue swathes of light over the floor and the altar cloth. The priest drifted on. George placed his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet, groaning inwardly as his joints cracked. He bowed towards the altar, turned and walked slowly back to his seat.

Afterwards George left the church by the south transept, hoping to avoid speaking to anyone. As he fastened his coat he noticed a button was missing. Hands deep in pockets, he walked through the old graveyard, trying not to slip on the clumps of damp leaves. Crows scolded from the canopy of yew trees above the crumbling, weathered headstones.

The priest loomed at the gate, shaking hands and laughing with two old ladies and a thin man in a wheelchair. Head down and shoulders hunched, George scuttled sideways past the group. Nobody noticed him. He turned into the town square and walked home.

*

George shifted in his chair and stretched to work off a stiffness in his lower back. He smoked and thought of his own father, dead at forty. An ex-merchant seaman turned engineer who worked away from home for almost as long as he'd known him. He recalled the excitement of Father's sporadic visits home and the wrenching sense of loss following the inevitable departures on the Liverpool boat. The boat was the Ulster Prince, he remembered the

name. As a teenager he had travelled to Liverpool on the Prince, hitching to London to work on building sites in Kilburn and Dunstable. He, like his old man, had always found it hard to settle anywhere.

He recalled his father's imposing presence, even during his absences. There was a large blue-black mark that young George thought looked like a flower, on the back of his father's right hand from getting it trapped in machinery as an apprentice. The strong, chapped hands were always stained with engine oil. He used to scrub them for ages with that cleanser you used to get – snot-green and viscous. It smelled nice though. George wondered if you could still get it.

*

Two years earlier George had spent a couple of days clearing out his mother's bungalow after she'd moved into a nursing home. From a sideboard he'd dug out a bunch of envelopes, tied together with a faded red ribbon. There were ten letters addressed to his mother in his father's orderly handwriting. The bundle also held what he initially thought was an old blue British passport but it was a set of Seaman's papers from his father's Merchant Navy days. He flicked through brittle pages full of stamps from distant ports and good conduct ratings.

George hadn't looked at the contents of the letters for a day or two. He was busy with house clearing and arrangements. He had driven home after securing the property for the last time. The letters lay in the inside pocket of his coat, along with several photographs he decided to keep. He might have forgotten about them altogether if he hadn't pulled them out of his pocket along with his lighter.

The first three letters were full of everyday concerns, how the job was going, films he saw in Liverpool, his digs in St. Helens where he worked in the Tate and Lyle plant. Questions about how the boy was doing at school and if his maths was improving. He described getting the ferry across the Mersey to New Brighton with some mates from work to drown the shamrock on St. Patrick's Day. He left his good overcoat, the fawn one from Burton's, in a pub, mad when he went back and couldn't find it. His best one too. Still, he'd won five quid betting on the horses so it wasn't all bad. Sefton Park was nice to walk in, he

wrote. His mate Harry's wife had seen Paul McCartney and Jane Asher there once, walking a sheepdog.

The remaining letters had touched on dental appointments and finances. But his father also wrote about feeling anxious most of the time, especially at night. The litany of stomach pains, night terrors, worrying about everything, everything and nothing, disturbed George as he read. He couldn't reconcile the image of the nervous, worried author of the letters with the confident, strong, opinionated man he thought he knew. That was the strangest thing. His father was never specific. It was as if he was being haunted, George thought, stalked by something he couldn't understand. Something waiting in the shadows, just beyond his field of vision.

*

A long time ago. Dead as those old wet leaves in the churchyard, he thought. 'The past is another country:' who said that? He couldn't remember. Why the hell dredge it up now after all this time anyway? George reached for his lighter, looked at it, then set it down. His mouth tasted vile, tongue furred thick yellow with nicotine and coffee. In his mind he could see his father, alone in a bedsit on a rainy northern night, hunched over a writing table illuminated by the pale, watery light of a single, unshaded bulb. He witnessed the carefully crafted words bleeding from the fountain pen onto white stationery.

Maybe, he considered, that's why I'm the way I am; maybe something was shaken loose by the revelation of frailty, of fear, in the letters. And now, I can't get out from under it. Can't leave it be and simply forget about it. There were broken things you could never repair or make better no matter how badly you thought you wanted to. It was stupid, he knew, so facile, to equate what Ally's family was going through today, with him finding out his dad was fallible.

He recalled the church service and understood that the words of the Apostles' Creed he recited each week held no meaning for him anymore. Maybe never had. He felt like an actor in a shadow play. Like Ally's faith healers, three figures dark as crows, gathered around the bed of a dying man. Speech without thought. World without End. Amen, Amen. Goodnight ladies, goodnight sweet ladies.

It was 2.15. Time to go. He pushed himself up from the chair and walked to the hall to get his coat from the cupboard under the stairs. He paused in front of the hall mirror, ran a hand through his hair and addressed the tired, worn spectre of his reflection: ‘Pull yourself together you old bastard, you’re pathetic, you stupid, tired, worn out old fool.’ He smiled to himself, remembering an old jazz song his father used to sing about a gangster facing the electric chair in Sing-Sing: ‘There’s no lights on the Christmas Tree Momma, they’re burnin’ big Louie tonight.’

He stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind him, pushing it once to make sure it was locked. The street was quiet. He turned his collar up. It was raining and cold, but there was a match on. He had somewhere to be. He was glad he had somewhere to be.

Gareth Fox

Death and the Bees

I HAD BEEN LIVING WITHIN THE VICINITY OF MY BED, FOR THE MOST PART, SINCE THE beginning of my retirement. From the moment I pushed open the eyelids and stretched the limbs until when my wife settled in beside me in the evening, I lay supine with my extremities reaching to the four corners of the bed. Like any man of hygienic decency, I rose from time to time to get rid of the waste when required. I had the comfort of the mattress and the freshness of the air — my wife having introduced a fissure by way of the open window — to allow my thoughts to roam where they pleased, unrestricted.

Beautiful colours and words forming harmonies of glorious tapestry shuffled their way behind my eyes. To an onlooker I may have looked a simpleton with my perpetual smile, for I was content. At times I closed my eyes for whole hours to concentrate more keenly on the little zephyrs of my imagination, but I was still conscious of the sounds that ruled the busy house. My wife had company throughout the day and a great deal of time was given to talk about flowers.

Often, their words would seep into my habits and I would be transported from voyages on wild seas to botanic gardens, lying in lily beds and inhaling the scents of tulips. This was not displeasing, but made it a devilish task to get back to the oars and recall the cries of seagulls. I had a great desire to be with mermaids, you see, and tried on every occasion to imagine myself amongst the kelp and caves, where they were likely to bathe. I had only the occasional complaint; the strength of my tea or the sparseness of the butter stretched over my mid-afternoon slice of bread. Life was, I am not unwilling to state, pleasant, and the company of my imagination I found hugely satisfactory.

It was after a conversation, that I had overheard — while out on particularly rough waters — between my wife, Tilda, and an energetic neighbour, that she announced the taking up of horticulture as a means of occupying her retirement, with immediate effect.

I protested, stating that she had work enough — what with the three main daily meals, the little nibbles in between to stave off hunger, and the removal of dust, which I felt was over-running the unused floor of our house, I presumed, having not ventured upstairs in a number of months. She barked back, claiming I had been indulging on the delights of food a little too much — fingering my overstated gut — and that if I cared to go upstairs I would see that not only was there no trace of dust, but that she had also took the liberty of installing a lodger, Mr Kennelly, who used the empty sitting room to store his collection of old glass bottles and jam jars. There was no argument. I had myself noticed the decline of my figure, but I quietly stated my outrage regarding the lodger.

Later, after meeting Mr Kennelly, I found that he was a kind-hearted, sharp young man, with an incredible eye for craftsmanship when it came to the art of glass blowing. I was pleased with his being there, mostly due to his knack of seemingly never being there; I rarely saw him. And I must say that any involvement he had in these happenings was completely involuntary, if he was involved at all.

I slept poorly that night, for, not wanting to swing my arms and legs around her — in case she felt it were a sign of my submission on the matter — I felt a draft around my navel. I was troubled also by the exact meaning of taking up horticulture; we had a little garden, but as to what animal she thought it could sustain provided me with awful puzzlement. A few rabbits, maybe, but with their instinctive buggery we would soon be up to our eyes.
I awoke the next morning to the sound of a spade slicing through earth and the appearance of Tilda's head around the window. I heard her sigh as she hoisted a pot onto the windowsill. A moment later, she came in with my breakfast. I gave a quick glance to the floor for a trail of dirt. She was stripped to socks, but her face was flushed with exercise. I ate my poached egg in silence, waiting for an explanation. I supped and chewed until there was nothing left to chew and very little left to sup. And as I got to the bottom of the cup, there came an almighty burst of sweetness.

Did you not stir the thing, I demanded. She said she had, and walked to the window to examine her pot.

Alright, I said. She said that under the advice of Mrs Clements — the energetic neighbour — she had decided to take up the cultivation of flowers.

Floriculture, so. Not horticulture, I interjected.

The cultivation of flowers for competition, she continued.

Thank goodness, I said, I thought we were to be overrun by rabbits.

Rabbits? said she.

Rabbits, said I, and we continued like that for a time until fatigue, on my part, smoothed out the whole affair. She left me, taking with her the empty cup and saucer, and I was again free to recline to position; pensive, on my back, eyes facing ceiling, shut.

At first I was forced to imagine myself in a flower shop, escaping the reach of a large green beak on stem, but I soon regained composure. A biblical flood set in and I managed to scamper atop some debris and was washed out to sea. My face, I imagined, was a little scorched from being stranded out on the open water, but the kingdom of land, cave, cliff and mermaid sprung out from the horizon. Yet, from out of nowhere, I heard a buzzing; the sound of a motor and the waves began to thrash against my craft.

I awoke in a fury and found that the buzzing continued. It was coming from outside. I demanded that Tilda attend to me at once.

Tilda, is what I shouted. Tilda, come here! I said a second time so that she understood the urgency. She laboured in eventually, again stripped to socks, the toes of which now looked a little grubby.

There is something outside, I said, that's coming in. A noise. And it's doing me no good, no good at all. I might even go as far as saying that it's doing me the opposite. It is doing me ill.

Then close the window, she replied.

Well, while you're on your feet. I changed my tone to love or thereabout. Before you close it, I continued, can you have a look, see what is the cause?

She pushed her head out the open window then brought it in again swiftly.

A bee.

A bee, I echoed in amazement. In truth, it was not extraordinary news; it was the middle of April after all.

And what business has a bee in the vicinity, I thought aloud.

She replied with a throaty silence, the type that if it could be heard I would hear it surely. Then she left again.

I had almost written the day off as useless, when my mind began to drift again. I was

a passenger aboard a yacht. With a brisk call the captain assured me that he could see tail-splashing and devilish hair in the distance, through his monocular. But no-sooner had I readied myself, straightened my bow tie and dampened my eyebrows with the tips of my fingers, than I heard a motorboat circle.

I opened my eyes and glared at the window. Two large bees were jostling around the flower box. I made Tilda aware that she was needed. This time she arrived with a little spade in her hand and her bare knees coloured with dirt.

Your appearance, I chastised.

She avoided that and scolded me.

What is it this time?

These bees, I began.

What about them?

Something must be done. They are disturbing the peace. Set out a few jams jars, with sugar and water inside.

She brought my attention to the spade in her hand.

I'm busy, she sagged. Get up and do it yourself.

I was not unused to this selfish side to her. We had recently celebrated fifty-five years together; I say celebrated, I mean she had made me aware one evening, as I twiddled my thumbs over some matter of the heart; I could not recall the name of a little blonde I was once engrossed in around the time of my engagement to Tilda.

So I drew back the covers and set on the side of the bed. After a time, I got up and went to the window.

Is this Mr Kennelly in, I asked her outside. She was on her knees occupying her hands with loose soil.

He works until five.

I went up the stairs and opened the door onto where Mr Kennelly had been paying for my space. There was an odd, faint smell of bachelor, not unpleasant to my nostrils. In fact, I enjoyed being there. The living room was clear of clutter except for the hundreds of glass containers of all shapes and sizes, meticulously placed in a zigzagged, chaotic fashion. The light coming through the only room window was split by prisms and reflected blue and red and yellow on the opposite walls. On one of the walls was a large framed picture of a

furnace. I congratulated Mr Kennelly on his passion.

Knowing that he wouldn't return for a few hours, I decided to make use of this pleasing atmosphere, so I took myself to the bedroom and arranged my comfort in Mr Kennelly's bed. I found the whole thing hugely satisfactory, and I stared at the ceiling imagining rainbows and a great deal of other colourful things.

Yet, once more from the window I heard the buzzing of bees. I abruptly jumped and raced into the other room. Of all the fantastic receptacles on the floor, I chose four with the widest mouths. From there I took the jars to my kitchen and put a small amount of hot water and sugar in each.

I didn't yet dare go outside; I hadn't passed over that threshold in over a month and feared that the possible chill in the air might upset me. From the inside, I placed two jars on the outside windowsill of my bedroom and two on the outside windowsill of the bathroom — those being the two rooms I spent most time in.

I went back to my bed and lay under the covers, smiling, but I wasn't content for long. It was true that I frequented the bathroom often — to expel waste and to wash — but that in no way equalled the amount of time I spent in my bedroom. So, naturally, I could not justify an equal amount of jars on each windowsill.

After a little thought a solution came to mind. I got to my feet and approached the bedroom window. From there I took a jar and brought it to the bathroom. But having three glass jars on the bathroom windowsill upset me deeply. I stood for a time in wonder. The right solution came, eventually. I took the jar I had transferred from the bedroom to the bathroom, along with one of the original jars I had placed on the bathroom windowsill and put them both on the bedroom windowsill, and after that I went back to my bed, content. For a few days, Tilda was ongoing outside. I had on occasion prepared myself to get up and observe her work from the fullest of angles, but settled with the view I had from the window. While there I checked my bee traps. They were effusively ineffective and my thoughts were constantly disrupted.

I decided I would have to increase my efforts, so returned to Mr Kennelly's room in search of more jars. It was after five and I found Mr Kennelly in. I didn't think it necessary to introduce myself for Tilda was bound to have spoken of my presence in the house. I simply offered my hand with a good evening and pushed my way through the doorway.

I took my time to correctly explain to this Kennelly the profound gravity of my complication in hope that it would melt him into granting me a few more of his receptacles. He refused, but I was by no means disgruntled; Kennelly had listened intently and the cogs of his thought machine had conceived a greater solution. He was a natural problem solver; most single men are — having not the pains of responsibility, lovers and children to entangle their thoughts. Mr Kennelly would be able to attain the kingdom of mermaids with little difficulty, if he so wished to enter.

Here is a brief summation of how he arrived at solution, including solution in full: His first question was to ask when I had initially noticed the bees?

I replied by telling him it was on the morning that Tilda commenced her fad.

He nodded.

And where do these bees reside?

Around the windows, my reply.

I could sense the brewing of his interrogation. His final question surprised me; it was not the path I would have taken given the information he had already obtained.

What is on the windowsills?

Genius, I thought. Sheer, absolute genius, although I was still no closer to knowing.

Flowers, I replied.

I knew that salvation or redemption or something grand and significant was at hand. And then it came.

The bees are there for the flowers, he said. Get rid of the flowers and the bees will follow.

I turned at once, shouted that next month's rent would be waved, and left him. I descended the steps and shouted for Tilda to attend to me.

Tilda, in a loud voice. Tilda!

She arrived, draped in one of her lounge cardigans and slippers. Before she had time to inquire, I demanded for the scissors.

Which ones? Her contribution.

Scissors! Things that cut! Any. The ones with the red plastic, if they are sharp. She went to the kitchen. I heard her open a drawer.

Sharp, I shouted.

She came back with a small pair she used for cutting threads and covering the mistakes of her embroidery. I ran my finger along one edge, for I felt it the right image to give her.

Directly, I went to the bedroom window and chopped. I cut petal after petal until I butchered stem, then I went back to my bed, content.

For the next few weeks, I thought in peace. I revisited Kennelly to return the jars, which I had Tilda rinse thoroughly. I even asked him to allow me an afternoon in his bed, while he would be out, but showed no hard feelings when he refused.

Heaven resided in my head, for a time; the waves were calm and voyage was pleasing. For the fourth consecutive afternoon, I was approaching a cluster of rocks, behind which could be heard melodious mere-song and the muffled laughter of their mischievousness. I had only to continue a little further before I would be embraced by silkenscales and soft, kissable lips, when there came, from a distance, a bastarding motorboat. The waves heightened and crashed and the song up ahead was lost. I drew open my eyes at once. It was all I could do to stifle a curse — so as not to worry Tilda — for two bees were rudely fiddling against the windowpane. I appropriately spat in their direction.

Tilda, I shouted. Tilda!

I waited. She had drifted out of earshot. I listened carefully beyond the buzzing. She was in the garden, digging. In time, I got to my feet and went to Kennelly. The waft of woman came as I crossed the threshold, into his residence, but I did not comment — he was as free as the next to exploit the opposite. I had more pressing matters.

Kennelly, I expected, was the type to greet a sudden arrival with, to what do I owe. so I freed him of it.

They're back, my words to him.

The bees?

The very ones.

Did you destroy the flowers?

I did, and had peace to go with it. But there are more flowers around the garden.

Did you not destroy them all? Kennelly's face was quizzical — I allowed him that, for my response would sooth it.

I can't be expected to spend my minutes in the chill, chopping off flower heads in my slippers and cottons. I have other things to be doing.

His expression agreed. He discarded that line of interrogation for something closer to the pulse.

What brings in the flowers?

As I said before, Mr Kennelly had no part to play in the matter, other than to extend his hand in friendship, when required. He is a great young man, not yet fully shrewd, but adapt in the dismantling of problems, and with a fine eye for anything glass. I am sure that, if I had known of his lodging sooner, we may have even struck up a powerful friendship, master and apprentice.

What brings in the flowers, had been his questioning. I had no longer need of further conversation. I knew what course to take. I left Kennelly without further word and descended the stairs.

Tilda, I called. Tilda!

She was washing plates at the kitchen sink. I stood and watched her from the doorway.

Tilda, I said. Do we have a knife?

What sort?

Never you mind what sort, I said. The meat knife.

She pulled out a drawer by the fridge and took from it a large knife.

Is it sharp?

Sharp enough, she countered.

Enough for what? You have no idea what I need it for. Sharpen it!

She took a sharpening pole from the same drawer and moved the knife once this way, once that, against it. The noise was dramatic.

After a moment, she handed it to me and returned to her duties at the sink. I stood again at the doorway, watching her, with a knife now in my grip. For a moment I considered what I was approaching, yet I didn't linger long in thought, for fear of indecision, or worse, doubt.

I lunged forward, not intending to make a noise, but there it was, involuntarily; ARGH. I plunged the knife into Tilda's back, a little right of her spine. Her collapse to the

floor was immediate, accompanied by a noise, which I dislike to associate with my wife, for I had never before known or thought of her as vulnerable. I disliked this new weakness in her, so I continued to inundate her body until I had earned a great sweat and was outdone by fatigue.

Tilda, I said, as I sat back looking at her. No audible answer.

Tilda, I whispered, for if there were life yet remaining in her she would hear a whisper more intensely than any shout. But nothing. Tilda was dead. No more Tilda, accept, of course, her lifeless body.

I lay on for a time, taking in the scene, drifting on sea and ocean alike, all the while recovering my strength until I was able to get to my knees, at least, and make my way to the bedroom. Once there, I succumb to fatigue and accepted sleep.

I could not be altogether sure of the duration of my slumber, but I accepted that the light was that of early afternoon. I was just about to call for Tilda and scold her for her laziness — having not woken me with breakfast — when I recalled my act from the night previous. Whether that be fear I felt, guilt, sadness, relief or joy, I could not distinguish for I was unable to focus. A little scone, heavily drowned with butter, with a boiling cup of tea — left to cool — was the image that occupied me. I got to my feet, still in the clothes of yesterday, and stumbled into the kitchen. Tilda was still dead there and presented an obstacle to manoeuvre around as I made lunch. When lunch was complete — a slice of bread, some ham, a carrot and a glass of water — I turned and spat on her.

The next few days were exhausted in the same vein, and my ability to focus on the open waters was distracted by her body being there. They say that the death of a loved one pains the one left behind, and here was proof.

I will spare you the heartache of hearing of my troubles in disposing of her. I forced myself into the open air of the garden, dug out a hole in the ground, lugged her body from kitchen to hole, and filled her in. The following afternoon I took myself to the shops to refill the cupboards and on seeing a little bunch of plastic flowers, I bought them to plant atop Tilda's grave. I belittle my efforts of those few days like any man of modest disposition. They were torturous; my cheeks were constantly flushed and the effort I exhausted for the bitch left me too fatigued to even dare venture out to sea.

Yet in the end it was done, and done well. I had ample loaves and carrots and her mound contained an array of flowers, eternally blossoming. I returned to my thoughts somewhere along the lines of content.

Regularity returned; summer was alive beyond the boundaries of my home as I fuelled my adventures with a breadcarrot diet. Of course, in the beginning I struggled to trap the food within my person until it passed out in the way deemed appropriate, but as with all, routine set in and discomfort was replaced by satisfaction, of sorts.

I had a moment of elation when I discovered that I could travel just as well on land as on water to my desired location, and whenever the terrain become rough or dangerous, for example, if I was struggling to descend a cliff face that lacked appropriate footholds, I had the capability of inventing a rope and harness and abseiled to the bottom. There, I would tread water until I reached an area where I needed to submerge fully to pass a field of maze-like kelp.

This new method was hugely successful. With Tilda out of the picture, I was freed of the guilt of disloyalty. I could finally circulate with any number of beautiful aquatic goddesses. Two in particular had taken keen fancy to me, both surprisingly named Tilda. I lay sprawled upon a flat rock surface as their fingers and lips delighted my skin and lips alike. The idea of marriage had been discussed but with negative consequence, for neither of the three of us could decide who was to be wife and who mistress — one having more chores to carry out than the other. Naturally, the idea was put on hold so as not to disturb the pleasures. However, as always befalls the man in his peace, his passionate calm is destroyed.

I had just loosened the cord around the waist of my linen trousers, sprawled again on the rock, and Tilda — that is to say Tilda with the red hair — was slowly inching her hand down from my navel, for the first time in our relationship, when a waved crashed against the rock, showering me in an unquantifiable amount of water. I opened my eyes to find Kennelly standing above me, holding an empty glass object that I recognised as mine and not his.

Kennelly, I said, a little embarrassed upon realising my hand had slipped below the belt line of my trousers — although, from one single man to another, I'm sure he sympathised. I continued;

To what do I owe.

As I have previously suggested, it is unfortunate that we were unable to form a friendship; he cut me short of finishing.

Where is Tilda? he questioned.

Which?

Your wife, he answered. She has not been up for my rent this week. And I haven't seen her in the garden.

Have you seen the mound?

I have, he said.

Then you have seen her. She is below the surface. Although, now that I think of it, I have forgotten to put her in a box.

He looked at me, puzzled. I allowed him his time and like the glorious mind I had previously described, he wasn't too long in the wilderness.

You killed her?

Yes, I confirmed. Removed her. I stuck a knife in her back, once, and then many more times after that. It was an effort, Kennelly, but not without reward.

He was standing with face, I assumed, appalled. And then he did something that I did not expect. I was on the verge of announcing the news of my possible engagement to one of the two Tildas, though to which was still uncertain, when he turned and left. He took the glass with him. I lay on for some time, at first perplexed, but I soon settled.

The police arrived shortly after. I'm not sure if Kennelly had informed them or if they happened on me by chance, but they were not one bit pleased with the scene. They were even less amused by my recount of it all and with my refusal to be removed from the premises.

After that I can have no more complaints. Of course, there was the initial barrage of questions at the station, whose answers I had already offered freely, but when all had settled I was given an empty room and a bed in which I could lie unperturbed. There was little sign that my story had stirred in any one of them anything close to sympathy or even general interest. At first, when they delivered my meals, they greeted me with insults as to the oddness of my passions, but they soon waned, and I was once again free to explore the colours of my imagination and the lustful charms of those marine beauties, content.

Robin Oree

Another Few Days

WE WATCH THE DUCK LABOUR HER WAY UPSTREAM. DUSK HAS VARNISHED HER chestnut coat to a dusty sheen.

She is on her own. Lost? Late for something? I'm thinking there probably just aren't that many ducks around anymore.

Lars rises from where he squatted, resting on bent toes, heel cocked like a pistol hammer.

"Hello sweetie," he says, his voice flat and light.

We walk alongside the duck. She knows we're there, and I wonder how. I wonder what we are to her. Clouds of caustic stink? Darkening blurs of red? Frequency peaks in white noise? A few times, our eyes seem to meet, but it's just as likely she's looking straight through me, or into me, at whatever it is her eyes are made to see.

Lars takes care not to let the section of inner tube drag on the ground. It is wrapped tight between the two aluminium prongs of what used to be the fork of a bicycle frame. I helped him bend them apart, each of us grabbing a prong, placing a foot on the other's thigh and tearing away until we were blood-faced, licking up air.

Without looking at me, Lars hands me the slingshot. He tugs up his trouser legs, lowers himself down on his haunches and plucks a knuckle-sized rock from a damp knot of grass.

I keep an eye on the duck. Her head is drooping. I can't tell if it's from the strain of paddling against the current or if we're beginning to spook her.

She upends herself, presenting her arse to the sky while snapping up something underwater. It occurs to me that bodily shame is a sensibility exclusive to humans. There doesn't seem to be any evolutionary advantage to the notion that one's corporeal needs should be indulged in private and in moderation. By rights, natural selection should favour the shameless. And yet, here we are.

Lars makes a wavy motion in front of my face. "Done daydreaming, killer?"

With the rock squeezed inside the rubber string, Lars waits for her to resurface. When she does, he slams the spiked end of the bicycle fork down into the soil, stretches the rubber taut and takes aim. The duck is unperturbed, water gushing from her serrated bill. In the formerly sheltered world of urban waterfowl, there is no such concept as a projectile.

The rock thwacks dead into her eye and sends her head splashing down into the water. Her body lists slightly to port. Her legs snap flush to her keel, then slacken and hang limp.

Lars motions for me to pluck her out. I lie down on my stomach and slide myself forward over the edge, until I'm see-sawed on the hipbone. I can just about reach her. I grasp the tip of a feather between my thumb and index finger and drag her in towards me. She is cool and slippery to the touch, so I make little beckoning motions with my fingers to tractor her in closer without losing purchase. I reach underneath to feel for a foot.

When I hoist her out of the water, the neck begins spasming, in omnidirectional twitches and murderous forward thrusts. (Is she stabbing at me with her bill?) It reminds me of one of these giant promotional inflatables you would sometimes see mounted on fans, the violent air currents making them rear, flop and double over. I think to myself, if I dropped her back into the water upside down, the head would generate a kind of deformed locomotion. A ghoulish u-boat, prowling the canal in sickly jagged spirals, flaccid periscopes scanning for prey.

I lay her down on the grass. Lars motions for me to stand aside. He brings his boot down on her head. There is a sound like stepping into a nest of dry twigs.

The nobility of his violence would not become clear to me until much later. The quickest and most reliably painless way to end a life is the swift destruction of the brain. Anything else is torture, really.

Lars counsels me not to feel guilty. Ducks are in for the kill, just like anybody else, he says. Just like us. They're known to swallow frogs whole.

When he makes to wrap the dead duck into a newspaper we brought along (stained brown and red with previous contents), Lars pauses and grunts.

"It's a he."

I ask how.

"Eclipse plumage," he explains. When drakes shed their iridescent coat, for a brief period their new feathers assume the humble shade of the female. I can see this bothers him, but I can't make sense of it. I suppose you want to know what it is you're killing.

On our way home, we meet other hunters. Three of them stop, in front of us. They look at the soaking bundle under Lars' arm. They look at me, but I look at the ground. They look at Lars, and he looks back at them. They move on.

I decide to ask about the duck-turned-drake. Lars remains silent, chewing on the inside of his cheek. I ask about mother instead. Lars tells me not to worry. He explains how our bodies are furnaces. They may need a constant supply of quality firewood to keep a hearty blaze going, but a few chunks of coal or a fistful of twigs every once in a while is enough to keep them glowing, until you find another fat dry log to rekindle it properly. He clutches the bundle tighter to his ribs. I feel talked down to, but rather than affronting, it's oddly comforting. The definition of a leader is someone who makes your world simpler.

We pass the eviscerated remains of a corner store. The deli counter's blackened aluminium reminds me of a stripped pelvic bone, dusty and juiceless, gnawed clean, the unsalvageable innermost. I wonder about skeletons and whether they too decay, whether

worms secrete some kind of acid that melts down bone and allows them to suck it up, or whether our skeletons, our organs' shelving, are non-degradable, whether the earth's surface rises every year by a nanometre or two of accreted bone. Poking out from between a stack of concrete slabs, I think I spot a bent knee, but I decide not to look again.

When we turn the corner, the hunters are waiting for us. There's five of them now. Two in front and three bearing down in a half-moon behind us. They demand the bundle.

Lars turns his head towards me and says, in a low voice inaudible to the aggressors: "Remember that time before the Bust, when you were testing out for the track and field, and I told you to just run as if the Devil's dog is snapping at your ankles?"

I nod. Then he shoves the bundle into my hands and launches me through the opening to our right, only to hurl himself at the thug whose outstretched paws just barely miss the hem of my jumper.

I don't look back. I run and run and run and run. My Achilles' heels prickle with fear.

I don't stop running until I reach the crumbling staircase leading up to our complex. I will myself to dash up the stairs, but rather than my foot it's my knee that hits the bottom step and next thing I know I'm buttered face-down all over the steps, breath pumping out of me and eyes feeling twice their size. My arms come back to life before the rest of my body, so for a while I'm dragging myself up the stairs like a beached mermaid.

When I reach our door, I rap three times, in quick succession, then twice more, with a pause in between, then repeat the whole sequence. It's the theme from an old movie about naked robots from the future, which I wasn't allowed to watch as a child and have no means of watching now. The door creaks open to reveal Nan, a trail of water vapour drifting past the chalky tangles of her hair and escaping into the evening sky. I hand her the bundle. When she cops that Lars isn't with me, she doesn't need to ask to know what's happened. She looks at me and opens her mouth to tell me not to go, but I'm already on my way back down.

I find Lars plastered fungally against the husk of a vending machine. He's still drawing

breath. His abdomen resembles a spoiled fruit, sliced once for closer examination and then discarded. He looks up at me and spits, tries to spit, but he only manages a bubbly pink drool.

"Killer," he whispers. "Fuck you doing? Go home, eat the drake."

I tell him that he's going to die if I am to leave him here.

He smiles. "Promises, promises."

I'm crying. Lars strains to lift his hand up to my head, rubs my dusty hair with his knuckles.

"Hey," he says, "worse ways to die worse than this. Worse ways to live."

Lars and I sitting there, wishing for the blunt mercy of a boot. It doesn't come. Lars dies in pulses, each weaker than the one before. I sit there, watching him, learning from him, even now.

Later that night, we sit in a lumpy circle on the floor. Nan tears off a small chunk of drake meat and lifts it up to Mother's mouth. Her lips part, slightly. I watch her meek breath blow away the steam coming off the meat. She swallows, and her ashen cheeks flush.

Another few days.

flash fiction

Mark Tuthill

Slide to View

HE HAD BEEN DOING WELL. HE'D COMPARTMENTALISED DEATH. NOT HIS WORD: compartmentalised. Too bullshitty for his liking. A therapist's word if ever there was one. The therapist loved his bullshitty words. He was forever rattling them off in their one hour sessions: arc, narrative, tone. As if they were developing a film script instead of getting on with the compartmentalising. Was that even a word? Fucked if he knew. Words were never his thing, but that didn't stop the therapist from asking him to write a poem. An experiment he called it. A great word that. Couldn't have put it better himself. He'd never written a poem in his life. But he did it. He did everything that was being asked of him. It was the least he could do for his parents. His Dad forking out seventy quid an hour (as if anyone had seventy quid to burn, least of all his Dad), so he could play Yeats in a coffee shop for an hour before school on Thursday mornings with a guy who looked young enough to be his dead big brother. Like the therapist's closeness in age to Luke was part of the programme. Was always being late part of the programme too? Probably. It was all power games at the end of the day. Someone on top. Someone on the bottom. He'd tried to shift the balance one day. To rein in the words and force the therapist do more of the talking. That was the idea anyway. But the prick was comfortable with uncomfortable silences. Just sat there like poor Robin Williams watching the clock wind down — in this case his watch — tick tock, tick tock, another seventy quid please Mr. O'Connor. 'I'm willing to do all I can to help your son come to terms with the recent suicide of his brother, but this is a dual process (Fuck, he was good with the words. He should have been the one writing the poem), but without Brian's buy-in there is no guarantee of a positive outcome.'

When he had first walked in ten minutes ago it might have gone well. After all, he had become so good at this compartmentalising business that he had put it right out of his

head that today was Luke's birthday. Facebook reminded him with a notification alert as the waitress put down his green tea. He didn’t slide to read it as the phone instructed. Instead he tore up the poem and lifted his coat from the back of his chair.

As he left he imagined the therapist patiently piecing back together the torn pieces of the poem so he could make sense of it. As if by arranging the right words in the right order he could make sense of any of this. Good luck to him with that one.

Gerard McKeown

Good King Bumfluff

208 FROM BROMLEY ROAD/LEWISHAM TOWN HALL TO THE BERTHA JAMES DAY CENTRE IS a half hour journey, but in the morning it stretches from my yawn all the way along the taste of toothpaste waiting to be washed away by my first coffee.

The bus driver races and lurches like he wants it to be over sooner, like he's carrying sacks of potatoes instead of people. The guy beside me could be either. He has the dumpy frame of puppy fat that lingered, but he could be older. His bumfluff will never be a beard. He is showing his friend a video on his smartphone. His friend is wearing earphones round his neck, but Bumfluff doesn't ask to use them. His friend doesn't offer. I can't see the video but I hear the tinny rattle of some banter that Bumfluff and his friend agree is well funny. Bumfluff starts talking about some pub he is going to this evening, and some guy he's going to hit, who's been chatting shit about him and trying to steal his bird. His whiskers look like they've been grown to fool bouncers, but will instead draw attention to Bumfluff. I can see him standing outside the pub, giving it all that to the bouncers that he's nineteen – another tactic. He may well be, but he has that overgrown child thing about him, from the wonky way he wears his baseball cap or the way he props his chunky boots on the opposite seat, to his fake ghetto accent. I guarantee he never uses it when talking — sorry, chatting shit — to his mum. His volume suggests his banter has something of importance to communicate to other commuters, that we are eagerly enjoying the ongoing adventures of Good King Bumfluff. I will him like fury to get off at the next stop, but a small part of me senses, that a small part of him senses me willing and resolves to outlast me.

As more passengers board, Good King Bumfluff takes his boots off the seat. A woman sits opposite him, then slides over to the seat beside her when a guy gets on at the stop after. They have both sat unawares in whatever shit Good King Bumfluff trailed onto the bus with him. While I have a different kind of shit in my ear, gnawing at my patience. It's

Bumfluff's shit all the same, shit from his brain that came out his dominant arsehole.

His dominant arsehole is telling his mate, and the entire bus, about how lethal he is in a fight. He is learning Korean Gung-Fu two nights a week in a dojo above a pet store in Downham. His friend corrects his pronunciation, but Bumfluff is adamant that it is gung-fu with a G. The G is important, as gung-fu is a separate discipline from kung-fu which is totally fake. Gung-fu sounds as believable as Bumfluff's bumfluff.

I'd love to see him Monday morning, with a busted face, crying over the fight he lost at the pub, with either the bouncers or the guy who's trying to steal his bird. How his gung-fu would have worked if they hadn't jumped him from behind, while he was tying his bootlaces. I hope they kick Bumfluff toothless. But it's rare I see the same person twice on this busy bus route. As the bus careers towards the Bertha James Day Centre I ring the bell. This is where I leave the saga of Good King Bumfluff, that ignoble knight who spoiled my morning commute.

James Claffey

Unjumble

THE SEA IS AN UNFIXABLE POINT ON THE MAP, BUT THE WAVES ATTACKING THE SHORE beckon us. Your headache is gone now, the pain peeled back by a barrage of alcohol and pills, your pine-scented perfume wrapping me in love as I push aside branches and make my dogged way forward. Years before, your gait was jauntier, in the days when we read Edna O'Brien's Country Girls aloud in your bed in the flat on the Anglesea Road. We argued about your boyfriend in America, and how you felt obliged to remain faithful, at least until he returned and you could break up with him in person. We created a tragedy of love in the fluid sheets, your resolve diffused by a tangle of limbs and the desperation of loneliness. Thirty years on, those days are blurry, yesterday's argument discarded; the scar on the nape of your neck a browned slice of lemon peel. Take me to the frozen sea, you told me as the spasm ricocheted about your brain, fizzing your tongue so the words wouldn't unjumble. We're nearly there, the waves louder, the glass vial the doctor slipped me at your last visit in my jacket pocket. The seals mutter on the rocks. We are midway in our lives, hearts unfixable, love shabby at the edges. I prop you against the light and hold your hand as the past melts into your veins and the future unmapped rushes from the sea to take you away.

Louise Kennedy

From this day forward

ORLA MURPHY TOOK A MOMENT BEFORE THE REHERSAL BEGAN TO SURVEY THE SMALL country church. In the late evening sunshine the oak pews had a honeyed glow. The stained glass windows cast jewel coloured shapes that seemed to dance around her. The wedding party were sun-showered, slimmed down, French manicured versions of themselves. Even Ciaran's sister Tara looked reasonable, thought Orla, although her bra didn't fit and her baps looked like two bags of giblets.

Orla's friends had spent six hours tying posies of white hydrangeas to the end of each pew. Now they were slumped in seats which had been reserved for family.

"I could eat the lamb of God," said Angela from Estimating, peeling at a gel nail.

Poor Ciaran looked quite overwhelmed when he arrived, which was cute, thought Orla. Her father slapped him on the back.

"Here's the condemned man," he roared.

Ciaran took his place at the altar beside Jamesie, his best man. To Bach's Canon in D, Orla and her father began their progress up the aisle, her regal glide perfected from a YouTube video.

Ciaran and Jamesie stood with their heads bent together, talking. The priest stepped forward and leaned in too. As she reached the altar all three turned to her. He's definitely emotional, thought Orla. Ciaran said something in a small voice that she didn't catch. Her father must have heard, for he reached out his big builder's hand and caught Ciaran by the throat.

Patricia Browning-O'Shea

The Silver Sixpence

"ARE WE NEARLY THERE, MAM?"

"Mam, Mam, are we nearly there, Mam?"

"Maaaaam..."

Sheep fields between grey, stone walls. Endless drab, Derbyshire villages, a bumpy road and the sing-a-longs of the Lower Chapel bus trip were not Doreen's idea of a birthday treat. She decided to stick her fingers down her throat. Vomiting into the aisle should liven things up. As she waggled her index finger for a second retch, a warning cuff on the side of her head knocked her off balance. Huge rough-haired hands grasped the lapels of her new coat and sat her firmly in the seat beside her Grandma Hester, a large-bosomed widow in a black funeral hat. She smelled of Imperial Leather soap and raw onions. Doreen held her nose and wiggled to the edge of the seat out of her grandmother's peripheral vision.

Crumpled, belligerent, and five years old today, Doreen glowered at the bristles that sprouted from the back of the pock-marked neck in front of her.

What was he doing here?

She began to count the bristles one by one. If she was a witch like old Granny Gibbert and stared hard enough, she could set them on fire like birthday candles and burn holes in the back of his neck. She could turn him into a badger and send him snuffling off into the slime of the pig farm, or a fat rat and lock him in the privvy at the bottom of the garden. Then the midden men would come and shovel him into their cart with all the shit. Shit-shit, shitty-shit-shit.

Did it count if you swore in your head?

Her mother's, clear sweet voice rose above the general chorus of the others.

What a friend we have in Jesus

All our sins and griefs to bear

Did you have to wash your mouth out with soap and water if no-one heard you?

Have we trials and temptations

Anyway, it would be damned difficult to find any blasted soap and bloody water on a bus trip to Blackamoor. Damn. Bugger. Sod.

Doreen kicked the back of his seat and watched the shiny red toes of her Start-rite birthday shoes sink into the padding with the rhythm of the notes. A lull in the singing.

''Mam, are we there yet?''

The bus laboured its way up the last of the hills, with a crash of gears. A movement caught Doreen's eye. She gripped the seat in front and focused on her mother. The Badger-Rat was whispering in Mam's ear.

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam

I'll tell me dad when we get home.

***

A curled potted meat sandwich and a limp lettuce leaf lay in the crumbed remains of a pork pie in the middle of the plastic cloth. Doreen jabbed her finger at the jelly in the half-eaten piece in front of her. Her lip quivered. The afternoon sun was burning the top of her head and her promised surprise was taking too long. She shaded her eyes and looked for her mother.

The picnics dotting the small field were deserted. Her grandmother dozed in the shade. The others had long since left. Quietly and quickly. Two-by-two. Over the stile and into the woods. Well, she wasn't old and she wasn't afraid of them woods neither. She could go into the woods as often as she wanted and sod anyone who tried to blasted stop her. She jabbed again at the jelly.

"Eat it."

A dark shadow loomed across the cloth. The Badger-Rat

"No."

"Trouble with you is you're spoilt, young lady. I said eat it."

"You're not me dad."

"If I was, I'd give you a bloody good hiding."

"Maaaaam!"

***

"Close your eyes!" Her mother placed the iced cake in front of her daughter and lit the candles.

"Surprise!"

Doreen opened her eyes. A viridian, glacé cherry slid down the slope of icing.

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday, dear Doreen!

Happy Birthday to you!

Hip Hip – Hooray!

“Make a wish,” barked The Badger-Rat.

Doreen squeezed her eyes closed and crossed her fingers.

I wish you was dead.

Her mother nudged The Badger-Rat.

“And Uncle Jimmy’s got something for you as well.”

He thrust his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a shiny silver sixpence pinched between fleshy forefinger and thumb. It glinted in the afternoon sun.

Swift as a cat, Doreen snatched at the coin. Swifter still, The Badger-Rat palmed it.

“This is our secret, Doreen. You, me and your mother.”

Doreen nodded and the piece of silver fell into her hand.

***

Her mother’s voice led the opening of her favourite hymn.

The day thou gavest Lord is ended,

The darkness falls at thy behest;

Doreen lay down on the seat and closed her eyes. The bus bumped and churned over the hills and round the bends. Up and down. Over and round, faster now, the driver eager to get home.

"Mam"

Not in the dry retching of the morning, but in a forceful continuous upwards stream, Doreen’s stomach evacuated its contents.

Through streaming eyes, she watched a lurid mess of glacé cherry and birthday cake and Custard Creams and everything else she'd eaten and drunk that day cascade over the wisps of dry grass woven into her mother’s hair and clag in the bristles of The Badger-Rat's pockmarked neck.

Doreen gripped her sixpence tighter in her small hot hand.

Betsy Cornwell

Old Faithful

YELLOWSTONE SMELLS EGG ROTTEN.

At least it's better than Gettysburg, which my sister and I agreed was the most gee dee boring day of the entire road trip. No blood or anything, not that there would be anymore, I know. But you'd think there might at least be the smell of blood on the wind, or something. Nope. Just a field. The kind you might have a picnic on and not even know people died there.

Anyway, we get to Yellowstone and we can't even camp in the freaking tents wrapped up in the back of the Suburban for this exact freaking purpose, because there has been a marked increase in bear activity in the area says the park ranger who has what my best friend's big brother would call a porno moustache. Dad is pissed that we have to spend money on a hotel room near the park. One room with one bed plus two cots for my sister and me. I picture the bears like Yogi, rummaging into tents friendly for honey, nestling at the foot of my sleeping bag. I think maybe I would have liked that.

My parents always keep the TV on when they're going to sleep. It covers the room in a cheap yellow blare and it's hard to tune out. I turn over, my hips dig sore into the thin cot, and I miss last year's straight hips. I close my eyes and imagine a bear slumped snoring on my toes, and eventually it's morning and I hadn't even noticed it coming.

Dad's bitter coffee breath wakes me up. Time to go he says and we do. We take turns chirping about the scenery, and my sister hides her Sweet Valley High in the crook of her arm. Did you see that hawk get that squirrel, Daddy? Daddy, did you see how big that tree is?

And yeah. Rotten eggs. Driving into the park in the Suburban, with the AC on the fritz, is miserable enough, but at least it only smells like GORP and old soccer cleats and my sister's books in there. That smell has nothing on Yellowstone. My mom, who is a scientist so I have to believe her, says it's sulfur. Sulfur is yellow, which is where they got the park's

name from. But that's not important. What's important is sulfur smells butt-awful. It's coming in waves off the whole gee dee place, like the heat waves on the road that I thought were just an expression until this stupid trip. Guess what? Heat waves are a real freaking thing. They stick up like plastic sheets on the highway. I almost think they'll rip, or melt through the car and cover our bodies in clear goo when we drive into them. But we pass right through, and nothing feels any hotter than it did before, and the heat waves are still whole when I look back at them.

So those are a real thing, and Yellowstone is a real thing. There are lots of things I've figured out are real lately. The only things that aren't real are grizzly bears guarding the foot of your bed.

And Old Faithful is real. Dad insists we go there right away, even though my sister and I want to sit and stare at the Morning Glory hot spring, which I guess is supposed to look like a flower but I'm pretty sure it's an underwater gateway to a blue kind of hell, all lumpy and dark and tight and then opening up at the bottom and just smelling so, so bad. My best friend would love the colour, and I try to remember exactly how not quite dirty turquoise it is so I can tell her later. My mom makes some crack about how it smells like Dad when he farts in their bed, and he grumbles and promises to get up when he has to do that, and I think no, just stay, just stay.

But that's not important. What's important is my sister and I want to stay at the morning-glory-hell-grotto, but Dad and my mom urge us on to Old Faithful because it's almost time for it to go off. It's not so much exactly faithful these days, but my mom says you can pretty much still count on it most of the time.

We sit on this bench with half-melted plastic bags stuck around it, like melted from the sulfur in the ground or just the heat, I bet, and wait. Five minutes past the supposed time nothing is happening, and some of the other tourist families start to wander off. Probably back to the hellhole flower spring, which is definitely way cooler, but I don't say so. That's not important. Even Dad wants to leave after a while, but my mom grabs his arm and gets him to stay. We've gotta see this, she says. It's still Old Faithful, pretty much.

And then it starts, it starts before I even see, spurting up into the air not in slow thick waves like I'd imagined but clear and steady higher and higher, thrust up and frothing off to the side in the wind like a ponytail, water so hot, my mom says and I have to believe her, it wouldn't even burn you, you would vaporize.

I keep picturing myself stepping into the centre of the gush, but it's not like I want to vaporize myself, you know? There's my best friend Carla to get back to, and then seventh grade, and if that's not just bursting with gee dee beautiful possibilities, I don't know what is. So it's not exactly that I'm picturing stepping inside the geyser, I think, no, but being it, shooting and rushing and spurting out into the sky, mixing up dust into boiling mud, an all-by-myself pillar, vaporizing anybody who comes near me, essentially faithful, tall and white-hot and totally, totally pure.

Adam Trodd

Blue on Blue

IT WAS THE MAGNUSSON. ASKING A FELLA IF HE WANTS TO BE AT HIS SAME-SHIT-different-day job of work in the fried fluorescence of a windowless factory on the hottest day of the year. The air was staler than an armpit in there. A corrugated roof too; you'd hear the griddled corpses of the beetles unlucky enough to land on it ticking and clicking as they curled and dried. What the fuck kind of answer would any of us give? But he had to ask. Stupid. Didn't ask any of the other lugs on the line. No. They just looked over their shoulders at us like cows about to lick their assholes. Had to be me. I had to be special. And the boys know I'm honest. They could see it coming long before I even had time to think. But then again that's my problem; my particular brand of gun-flash honesty. Ask a question and you'll get the full bore of the unfiltered contents of my mind through both barrels. My old man used to say I had the kind of face that those in authority will seek to ask questions of and he was right. Magnusson was squinting at me like he wanted to pry some kind of trouble out of me if even if it meant taking a crowbar to my mouth. And that fucking clipboard? I'm telling you, do nothing but walk up and down a factory floor with one of those in your hand and nobody will ask you a thing. But stand there and do your job and they want all colours of shit out of you.

The boy was doing his homework when I got home. His mother was still out short order cooking for road-dried truckers and desk jockeys so I came home to keep an eye on him. He didn't ask why I was back early. Children don't piece that stuff together, they just go on living minute by minute in their four foot high world. There's none of me in him. The mouth, the eyes. All her. Same birthmark even, just peeking out from under his hairline like a patch of spilled red dye. Same brains too. There's nothing of mine in that boy.

Like I said, it was hot and he had the kitchen window open about a foot. The breeze cooled the sweat on my forehead. I sat and watched him work his pencil along the lines of

his copy book and thought of Magnusson and how happily I would crack his windpipe under my boot like a washing machine hose. I guess I must have drifted off into a dream world where furious vengeance was meted out with no consequences. A bluebottle landed on my forehead to get a sodium hit by sopping up the drying sweat. I awoke, startled, half slapping my brow. The boy was still there, writing carefully.

It landed on the plastic table cloth, the tongue sponging away so I made to splat it with my hand but I was easily out-manoeuvred. It took flight, inscribed a lazy oval in the air around the boy's head and landed near his arm. Getting that bastard of a fly became important to me. I slid back my chair by pushing with my feet on the floor and reached over to the counter for the swatter. Bluey just stayed there, tensed and instinctually aware of the myriad, minute alterations of the environment. Readying himself, I felt, for my move.
I told the boy to stay still and wrapped my fingers around the handle of the swatter, the idea being to swing it in an arc from the kitchen counter where it lay. The boy was absorbed in his homework and didn't hear me. He rubbed his eye and the fly took off. All the tension from the unused strike remained in my arm. I clenched my teeth and glowered at him. He was unperturbed and settled back to his work. The bluebottle gave the kitchen counter a cursory zigzag flyover. I let the swatter go and instead opted for a magazine; one of the thick glossy ones that she reads with the spine glued hard as a garden cane. It creaked as I rolled it until it was solid as a length of pipe. I waited then in stasis, like a chameleon, trying as well not to let thoughts of doing heavy damage to Magnusson ruin my poise.

It landed on the boy's head, tongue probing like a plunger at the sheening black hair. I re-tightened the rolled magazine, my eyes fixed on every halting movement. The boy shifted in his seat. I closed my eyes and tried to exhale the frustration of being thwarted again but by some miracle the fly stayed put and headed for the port stain at the boy's hairline. I tensed the backs of my legs.

'How come you're not at the factory?' the boy asked, looking up.

The bluebottle took off.

I sprang from my chair and let the little bastard have it.

review: Claire Savage

on The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories

by Jane Talbot

AS A FAN OF THE FAIRY TALE AND WRITING THAT EMBRACES THE GOTHIC, QUIRKY, strange and exciting, I approached *The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories* by Jane Talbot with interest. As a professional trainer, coacher, explorer and storyteller, Ballymoney-based Talbot's passion for adventure is reflected in her working life, but would it be revealed in her writing? The short answer is yes, but of course, you'll want to know a little more than that…

The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories, published by Belfast's Blackstaff Press in September, is a collection of seven short stories, complete with brief notes and a glossary at the back. Short story collections, as we know, come in all shapes and sizes, and this one serves up seven sizeable stories as opposed to a longer collection of shorter tales. The stories are partly inspired by Northern Irish folklore and weave in various local landmarks and traditions throughout the narrative. They're also rather more gruesome than I'd been anticipating, so if you're expecting sweet tales of helpful elves and pixies, then consider this your warning.

Of course, when you're tackling the subject of the fairy tale, to get published, you really have to bring something new to the genre, and Talbot does exactly this with *The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories.* Many writers try desperately to 'find their voice' and Talbot has certainly found hers, for it jumps out at you from the first page and hooks you in with its almost otherworldly lilt.

'A silvery cartwheel of plump harvest moons ago, in the large mossy space between a tick and a tock, there lived a farmer called Man Donaghy. He was one of the Big People, all

black-haired and broad and handsome-strong with the dark, urgent eyes of a hungry dog.'

A note at the end of the book explains to the reader that the stories follow *'many conventions associated with traditional and oral storytelling.'* This also makes them more suited than most to being read aloud, which is evident from the outset. Indeed, it's part of what makes the collection stand out, together with the extended story format – just when you think it's over, you realise there's another bit. Usually followed by *'The Last Bit'* and then *'An Extra Bit'*.

The first story is the one which gives the collection its title and is of course, *The Faerie Thorn*. Here we meet Man Donaghy and his wife, along with the Little People and the Big People. We learn of the Memory Takers and the *'knows-everything woman'*; of the tricksy trolls and the Seeing Curtain. There's also a Hell Gate and a Bone-Ghost to contend with. Suffice it to say, there's a lot packed into this clever tale and it flows along nicely, broken up into sections which hint at what's to come. For example, we have *'The Things-Actually-Get-A-Lot-Worse Bit (which includes The Really Gruesome Bit)'.* However, spoilers…

What strikes the reader from this initial story is that here, we don't have a stereotypical fairy tale collection. This is good, and so, we keep reading.

In *The Story of Amergin*, we have a retelling of an ancient Ulster myth, which features a shape-shifting fairy or pookah, a faerie poet and an appearance by the Bard of Ulster. Like the stories to come, it's a tale with a twist and recounts a family's love for a misshapen son who receives seemingly useless gifts every birthday from the shape-shifter who saved his life. *The Merrow of Murlough Bay* follows, where we learn the fate of a Co Antrim merman. The Little Mermaid it is not. Instead of singing sirens and beautiful mermaids, we find ourselves in the company of merrowmen with *'slimy, brown fishtails and… barely-there, burning-red eyes… sharp, muddy-green teeth that lazy-leaned in all different directions… tangled-seaweed hair and a snout that any pig would be proud of.'*

It rather sets us up for what's ahead, in this tale where souls are stolen and punishments are dealt with cruel abandon – where good deeds are met with witchery-pokery and all sorts happens besides. Talbot winds her way smoothly around the narrative with her original tale, inspired (if you flick to the notes at the back!) by a grave at Murlough Bay in Co Antrim.

Unexpectedly, *The Song of Hulva* is one of my favourite tales in the collection, despite a few rather unsettling gory passages. Centred around Breen Wood, which lies not far from where

I live, *The Song of Hulva* tells the story of the trees that formed it. It plants ideas about how this ancient woodland has perhaps survived for so long and is full of beautiful and also, as Talbot might say, 'ugly-beautiful', language.

'When the sun was too hot to bear the company of clouds and the sky was big enough to dream in, the wind visited Hulva…'

'The wind whipped up into the sky to safety, but Hulva lashed her scissor-branches upwards and wound them around the wind's throat.'

The Spirit of the Meadow Burn is another very local tale for this reviewer, as it gained form after Talbot heard about a ghost who haunts the Bonner Mill in Bushmills. Weaving a bit of Norse myth into her tale, Talbot wraps it all up rather neatly and gives whiskey drinkers something to mull over about why their favourite brew might taste so good! It incorporates the more familiar set-up of man pitted against otherworldly tricks - where tasks must be passed in order to win freedom from the faeries. But again, our narrator puts her very own spin on the form and freshens up the tale to keep us reading to the end.

The penultimate story – *The Terrible Tale of Fillan McQuillan* – is a suitably spooky one involving a conman, a washerwoman (or banshee) who is '*not all-the-way dead* 'and some misplaced souls… It carries on Talbot's gift for putting a new slant on an old idea and conjures up some of her by now trademark quirky, if gruesome, descriptions.

'Her grey skin was all water-wrinkled, her hands were rubbed red-raw and her toes were all webbit. Her baldy head was covered in weeping sores, and her nose was boneless and flip-flapped all about her face. She had a single, long, sharp, yellow tooth that stuck out from her bottom gum and showed itself even when her mouth was closed. She was clothed in green from the waist down and bare from the waist up, and her breasts were long and heavy and all drippit with milk.'

The collection ends with the poignant *Seachmall* – Irish for 'illusion' – another favourite of mine. It is also the shortest story – just seven-and-a-half pages compared to the usual 30-40-page tales. As we read, we anticipate that not all is as it seems, but we want to believe the Seachmall when it says: *'I have merely broken the enchantment of your eyes so that you may see the world as it really is.'*

Indeed, the reader, at this stage, might ask themselves – has Talbot, with her writing, broken the enchantment of *our* eyes to see the world, if not as it *is,* then at least, maybe a

little more imaginatively?

The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories is, I think, a collection which will appeal to anyone who loves tales of myth and lore, and writing that evokes the history of our landscape. Regardless of whether that history is myth or fact, it reminds us of the traditions of which we're a part and the stories our ancestors used to tell and believe.

Talbot's imaginative way of retelling such tales, and of creating her own suitably inspired folklore is in a style that encourages you to always read on. This is fiction that leads you on an adventure, is told in a unique voice fitting to the genre it represents (yet inherently different from what's already there), and which always manages to surprise.

It also serves up a little bit of advice along the way, which readers may do well to take heed of. As Talbot says: *'Remember to keep your seeing eyes and hearing ears WIDE open, won't you?'*

The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories is available from the Blackstaff Press.

review: Joanne O'Sullivan

on The Good Son

by Paul McVeigh

PAUL MCVEIGH HAS PROVED AN UNDENIABLE SUCCESS AS A SHORT STORY WRITER, SO IT would be easy to imagine that his recent move to the novel might mirror the fine-tuned focus of short fiction. While his characters remain densely detailed and his skill for complex personalities is still obvious, he also succeeds in constructing a deceptively broad landscape. Through the exceptionally crafted voice of his narrator, Mickey Donnelly, he manages to cover a wide range of interests; poverty, sectarian violence, childhood bullying, adolescent anxiety and the Troubles. These sort of issues could well write their own stories, yet The Good Son encompasses all of them and more without ever feeling laboured.

While the main strength of the book is its young narrator, it can take time to fully appreciate what a valuable and impressive character he is. Mickey's voice is initially difficult to warm to, and often he displays a degree of naiveté that the reader can find uncomfortable and irritating. At times Mickey's obliviousness to the outside world and his innocence is frustrating, and the reader might question if McVeigh has gone too far in his construction of such a clueless character. Confused observations like: "Ma has to work every hour God sends. How exactly does he send it? Post? Telegram? Mule?", and his incredibly close but provocative friendship with his younger sister Maggie make the childhood teasing he endures seem inevitable.

Although his painful innocence can at first make him difficult to access as a narrator, as the story develops it becomes clear that this is actually part of McVeigh's forensic skill as a writer. The audience understandably sympathises with Mickey, however we are also forced to experience some of the unreasonable animosity his peers show towards him

growing up. His lead figure's ignorance at first might seem like clumsy characterisation, but McVeigh's unrelenting reveal of Mickey's inconvenient opinions and ambitions is important. A reader will often find themselves wishing that Mickey would mature more quickly in order to avoid being so easily isolated and bullied, but almost immediately knows this impulse is wrong and unfair. Even the audience finds themselves implicated in McVeigh's unexpectedly textured narrative, and while the story revolves around Mickey The Good Son illustrates that no one made it through the Troubles entirely guiltless.

Despite Mickey's painful ignorance in areas like boyhood friendship and neighbourhood politics, he's a keen observer of other people and the finer aspects of character. His inability to interact with boys his own age might make him an easy target for the local children, but he notices and interprets more subtle behaviour. He gauges his mother's feelings by her fidgeting with her wedding band, and easily observes when his sister Mary is secretly planning on meeting a boyfriend. While Mickey might be good at noticing these small habits and traits, this talent also lends depth to his portrayal. Although his close scrutiny of others can at times childish, it becomes clear that he possesses a surprising knowledge of the darker side of other people. For most of the novel Mickey seems totally unaware, but McVeigh's gradual and fine presentation leads us to eventually believe our narrator when he announces that "I know people, I know their evil ways."

It's not merely his hero who McVeigh illustrates intricately. Figures like Mickey's imposing mother, caring older sister Mary and drunkard father might at first be in danger of being read as one dimensional personalities, only inhabiting the edges of his self-centred world view. However while none of these names occupy much page space, as the plot comes to an end the reader has actually acquired a surprisingly detailed and completely convincing impression of even these minor figures. While Mary is at first easily cast as the maternal and long-suffering older sister, her involvement in the tarring of a local “tout” and dedication to young men and discos is a convincing account of how a teenage girl might turn out during the Troubles. Although Mickey's and his mother's affection for one another is obvious, it is not without complication either and her sporadic anger towards her adoring son is yet another aspect of their difficult family dynamic.

Mickey's father “holding court” with a group of winos is a brief scene, but is one of the best examples of McVeigh's quiet but impressive investment in personalities other than

Mickey. His dad's secret meetings with local drunkards in an abandoned public bathroom to continue his drinking and garner an audience for his story-telling is a small but striking insight into the life of a frustrated alcoholic. His failed dreams of leaving Belfast and tendency for drama when drunk are not only believable, but are made all the more legitimate by his younger son's more innocent but similar traits. Even though Mickey is the star of the show, without losing focus of his finely detailed protagonist McVeigh manages to illustrate the insidious and unrelenting effects of the Troubles. While the young narrator's struggles with friends, family and boyhood take centre stage, the small dramas of the novel's lesser characters are still granted equal skill and psychology.

Considering the strong emotional attachment that McVeigh forces us to feel towards his hero, it would be tempting to allow him a fairy tale ending similar to the films and TV shows he obsesses over. However the story to the very end remains true to the complex characters and messy realities of Mickey's life, and while some small happiness seems to prevail he is no less conflicted than he was in the beginning. While there are a few reasons for celebration Mickey doesn't escape the story unscathed, and his youthful innocence is replaced by a sad and adult realisation that “no miracles are coming out of the sky.” The story of a young boy and his family's negotiation of the Troubles would be a satisfying enough experience for a reader, yet McVeigh successfully manages to carry this already weighted subject further. The Good Son goes beyond surface politics and stereotypes of Northern Ireland, and is instead an impressive and insightful novel about the inextricable nature of guilt and innocence.

The Good Son is published by Salt.

Olive Broderick

on Aloysius Tempo

by Jason Johnson

"AND THEN WHEN THE GUARDIAN *IS RUNNING OPINION PIECES ON THE LATEST COCK-UP, people don't usually ask you about it, because they're not interested, but you want to tell them about it anyway. You want them to know-yes, they forced that girl to have a Caesarean; no I can't vote, unless I go home, and even then I'm not really supposed to-...".* In the way of strange fortune, this is from an Irish Times article that I read immediately before reading 'Aloysius Tempo'.

The article is, in fact, published as a thought piece entitled '*There's not much I like about Ireland, so I live in London*' in the London edition of the Stinging Fly. The quote above is a little bit out-of-context but the truth is that there was a lot about that article that felt right to me about the current wave of emigration (RoI side of things I hasten to mention) and how those who are taking the boat this time round have a very different feel for their country of origin. It got me in a good mindset for reading Aloysius Tempo.

18 November 2016: the opening date of Jason Johnson's fourth novel — and his first featuring the improbably named Aloysius Tempo — gives a clue to the backdrop of the novel. The novel moves around a bit in its timeframe but it mostly moves backwards.

'As a nation we've put on a good display in the window this year but made a balls of truly sorting through the stock in the back of the shop.'

This is the first piece that I have read dealing with the 1916 centenary. The first of many, I suspect, as 2015 winds its way into the New Year. I admit a preference for crime fiction as a means to work out the knots and difficulties of political situations (no matter how big or small the 'p'). An investigation, in all the meaning of the word, of crime is an excellent way of sorting out where the lines are and when it's alright to cross them and all those shades of meaning told with action and suspense carrying the story. For me, this was a very good way to begin to get my head around what the anniversary of 1916 might mean.

So 'Ireland' has a PR problem and Aloysius is called in to 'hard solve' that problem — a solution that involves a series of particularly nasty 'accidents' which happen to a series of particularly nasty individuals. But while Aloysius Tempo may have the hard solve credentials — the nature of his own 'Irish' background (and his lack of interest in his Irishness) makes him a good foil for the ruthless form of patriotism held by those who hire his type of hard solving capabilities. They, led by 64 year old Imelda, attempt to create with Tempo's skills — while at the same time coaxing him back into — a world where everybody can have an Irish identify that they can be proud of again.

As somebody from there (Co. Cork) and living here (Co. Down), I particularly liked that set up — that sense of the main character speaking from the perspective of one whose Irishness has more than one model which is a bit suspect within the old patriotic style of operation and who has already checked out of living with a sense of a single geographic identity. It makes for thought provoking reading at times.

But, to be fair, this isn't a documentary — and it doesn't take itself as seriously as all that either. The story itself pays out in a lively way. Aloysius, himself, is quite diffuse as a character and a bit of a mix 'em, gather 'em. At large internationally, at times eloquent in the midst of his mode of dispatching, possessing a strange fascination with everybody's age, humorous and, at times, let's face it, a bit mad, he retains his own strange integrity throughout.

There is quite a collection of colourful characters that fit well within the world of crime

fiction. And for all that there could have been a temptation to go back to glory days of 1916 solutions, the setting and the set-up is contemporary — with all the right technical devices, brutality, and the CIA's uncanny digital intelligence systems.

What happens to Tempo in the end is ambiguous. Will we see him again? In an interview with Gerard Brennan for his Crime Scene NI blog, the author says that it's very likely – and he has another four or five adventures planned for the man who has the hard solutions.

Refs:
'There's not much I like about Ireland, so I live in London' Niamh Mulvey is acting editorial director at Quercus Children's Books. This essay, published by the Irish Times, is from a special London issue of the Stinging Fly — stingingfly.org. http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/generation-emigration/there-s-not-much-i-like-about-ireland-so-i-live-in-london-1.2295823

'Five Questions — Jason Johnston' — interview with Gerard Brennan from Crime Scene NI (blog) — http://crimesceneni.blogspot.co.uk/

Aloysius Tempo is published by Liberties Press, Dublin.

plays

Alan McMonagle

Famous Last Meals

'SO NOW YOU THINK WE SHOULD USE THE BERETTAS.'

'It's only an opinion.'

'It's very different to your previous opinion.'

'I am a woman. I am allowed opposing viewpoints in quick succession. Left or straight on here?'

'Left. Do you want me to drive?'

'No. You are the navigator. How are we for time?'

'Our timing is spot on. Our guy should be just sitting down to his dinner. What do you suppose he'll be eating?'

'What makes you think it's a guy?'

'Are you saying it's a woman?'

'No. I'm saying you're making a presumption. Which way?'

'Left. Are you sure you don't want me to drive?'

'Yes.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't like the way you behave going through roundabouts. Plus, I am in charge.'

'Why do you get to be in charge?'

'I am a Hopper painting. I am straight out of a David Lynch movie.'

'What is that little speech supposed to tell me?'

'I ooze menace and dread.'

'What do I ooze?'

'Do you really want an answer to that? I think it was straight on back there.'

'Oh! So now *you* are the navigator.'

'If you are going to sulk on this trip I can be driver, navigator and everything else. Jesus! Did you see that? He cut right across me. You should have warned me he was there.'

'And now you want me on traffic patrol.'

'Sometimes it can be useful to do more than one thing at once. Have a think about that when you get a moment.'

'Maybe I should give birth. I hear that helps.'

'Good one, brother. Hey! Was that a chipper?'

'I'm sorry. I no longer have eyes in the back of my head. I thought you had chips earlier.'

'There! He did it again. MOTHERFUCKER!'

'There's no need to be like that.'

'It's my primal scream. I need to let it out every few days.'

'Because you are a woman.'

'You catch on fast when you want to.'

'So, have you been wondering about what he's eating?'

'Who?'

'You know, the guy.'

'You're very sure it's a guy.'

'Is this your way of letting me know it's a woman?'

'I'm encouraging you to keep an open mind. Anyway, what's it to you what he or she is eating?'

'It's just that it occurred to me that it will be his *or her* final meal.'

'She doesn't know though, does she? Or he.'

'She doesn't. Nor does he. Which is kind of a pity when you think about it.'

'If I was a judge in a courtroom right now I would be interrupting to ask where are you going with all this.'

'A condemned person always get a chance to eat a last meal of their choosing.'

'Because he knows he is going to die.'

'Exactly. Only the way we operate they never know.'

'And you feel bad because they may not get some last minute grub.'

'It's just an observation.'

'Consider it part of the price they have to pay.'

'Tell me something, sister. If it was your turn — you know, to be gassed or for lethal injection — what would you choose as your last meal?'

'I don't know.'

'I bet you do know. Turn left here.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Now listen to me. A needle full of poison is about to be put inside you and you have to eat something. What will it be?'

'Nothing. I'm not hungry.'

'Look. This is it. Your last chance to have someone do something for you. You're going to order something and you know it.'

'I'm still not hungry. Are you sure that was the correct turn?'

'Yes I am. Have you ordered your last meal yet?'

'No.'

'Well, just so as you know, the clock is ticking here. Come midnight you're history and Chef wants to be long out of there before things heat up.'

'Will there be protestors?'

'Protestors?'

'At my execution. This is a woman we're talking about here. Plus I might be innocent. Plus it is wrong to —'

'OK, OK. You can have protestors. You can have banners and glow-in-the-night candles and songs. Besides, these events tend to attract all sorts. But just so as we are clear: you are not getting out of this. There will be no stave of execution.'

'*Stay* of execution.'

'What?'

'It's *stay* of execution. Not stave.'

'What are you eating?'

'I might order a drink.'

'You can't have alcohol.'

'I thought you said I can have whatever I want. Anyway. What makes you think I'm after booze? That's presumptuous of you. And not for the first time this evening.'

'You better not be like this on your last evening on earth. It's not how I want to remember you.'

'How would you like me to be? Begging for mercy? Patting everyone on the back while letting them know what a fantastic job they are doing. I know! Maybe I can join in when the singing starts.'

'Have you ordered anything yet?'

'I've ordered starters.'

'Oh yes?'

'Soup.'

'What kind of soup?'

'Tomato.'

'Chef is going to love you. What else?'

'Can I not enjoy my soup without having to think ahead all the time?'

'You don't have much time. Remember?'

'And another thing. I don't want an injection.'

'What do you mean you don't want an injection! You've been sentenced to death.'

'Yes and I want a firing squad. No jabs for me, thank you very much.'

'Are you afraid of needles?'

'No, I am not afraid of needles, but if someone wants rid of me he can load up his rifle and be a man about it.'

'I take your point, sister. Turn left here.'

'This is a lot of left turns.'

'Talk to the road-makers. How's the soup?'

'It could do with a little salt.'

'You take way too much of that stuff. It can't be good for you. I read somewhere there's a place in America that lets you go if the bullets don't kill you.'

'What! They only get one shot?'

'Something like that. If they miss or catch your shoulders or the bullet lodges inside your skull — you know, without penetrating — they cannot reload.'

'That sounds ridiculous.'

'I know. Remember that lad last year?'

'Lots of reloading there, brother.'

'What else will you eat?'

'A plate of curry chips. With plenty of Ketchup.'

'You're about to die and you're going to mix curry sauce and Ketchup?'

'It's my funeral, brother. I can have what I like.'

'Yes, but of all the available choices you go and choose fast food.'

'You didn't say there was an a la carte menu.'

'I said you can have whatever you like.'

'Then pour me my vodka.'

'I knew it was booze you were after!'

'And I'm saying I want curry chips.'

'Alright, alright! You can have chips.'

'*Curry* chips. With Ketchup.'

'So let me get this straight. You want salty tomato soup. A plate of curry chips. And Ketchup. Jesus! I would not like to be the mortician on this case. Are you leaving room for dessert?'

'I thought you'd never ask. For dessert I'm having ice-cream.'

'Now we're getting somewhere. What flavour? Don't say mint.'

'Pistachio.'

'Good choice.'

'I'm so glad you approve. Now that I'm thinking about it I'm going to skip the other courses and go straight to dessert.'

'That bomber from Oklahoma did something like that.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. For his last meal he asked for two pints of chocolate-chip ice-cream.'

'Wow! We belong in the same painting.'

'The Hopper painting?'

'Now I'm thinking Breugel.'

'Never heard of him. Another lad asked for a plate of dirt.'

'I'm not that bad.'

'And another lad even paid for his last meal.'

'He must have had money to burn. What did he do?'

'Stabbed his neighbour thirteen times and stole fifteen dollars. They used the needle on him.'

'What about the Boston Strangler?'

'He never made it to the execution chamber — he was stabbed in his cell.'

'Did he get to eat beforehand?'

'I have no idea.'

'What about Jack the Ripper?'

'Don't know much about him.'

'What about Ruth Ellis?'

'Who's she?'

'And for a moment there you were sounding like such an expert.'

'Ted Bundy was given steak, eggs, hash browns and a cup of coffee. And a German lad — I forget his name — didn’t want anything to eat. He just drank half a bottle of red wine.'

'I thought you said you can't have alcohol!'

'I meant the kind of alcohol you drink. Wine is civilised.'

'Well, excuse me!'

'How's the ice-cream?'

'Cold — just the way I like it. In fact I'm going to have a second scoop. Would you like some?'

'I'm not the one facing the death squad.'

'It's your loss.'

'I'll be sure to think of those words at one minute past midnight.'

'You better be doing more than that. Because just before they pull the trigger I'm going to mention the name of my accomplice.'

'What! You mean to say you're going to give me up.'

'Of course! You're the one who got me into this mess in the first place.'

'I see your point. How's that second scoop of ice-cream going down?'

'It's only alright. To tell you the truth I'm feeling a little bloated.'

'Yeah. It must be a horrible feeling — knowing what's going to happen as soon as you've finished your meal.'

'It's enough to take your appetite away — which sort of defeats the purpose.'

‘You make a good argument, little sister. I've always said you are the brains in this outfit.’

‘Why, thank you, big brother.’

‘I suppose the looks came my way.’

'If you say so.'

'And the ability to prepare a decent meal.'

‘You know, you really should figure out a way to quit while you’re ahead.’

‘I wish I had heard those very words this time last night.'

'Please don't tell me you were gambling.'

'I was gambling.'

'Horses?'

'Cards.'

'The Black Cat?'

'No! I never have any luck in that place. The Four of Spades. The fellows there are very friendly.'

‘They are always friendly when they see you coming.'

‘In for a penny in for a pound. That’s what I say to them. They get a kick out of it every time.'

'You really need to change your attitude towards money.'

'Me and the rest of the world, sister.'

‘We could have stayed in a nice place tonight. Eaten in a restaurant.’

'All you ever have is dessert.'

'I could have pretended it's a last meal.'

'Hah! Do you remember mealtimes when we were little?'

'We are not having this conversation again.'

'I'd say that's what it's like for those lads on execution night.'

'Please talk about something else or be quiet, brother. My tooth is starting to bother me.’

'That would be all the ice-cream.'

'What part of be quiet do you not understand?'

'I'm choosing the other option you gave me.'

'The next time you need a release you should get yourself a woman instead of gambling.'

'I could let out one of those primal screams.'

'Get a woman.'

'Get one yourself.'

'Don't be funny on purpose. You're no good at it.'

'I want to be like you. Ooze menace and dread.'

'With those looks?'

'Want to hear something Ma once said to me? Follow a lion before you follow a woman.'

'What are you telling me that for?'

'She had a way with words, Ma did.'

'Can't say I remember too many of them. Left here, I presume.'

'No, straight on.'

'Are we nearly there?'

'Almost. Do you want anything else? A milkshake or some tea?'

'So now I can have a drink.'

'You ate everything, so I'm going to let you have something else. Not everyone gets this special treatment, mind you. So mum's the word, OK. Now think carefully. This is your final decision.'

'I don't see what all the fuss is over a last meal. I'm going to be dead in a few minutes.'

'It's nothing got to do with you. It's all about the executioner. By your accepting his offer of a last meal the executioner takes it that he is forgiven for what he is about to do.'

'What if I'm hungry and not in a forgiving mood?'

'Then I suppose you'll have to die on an empty stomach.'

'Now who is the clever one?'

'And I've still got all the looks. OK, slow down. 95, 97...here we are...99 Sunlight Avenue. Good driving, sister.'

'Good navigating, brother.'

'Look at all these trees.'

'It's a leafy part of town.'

'Look at them! They're growing right out of the ground. We're a long way from home now, sister.'

'We are. OK. Let's go. I want this one to be fast.'

'I hear you. All that food talk has made me hungry. You want to know something, I’m glad we do what we do.’

‘So am I, brother. So am I.’

David Butler

Forwards

COMPUTER ROOM OF A THIRD LEVEL COLLEGE, EMPTY BUT FOR LORRAINE, A PRETTY Final Year student, whose phone rings.

LORRAINE: Hello? Trish! Listen, can I call you back? … No. Still in college…I know… I know! Trish I have to get it finished…it's already three days late, like! Yeah! That's what I'm trying to tell you! …Really? When? … (troubled) And Mitch was there? Was he…did he seem ok? …Listen, can you hang on Trish, I'll just get my bag…

(Phone between ear and shoulder, she reaches inside her bag, takes out a packet of cigarettes, shakes them, drops them back in, and exits, carrying bag, but leaving folder, scarf, textbooks behind. Unnoticed, from back-room, enter DOYLE, smallish, alert, wearing a hoodie, and FITZ, large though not overweight, in rugby top.)

DOYLE: I don't believe it. Lorraine Hayes in here? She's getting as slack as you so Fitz!

FITZ: How, "as slack as me"?

DOYLE: (lifting a textbook) She must be just as late as you with your famous Ethics assignment! Give Sky News a buzz there would you! I'd lay odds Lorraine Hayes hasn't been so much as a day late in three years!

FITZ: But she's been away, like. All last week.

DOYLE: How do you figure that?

FITZ: Coz I was there, Doyler. I actually went to my Ethics lectures last week.

DOYLE: So I believe. But what I'm asking you is, how come you noticed Lorraine Hayes wasn't at them? C'mere, you fancy her!

FITZ: Fuck off!

DOYLE: You do! You fucking fancy her!

FITZ: Would you ever … feck off for yourself Doyle!

DOYLE: Are you mad though? You, a prop? At least your pal Mitchell's a winger, so he must have something upstairs. And look how long he lasted with her.

FITZ: You have to be Mastermind to play soccer I suppose?

DOYLE: You have to be fast, bro. A 'striker', know what I mean? What you rugby heads lack is the killer instinct.

FITZ: I'll say that for Lorraine Hayes anyhow, she's one smart girl.

(DOYLE sits at computer at which LORRAINE had been sitting.)

DOYLE: She is not smart. What she is, my friend, is a swat.

FITZ: She was smart enough not to go with you to the Halloween Ball last year.

DOYLE: (long, ugly pause) What do you mean she didn't go with me?

FITZ: (winks) I heard through the grapevine you asked her.

DOYLE: Who told you that?

FITZ: Ah now!

DOYLE: Who fucking told you that?

FITZ: Mitch did! (winks) Straight from the horse's mouth bro.

DOYLE: When?

FITZ: He told me ages ago. Before they broke up.

DOYLE: (glares from screen to window) So she must've told Mitchell!

FITZ: No, it wasn't Lorraine. Mitch said it was Trish Neill told him.

DOYLE: Trish Neill? The … cow!

FITZ: (trying to revive lighter banter) Here, I don't hear you denying it Doyle.

DOYLE: I wouldn't touch Lorraine Hayes with a… (indignant) She had no right to tell Trish Neill! That means the whole jaysus college knows. (DOYLE taps a key, staring at screen) Trish Neill is one interfering nosy bitch's melt.

FITZ: Here, what are you up to?

DOYLE: I'm just having a gander is all. Relax!

FITZ: (glancing at the door) What if Lorraine comes back in?

DOYLE: She won't come in. You seen her take her smokes, right? And if that's News of the World Neill on the other end of the phone, it could be a week before she gets her ear back.

FITZ: (with less conviction) You still … you shouldn't be doing that.

DOYLE: I'm doing you a favour, pal!

FITZ: Me? How do you figure that?

DOYLE: I'm just seeing what she has done for Maguire's Ethics assignment.

FITZ: (as if joking) That's not what Maguire would call ethical.

DOYLE: So long as it gets you and me down to Fillies' before everyone's locked out of their box, believe me, it's ethical.

FITZ: (Pause, glancing again at the door. Nods) Has she anything done?

DOYLE: Just bleeding emails. Wouldn't you think now, swatty-knickers would have better things to do with her time than social networking…

FITZ: Here, give us a look… (FITZ peers over DOYLE's shoulder.) Listen, keep sketch. (FITZ takes DOYLE's seat once he rises) Here, this'll give you a laugh!

DOYLE: What? (walks to check door) What are you up to Fitzer?

FITZ: I'm going to sit right down and write myself a letter! (types) "Hey big boy…
I fancy the boxers off you, mwah! Lorraine. " Ha ha! Wait till she gets my reply!

DOYLE: (returning) I knew it! I knew you'd the hots for her!

FITZ: Give it a rest, Doyle!

DOYLE: You're a fucking eegit all the same Fitzwilliam! You send that, she'll bleeding know it was you sent it! Here, get out of the way. I've a better one.

FITZ: (not rising from the seat) What?

DOYLE: Send that to Maguire, that's what!

FITZ: Maguire! (considers) No way!

DOYLE: Didn't he tell yiz you could email him if you were in trouble with his assignment?

FITZ: "Hey big boy" is hardly what he had in mind, Doyle!

DOYLE: Come on! It'll be a laugh…

FITZ: (shakes his head) No way, Doyler! It'd land her right in the shit.

DOYLE: Are you trying to protect Lorraine Hayes? After what she done to Mitch?

FITZ: What'd she do to Mitch, in your opinion?

DOYLE: In my opinion, she dumped him.

FITZ: So? People get dumped every day of the week.

DOYLE: (pause) You want me to send it?

FITZ: I'm not moving Doyle.

(Stand-off. Doyle pushes several times, not entirely in play. Fitz isn't moving.)

DOYLE: Makes you feel any better, bro, I heard she's fucking useless in the sack!

FITZ: You're a sad fecker, Doyle, do you know that?

DOYLE: I swear to you. It was Mitchell himself told me.

FITZ: Like he's going to tell you, when youse two can't even say hello to one another! (muses) I can tell you one thing though. It has his head wrecked so it has. He just … doesn't get it.

DOYLE: Get what?

FITZ: Why she dumped him! He told me only last month they was planning on going to the States for the summer.

DOYLE: But sure that's women for you! (considers) Or it's not. I'll tell you what it is. That's women like Lorraine Hayes for you. Seriously, did she really not tell him why she dropped him? (FITZ shakes his head) There's nobody else she's into?

FITZ: No. Nothing like that.

DOYLE: That's what I mean Fitz. That's just exactly what I mean. It's always the complicated ones like Lorraine bleeding Hayes that feck you up in the end. And you'd swear butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. (Pause) So, what about it?

FITZ: What?

DOYLE: Sending your little love note to Maguire.

FITZ: I'm not doing it, Doyle.

DOYLE: Get up. I told you, I'll send the bastarding thing.

FITZ: You'll get her expelled.

DOYLE: I will in my hole. Maguire'll know it was someone messing with him.

FITZ: You'll get us fecking expelled is what you'll do!

DOYLE: How? (delighted with himself) Who's to know it was us?

FITZ: It had to be someone…

DOYLE: When's the last time you or me was seen in the computer room Fitz? Would you have a bit of cop on for Jaysus' sake! (putting FITZ in mock head-lock and fisting his hair) Doyler and Fitzer, in here? In bleeding rag week?

FITZ: (who still won't give up the seat, to DOYLE's exasperation. Snaps his fingers) You know what we'll do? (DOYLE is too annoyed to answer) We'll send it to Fatboy.

DOYLE: (incredulous) To Fatboy?

FITZ: All twenty-two beautiful sweaty stone of him! Listen to this. "Hey big boy…My mate Trish Neill fancies the boxers off you. She's dying for you to ask her out! L.H."

DOYLE: I like it! He's nearly as thick as you are Fitz. I'll lay any money he buys it and asks her out. Trish fucking Neill! Ha! (momentarily doubtful) You did send it?

FITZ: Message … sent!

DOYLE: I could bleeding kiss you, Fitzer! I fucking love it man!

(FITZ gets up from seat, happy with text, eager to get out.)

FITZ: Come on. We'll go.

DOYLE: (with a mean look) What's your rush all of a shot? (DOYLE now takes the seat.) What about your Ethics assignment?

FITZ: I'll get it in tomorrow. (edgy) Come on will you!

DOYLE: Hang on one minute.

FITZ: Feck sake, Doyle, what are you at now? She's going to … fecking …

DOYLE: Would you relax? There's something we'll check while we're here.

FITZ: What?

DOYLE: Listen. When you and what's her face broke up in first year, you told me all about it, right? (FITZ shrugs and nods) Well then?

FITZ: What about it?

DOYLE: Ah for fuck sake, Fitz! Lorraine Hayes would have told Trish Neill why she was giving Mitchell the bullet.

FITZ: So?

DOYLE: So, Einstein, we're going to have a little butchers at what the two of them has been jabbering about over the last couple of weeks. Sent items. There. When was it you said she dumped him?

FITZ: (Glances towards window, but returns to look over DOYLE's shoulder) It was end of March. Just after the Wesley game.

DOYLE: Sent items. To Trish Neill. Let's see now. By subject matter…

FITZ: (pulls over a second seat. still uneasy) Here! Try that one.

(The two begin to read a long email entry. Eyes widen. The tone has changed. Both appear troubled. Long pause. They look at one another, then FITZ avoids eye contact. DOYLE's eyes remain hard on him during the following exchange.)

FITZ: (gutted) Ah no!

DOYLE: Ah yes…

FITZ: (shaking his head) Ah for the love of Jesus!

DOYLE: That's your answer! (FITZ continues to slowly shake his head.) That's why she wasn't in all last week bro.

FITZ: (one hand to his brow) Ah Jesus, Doyle.

DOYLE: England! (Pause) And Mitch didn't know?

FITZ: No. Nothing.

DOYLE: Not even that she was preggers?

FITZ: Nope.

DOYLE: She mustn't have said a word to him so, bar 'be seeing you round bud!'

FITZ: (Pause) I … don't believe it. She…

DOYLE: You better believe it. There it is for you, in black and white! (FITZ shakes his head. He is too upset to reply.) There's your answer Fitz. I'm telling you, they're all the fucking same when it comes down to it.

FITZ: She must be … absolutely gutted.

(Silence.)

DOYLE: So when are you going to tell him?

FITZ: What? Tell Mitch?

DOYLE: Of course!

FITZ: I'm not going to tell him! Why would I tell him?

DOYLE: (sitting up in surprise) You are joking me, right?

FITZ: I'm not joking you! What good is it going to do now?

DOYLE: (shrugs) Maybe none. (Pause) You can't not tell him, Fitzer. Aren't you after telling me it has his head wrecked, the way she dumped him.

FITZ: It can't do him any…what use … he can't do anything about it now!

DOYLE: Whether he can or not, you've a right to tell your friend what you know.

FITZ: Listen, Doyler… She's in bits, like.

DOYLE: Don't come the fucking cry-baby. Fitz, come on! (Pause. He examines him.). Ok. Suppose you just found out she'd been cheating on him. You wouldn't tell him that either, I suppose?

FITZ: You're being ridiculous!

DOYLE: I'm being ridiculous. (Pause) He's meant to be your pal, Fitz.

FITZ: (looks at him) We're on the same rugby team…

DOYLE: Jesus! Would you listen to yourself? The same rugby team! (Tense stand-off.) I can tell you one thing bud. If you're not going to tell him … I am.

FITZ: Doyle. Listen. You read what she wrote. She was thinking of dropping out of the course! You bring this up, she might never sit her finals!

DOYLE: And? Arthur Mitchell is your friend Fitz, not Lorraine fucking Hayes. So you'd want to explain to him exactly what his ex is like. (A new idea) I mean, just suppose they were to get back together.

FITZ: (deeply bothered) They're not going to… get back together. (angry) That's not what this is about!

DOYLE: But suppose they were to, right? It's not impossible. You said yourself they was planning to go to the States. Suppose in a month's time she asks him back?

FITZ: (hesitant) She won't. But even saying she did, Mitch wouldn't go back with her. He told me himself he wouldn't.

DOYLE: I can guarantee you one thing, he won't once he knows, Fitzer. So you'd want to wise him up.

FITZ: It tore the guts out of her, Doyler. You read her email.

DOYLE: Boo fucking hoo!

FITZ: (angrier) And anyway it's none of our fucking business.

DOYLE: Isn't it? (taps screen) It is now.

FITZ: That's bollox Doyle. It's between Mitch and Lorraine. It's nothing got to do with you or me or anyone else.

DOYLE: How can it be "between" Mitchell and Lorraine Hayes when she didn't have the guts to tell him she was up the duff? (Pause) I'd want to know. And, Fitz, so would you. If you'd just been dumped, with no reason given. (Tense silence) Think about it!

FITZ: (groping for an obstacle) He'll never believe you.

DOYLE: (sensing FITZ is desperate) You think he won't?

FITZ: You can't stand each other for Jaysus' sake! (A last chance) He'll reckon you're making it up! He'll think you're jealous of him cos Lorraine went to the Halloween Ball with him instead of you!

DOYLE : That's … old hat. That's history.

FITZ: I'm telling you, Doyler, drop it. He won't thank you for it.

DOYLE (addressing the screen): He won't thank me, for putting him in the picture?

FITZ: I know Mitch. You don't. He'll figure you're doing it out of … spite or something. Anyway, how are you supposed to know? You're hardly going to tell him Lorraine or … or…or Trish Neill told you?

DOYLE: I'll tell him…I don't know. I'll tell him I seen her email. Why not?

FITZ: Just drop it, Doyler. I've been around Mitch since first year. He's straight as a die. Something like this…. Seriously. We never saw this, right?

DOYLE: (Pause, then delighted) I've got it! (clicks his fingers) What's Mitch's email?

FITZ: Why?

DOYLE: (genuinely delighted, and sure that FITZ will be with him) I'm going to forward it to him. That way, he'll know for definite. He'll have to believe it, when she's written it here herself in black and white… And come here! Fitzer! This way, he won't ever know it was you or me wised him up. (slyly) And neither will Lorraine, Fitz. How could she? Neither one of them will ever know me or you had anything to do with it!

FITZ: (quietly) Doyle. Don't send that mail. I'm asking you, as a friend.

DOYLE: A "friend"! Some friend you are to Mitch!

FITZ: To Mitch? To fucking Mitch? You don't know the first thing about Mitch! I'm telling you, you'll wreck his head for him if you send that mail. And for what Doyle? What's your point? So he'll drop out of college, is that it?

DOYLE: You're talking pure bollox, Fitz, and you know it.

FITZ: Am I? Don't think I don't know what this is all about.

DOYLE: Oh? Really?

FITZ: You're spitting feathers all year that Lorraine Hayes went out with Mitch instead of you. 'Cos you could never stand him, Doyle, not from day one.

DOYLE: He's a prize wanker, I don't deny it. But personal feelings has nothing got to do with this. This is about he has the right to know. And you're the one that's supposed to be doing Ethics?

FITZ: Jesus, listen to yourself! There's no talking to you when you're like this!

DOYLE: Who's asking you to? (Long stand-off) Well?

FITZ: What?

DOYLE: What's Mitch's email?

FITZ: I'm not telling you.

DOYLE: Would you give us Mitchell's fucking email!

FITZ : You don't get it, do you? I'm not giving it to you, Doyler. End of story!

DOYLE: (his gaze close to hatred) Ok, have it your way Fitz! Go ahead, wash your hands of it. Walk away. (clicks finger and points) Contacts!

FITZ: You're not doing this, Doyle.

DOYLE: Arthur Mitchell will be one of her contacts.

(As DOYLE scrolls down FITZ grabs and holds DOYLE's hand. It is obvious that FITZ is the stronger, but DOYLE is driven by a smaller man's fury. FITZ has to clamp both his arms against the seat in a bear hug. The struggle is violent, consisting of DOYLE's short, intense lurches to break the grip. It is almost, but is not, play. The seat overturns and the struggle continues briefly on the floor, FITZ never relinquishing his restraining grip and finally kneeling either side of the prostrate DOYLE.)

DOYLE: OK. (breathing heavily) OK pal. (thinking) All right. You tell me, hand on your heart, that if it'd had've been your kid, you wouldn't want to know. You tell me, had've been your kid, you wouldn't have the right to know. You honestly tell me that Fitzer, and I swear to you, I won't say a word.

(Silence. FITZ is deeply bothered. He releases both arms, but for the moment remains kneeling over DOYLE. Unnoticed by either of them LORRAINE re-enters, too surprised at seeing them on the floor to move into the room.)

FITZ: Ok. (he begins to stand up) Ok, so you tell me. Who're you supposed to be doing a favour to if you send that mail?

(DOYLE rises and ostentatiously examines his lip to see if it's bleeding and hoodie to see if it's ripped.)

DOYLE: Don't try to come smart with me, Fitz. It doesn't suit you!

FITZ: Can you give me an answer?

DOYLE: (examining his sleeve) I can give you an answer all right. (He spots LORRAINE) In fact I will give you an answer. (Glaring, he turns rapidly to the computer and hits key.)

Message…sent!

FITZ: You are some … prick.

DOYLE: No, my friend. YOU are some prick!

FITZ: (Miming a blow which he can't bring himself to deliver) See you round…

(FITZ turns to go. He freezes when he sees LORRAINE standing by the door.)

Fade to black.

contributors

Olive Broderick. Originally from Youghal, Co. Cork, Olive travelled to Northern Ireland to undertake the Creative Writing MA at Queen's University Belfast, setting in Downpatrick in 2003. Her first publication - pamphlet 'Darkhaired' (Templar Poetry, 2010) was shortlisted for the Michael Marks Award for Poetry Pamphlets.

Patricia Browning-O'Shea is Irish by marriage. She is an actor, teacher and voice coach, and has written stories since she could grasp a pencil. She has lived and worked on three continents, brought up 2 children and gained a Masters of Applied Linguistics.

David Butler's latest novel *City of Dis* (New Island) was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year (2015). He won the Fish Short Story Prize (2014), a Scottish Community Drama Award (2013) and a Cork Arts Theatre Writers Award (2015).

Craig Carry (Artist) is a Cork-based illustrator and designer working across a wide range of media. His work has been used for a wide range of clients including: Cork Opera House, Cork Film Festival, Bottlenote Festival, Ergodos and various musicians and record labels. Since 2012, Craig co-runs the music webzine Fractured Air. www.craigcarry.net

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.

James Claffey hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and his work appears in the W.W. Norton Anthology, "Flash Fiction International," and is forthcoming in Queensferry Press's anthology, "Best Small Fictions of 2015." He is the author of the collection, *Blood a Cold Blue.*

Betsy Cornwell is an American-born writer living in east Galway, she has one novel published and two under contract with Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Betsy holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Notre Dame. Her writing has appeared in the Fairy Tale Review, Parabola, and elsewhere.

Kelly Creighton (Editor) is an arts facilitator. Her 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 for fiction and the Fish Short Story Prize. Blog - kellycreightonwrites.wordpress.com @KellyCreighton

Diana DeCesaris Champa is an M.A. student in Creative Writing at the Seamus Heaney Centre, QUB. She is also a writer, teacher, archivist, community facilitator and mother to a toddler whose middle name is Hellion. Her short stories and essays have been published by Array Studios, University of the Air: a thousand words project, The New South and Switch.

Gareth Fox grew up in Maghery, county Armagh. After studying English at Manchester Metropolitan University he moved to Montpellier, France. He debuted his first stage play in Avignon in 2013. He returned to Northern Ireland in 2015 to begin a Masters degree at Queen's University Belfast. He has since returned to France.

Diarmuid Hickey is a teacher from Clonmel, County Tipperary. His work has previously appeared in *The Ogham Stone*.

Gary Hunter lives in Comber and worked in the media before medically retiring in 2011. He studied English and History at university and has recently completed a creative writing course with the Open University. He works with cancer charities Macmillan and Marie Curie, writing, public speaking and lobbying Government.

Louise Kennedy spent her childhood in Holywood, Co. Down. She was shortlisted for both the Memoir and Short Story categories of Fish Prize 2015. She is long listed for Frome Short Story Award 2015 and had a flash fiction in the Incubator issue 5. She has received a full bursary to attend the John Hewitt Summer school 2015. She lives on Sligo with her husband and two children.

Gerard McKeown's work has been published in 3:AM, Litro, Neon and Fuselit, among others. He has performed as support for acts as diverse as John Cooper Clarke, Stewart Home, and Frank Sidebottom. More of his work can be viewed at www.gerardmckeown.co.uk

Alan McMonagle is based in Galway and has published two collections of short stories, *Liar Liar,* (Wordsonthestreet, 2009) and *Psychotic Episodes* (Arlen House, 2013). Last year, his radio play, *Oscar Night,* was produced and broadcast as part of RTE's *Drama on One* season. He has just completed his first novel.

Bernie McQuillan completed her MA in Creative Writing in Queens, Belfast. Her short stories were runner up in Emerald Street's Short Story competition, shortlisted in Creative Writing.ie & UK, long listed in the Fish Flash Fiction Award and published in Woman's Way magazine, The Incubator (Issue 5) and Birmingham Arts Journal. A first novel 'A year in the life of Maggie Sweeney' is looking for an agent. Contact her at MsBMcQuillan@yahoo.co.uk or @BernieMcQuillan.

Marie O'Halloran's short stories have been widely published and longlisted in RTE Guide/Penguin Short Story competition 2013. Her poetry's published in 'The Blue Max Review 2013 and 2014', 'fathers and what must be said' and commended in the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition. She's currently editing her crime novel and working on a play.

Robin Oree is a Dublin-based writer of bite-sized prose, screenplays, stage scripts and the occasional shaving of poetry. He twitters @nibORee and tumblrs onniboree.tumblr.com.

Joanne O'Sullivan is living in Dublin, and works for Dubray Books. A proof copy addict, she loves getting her hands on exciting new titles. She tweets about books and the rest of the world at @JoanneKateOS.

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

Adam Trodd lives and works in Dublin. His fiction has appeared in *The Flash Flood Journal, The Irish Times, 100 Words 100 Books,* KYSO Flash and *Crannóg Magazine.* He was shortlisted for the 2015 Cúirt New Writing Prize and will have a piece in Issue 2 of *Brain of Forgetting*. https://twitter.com/A_Trodd

Mark Tuthill lives in Dublin. He currently has a feature film in development with the IFB, while two short films he wrote have been awarded at numerous film festivals, including the BFI London Film Festival by a jury chaired by director, Terry Gilliam. Mark also recently completed his first novel.

Jona Xhepa. Currently in Dublin, originally from Albania via Canada, Jona has performed poetry, music and comedy around Europe and elsewhere, and is working on more stories and performances and curates Chronic Jazz Flan productions.

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interview: Kelly Creighton

reviews: Joanne O'Sullivan on The Good Son, by Paul McVeigh
Claire Savage on The Faerie Thorn & Other Stories, by Jane Talbot
Olive Broderick on Aloysius Tempo, by Jason Johnson.

plays: Alan McMonagle. David Butler.

fiction: Diana DeCesaris Champa. Diarmuid Hickey. Bernie McQuillan. Jona Xhepa. Marie O'Halloran. Gary Hunter. Gareth Fox. Robin Oree. Mark Tuthill. Gerard McKeown. James Claffey. Louise Kennedy. Patricia Browning-O'Shea. Betsy Cornwell. Adam Trodd.