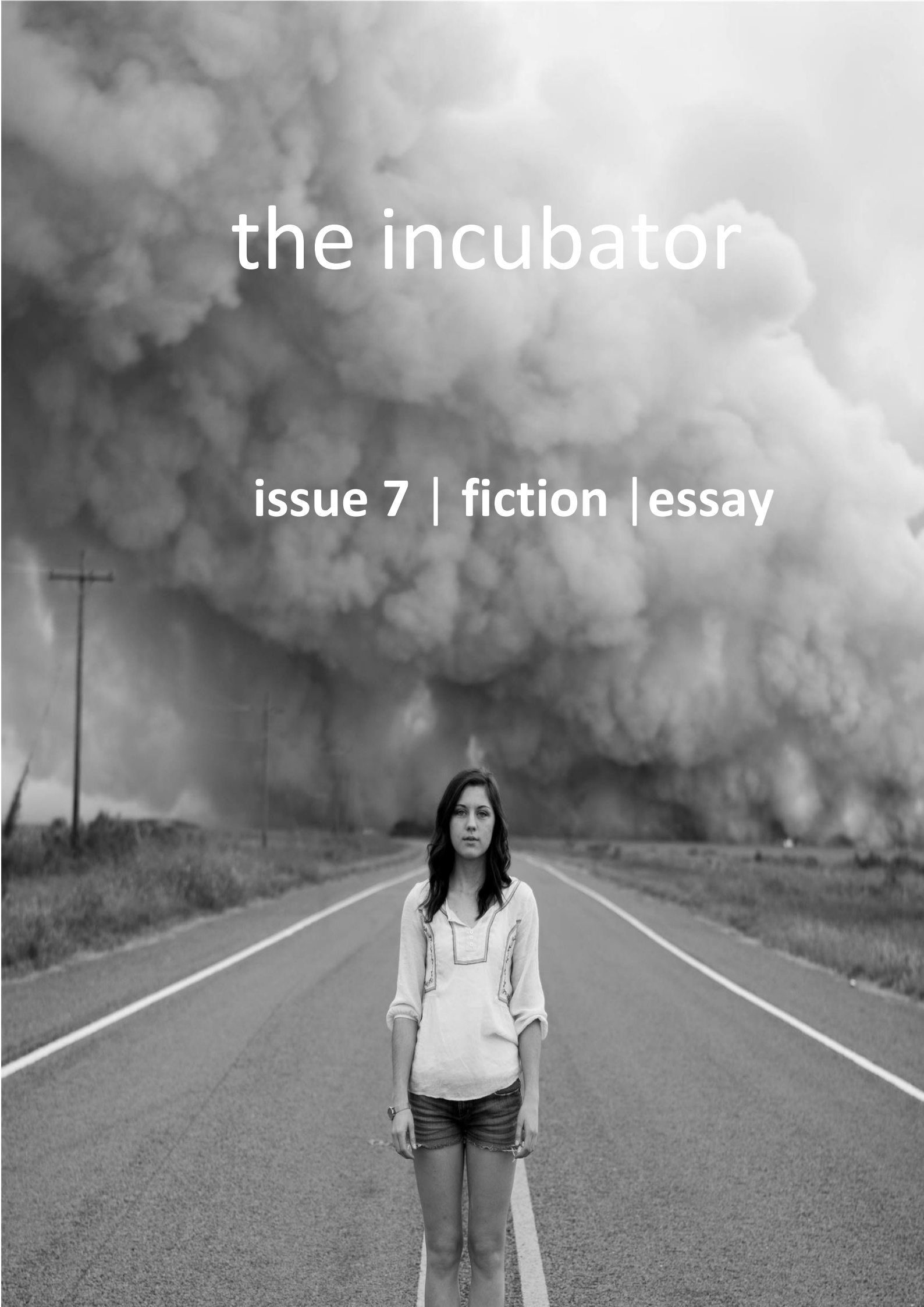


the incubator

issue 7 | fiction | essay





the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(December 2015)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 8

(due to be published in March 2016)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories**
and **poems** (4 max.)*

Guidelines are at

theincubatorjournal.com

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editorial

THIS IS THE SECOND YEAR THE BOARD GAIS BOOK AWARDS HAVE RUN THE WRITING.IE *Short Story of the Year* award. For the first time we nominated four pieces that really impressed us at The Incubator. Selecting contenders was by no means an easy task, however there was a piece from each of the last year's issues which shone in particular. They were: Heather Richardson's *Sparta* (issue 3) Brian Phelan's *Molotov* (issue 4) Sandra Coffey's *Bookmark* (issue 5) and Robin Oree's *Another Few Days* (issue 6). We believe that each piece would have been worthy to have gone the distance for originality and oomph alone, and were absolutely thrilled when Sandra Coffey's story was longlisted for the prize. As always, you can read *Bookmark* and the other nominated stories straight from our website and, if you wish, you can download past editions for free.

Having their first lease of life in this issue are eight wonderful new short stories, while Anne Caughey has carefully selected stunning flash fiction pieces to make these long, bleak evenings a little brighter. Claire Savage interviewed author and short story writer Bernie McGill who has a story in *The Long Gaze Back*, which is a prize-winning anthology of Irish women's writing. This issue also features two exceptionally vibrant pieces of non-fiction for you to devour.

We are focusing on two books that are distilled in form, with poet Brian Gourley reviewing *The House of Small Absence* by Anne-Marie Fyfe and Mike Mac Domhnaill's debut short story collection *Sifting: Uncle Ned and Other Stories* reviewed by myself.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Bernie McGill

author of Sleepwalkers

IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN CAPTIVATED BY A SHORT STORY BEFORE, THEN SHIRLEY Jackson's *The Lottery* is a pretty good place to begin, according to Portstewart writer, Bernie McGill.

"It's one of the most suspenseful and terrifying stories I've ever read in my life," she says. "It's a story about a day in a village when all the villagers come together for a particular purpose. It's absolutely chilling and brilliant. If you've never read a short story in your life, then read this."

Bernie, of course, is no stranger to the short story form, having had numerous tales nominated for awards over the years. She further won the *Zoetrope: All-Story* Short Fiction Award in the US in 2008 and has a published collection of short stories in *Sleepwalkers*. She's also one of four Northern Irish women writers included in the recently published, *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* – a collection of 30 short stories edited by Sinéad Gleeson.

When it comes to short stories then, Bernie knows a thing or three. She also knows what she likes when reading them – and what she doesn't.

"I always like to be surprised and engaged," she says. "But I absolutely abhor being preached at and being told what to think about anything. I don't like it when the author steps out of the frame to address me – the 'dear reader' idea. I don't want to be acknowledged as a reader at all. I like to be absolutely drawn into the story – into that world – to feel like I'm experiencing what the character is experiencing."

In *The Long Gaze Back*, Bernie is in amongst a riveting selection of deceased, currently established, and emerging literary voices in Ireland. Indeed the anthology, she

says, offers a fascinating insight into style and content, as it spans around 230 years from the birth of the first author included, to that of the last. The stories are also laid out chronologically, which allows the reader to experience this flow of form, while all of the contributions from the current living authors are new works. For this reason, says Bernie, there are perhaps a few notable writers who haven't been included in the book, such as Edna O'Brien and Claire Keegan. Both O'Brien and Keegan were working on other projects at the time however, and so were unable to take time out to write something new for the tome.

"The brief was that it had to be new work," says Bernie. "I think it was quite inspired to ask people to do that. It would have been easier for Sinéad Gleeson to choose published stories. She could have had a very different kind of collection if she had, so it was a brave and interesting decision to make. All the work by living writers hasn't been seen anywhere else before and I think this is really interesting as a collection of work for that reason.

"With the deceased writers, Sinéad tried to find work that was lesser known for most of them. Some were out of print or in archives, and there are writers I don't remember reading before. It's really fascinating to see how the style of writing has changed over the years. I think the Elizabeth Bowen story is the turning point for me – it's very modern and the focus moves towards the reader – it's a very different style."

Described by Gleeson as a triptych, the anthology subsequently begins with work from the deceased writers, followed on by stories from the currently established writers and then the new and emerging voices. Says Bernie: "I'm in there somewhere!"

As for her own story in the collection, she describes it as a melancholy tale which depicts a journey from Dublin to the north – "of a person who's travelling, and where she is and what happens."

Although currently working on her second novel, having previously published *The Butterfly Cabinet* to critical acclaim, Bernie hints at another short story collection of her own in the future. She points out that it would be a different animal to *Sleepwalkers*, if she decided to go ahead with the idea, as it would include all-new stories.

"When I was putting *Sleepwalkers* together, I took advice from the publisher and editor on what to include," she says. "All but one of those stories were published already, so

I wrote only one new one for the collection. The publishers hand-picked them and I was happy with the selection though.”

She is, however, currently immersed in the manuscript of her second novel, another historical story which this time, takes place on Rathlin Island on the north coast. “It’s set in 1898 at the time of the Marconi experiments,” says Bernie. “I’m on my tenth draft now...”

Novel-writing of course, requires a different kind of writerly grit from the short story, and for Bernie, plotting at the outset just isn’t an option. Indeed, every writer has their own particular style and when it comes to penning short stories and novels, this is one author who likes the excitement of venturing into the unknown.

“My writing style is quite fragmentary,” she says. “I’m not a plotter. For me, it feels like sewing your own straitjacket and I can’t bear it. It does give me lots and lots of problems, but they’re always interesting problems. I think I just work it out through writing. I don’t plot and I don’t even summarise. I can see the appeal of it though.

“For me, it’s a matter of writing down what I know about the story and then saying, ‘what’s the best order for this to happen in, and what’s missing from that?’ It’s a very frustrating process, but it’s preferable to me from a plot. I think if I had a plot I would just discard it.

“I think you need to be excited about what’s going to happen. It’s quite an exciting place to be. It’s also very demanding...”

Quoting Stephen King, who says in his memoir, *On Writing*, that he always writes his first draft with the door closed, Bernie adds that this initial version is not one for showing off.

“The first draft is you telling yourself the story and the second draft is telling the reader,” she says. “That’s not the same thing at all. You do need to think about the sequence of events, but I don’t concern myself too much about it until after the first draft is in place. For me, *that’s* when the plotting happens. Then I think – what’s the most interesting point for the reader to enter this story?”

Having recently read Pulitzer Prize-winning author Elizabeth Strout’s book, *Olive Kitteridge: A Novel in Stories*, Bernie alludes to an increasing interest in presenting novels in the story collection form. She adds that in her opinion, short stories are also closer to poetry.

“There’s a lot of very good poets writing very good short stories,” she says. “A short story is more like a moment in time. It’s kind of like a pause in the day.”

As for her preference for novels or short stories, she adds: “I wouldn’t ever just read short stories or just novels. But while there’s both, let’s appreciate it all.”

Interview by Claire Savage.

The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers was published by New Island Books in September 2015.

short story

Tanya Farrelly

The Prodigal

MY BROTHER HAS COME HOME AFTER AN ABSENCE OF SEVEN YEARS. HIS TALL, THIN frame hovers in the doorway, an unlit cigarette dangling between his tobacco-stained fingers, as his eyes flick about the room and focus on nothing particular. I can't help but wonder if he's noticed the absence of ceremony that accompanies his return. There are no colourful balloons strung from the balustrade, no welcome-home banner brushes the top of Christian's head as he enters our living room. Instead his return is met with anxious glances, and too-bright smiles. My voice is an octave too loud and betrays that this is not the kind of reunion that I desire.

Christian's been clutching that cigarette since he got into the car. Reason tells me that he's dying to light it, but that he's too polite or preoccupied to ask. As he enters the room, I find myself babbling about the new decking that we got earlier in the summer. I swing open the back door, forgetting about Jess, our five-month old collie, who flies at the newcomer before he's even got through the door. Christian puts the cigarette in his mouth and stoops to fondle the dog's ears, relieved perhaps by the first genuine greeting he's received all day. And I remember that my brother has always loved dogs, and that each dog we've ever had has sworn its allegiance to him. I look at Jess now feeling slightly betrayed, and question her judgement of character.

'I don't suppose you've a light?' The cigarette jigs up and down as Christian speaks.

'Matter of fact I do,' I say. 'Barry's a chain-smoker.'

I return to the kitchen and stand on the first rung of a stool to retrieve a lighter from the top shelf of the cupboard where we keep it out of Emily's reach. I've learned over the years what not to leave around a small child. When I get down from the stool, I linger in the

kitchen and watch as my brother picks up a stone and with a deft movement of the wrist sends it hurtling down the garden. Jess barks and bounds after it, skidding to a halt by the gazebo. She looks back and pants happily at her new friend, her mouth open in what looks like a wide grin.

I toss Christian the lighter and tell him that I'll show him his room when he's ready. I stand behind my brother for a few minutes, but he doesn't say anything and I go back inside to start the evening meal, leaving him leaning over the decking puffing on his cigarette with the dog prostrate at his feet.

The light has faded by the time Christian comes in. I'm at the sink peeling and chopping vegetables, and I don't hear him come up behind me. When I turn to see him standing close by, I give a start, and then laugh to try to conceal my all-too-real anxiety.

'I didn't hear you come in,' I say.

Christian ignores my uneasiness and asks if he can help with something.

I wipe my hands on the tea towel, smile broadly and tell him that everything's under control.

He stands close to me and I get the faint smell of perspiration rising from beneath his thin cotton shirt.

'Come on, I'll show you where you're sleeping,' I tell him. I give him a wide berth as I pass and he follows me like the collie to the bottom of the stairs.

In Emily's room, I reach for the light. Christian looks around, I see him take in the doll's house, the army of stuffed toys, button eyes glowing in the harsh electric light, and Emily's Hanna Montana posters pinned to the wall. He puts his bag at the end of the bed, and runs a hand over the soft pink quilt.

'I hope you don't mind sleeping in Emily's room,' I say. 'We'd nowhere else to put you.'

Christian shakes his head. 'And what about Emily?' he asks.

‘She’ll sleep in with us. God knows, she does it most nights anyway.’

I tell him about my daughter’s fear of the dark, and he says that she must take after her mother, reminding me that I was always afraid of the monsters that lurked beneath the bed. He pats the bed, sits unmoving, and waits for me to leave. I tell him that I’ll leave him to settle in, but in the doorway I pause and turn.

‘Christian, I am sorry about Helen,’ I say.

He nods, and his eyes look glassy.

Christian is still upstairs when Barry and Emily come home. I hear the front door opening and the sound of Emily’s black patent shoes running on the wooden floor. Too late, I discover that Emily has gone straight upstairs to her room where the guest is. I call after her, but she doesn’t hear or chooses to ignore me. She knows that her Uncle Christian has come to stay.

Barry kisses me in the hallway.

‘How’s it going?’ he says, and brushes the hair away from my face.

I shrug. ‘Okay, I guess. The dog likes him.’

We listen for sounds from upstairs. I hear Emily squeal with laughter, and I exchange a look with Barry before hurrying up the stairs. The scene when I push open Emily’s bedroom door catapults me back to the past and leaves me reeling.

Emily has been introducing Christian to her family of bears, and Christian crouched on the floor is putting on a show. He puts on a deep bear voice, and Emily sitting on the floor before him squeals with delight and claps her hands. He looks up and smiles when he sees me and I try to smile back, but I feel as though my face has been botoxed into position and what’s supposed to be a smile passes off as a grimace as I recall the nights that Christian put on these shows for me, my beloved big brother.

Briskly, I shove off the memory.

‘Emily, don’t be bothering your Uncle Christian,’ I say, as I put my hands on my child’s

shoulders and swing her into a standing position.

'She's no bother,' Christian says, easily. 'We were just getting to know each other a little bit, weren't we?'

I don't know if I've imagined it or if his eyes hold some kind of challenge.

Emily is playing on the living room floor. She's scattered her new set of crayons all around her and is busy transforming a ballerina elephant to a shocking shade of pink in the latest bumper colouring book that Barry's bought her. She is careful to keep the colour inside the lines.

'I just don't know if this was such a good idea.' I say.

My voice is low. I'm aware of Christian in the room overhead and of Emily sitting nearby. I walk round the table, laying cutlery in each place, and putting napkins in the glasses. Then I take the napkins out again and flatten them. This is not a celebration.

'Come on. He's just lost his wife, Jen. He needs support...family...I couldn't imagine losing you like that.'

'Yes, but...it's been a long time. We didn't exactly part on the best of terms, you know?'

'Well, no, I don't really. You never said much about him. I just assumed you weren't close...or maybe that you resented his going away a little.'

I look at Barry who is so unshakable and I wonder what he would do if I were to tell him the truth.

'His going away...no, it wasn't that...it's true, Helen and I never really got along, but it was nothing to do with the move...it wasn't that. It's more complicated. It's Christian himself. He's not, he's not who people think he is. He's...'

Christian clears his throat as he enters the room and I look up, already feeling the surge of blood to my face. I don't know how much he's heard.

'Mmm. Something smells good,' he says. If he's heard anything, he doesn't show it.

At dinner, Christian sits opposite me, Barry on my right, and Emily to my left. Barry makes conversation, asks Christian if he likes football, and if he's been following the league this year. Christian answers Barry's questions enthusiastically, cuttings his steak into minute pieces, just as he did when we were children. As I watch him I wonder what his life has been like for the past seven years. I wonder if with the distractions of his new life, he managed to forget the old one. If he managed to forget about me?

Suddenly, he looks up as though he's read my thoughts, and his eyes, gold, like an animal's hold mine until I am forced to look away. Christian's eyes have a way of transfixing his prey.

'Uncle Christian, why do you have that name? Are you holy?'

Christian laughs as Emily swings her legs, fork gripped in her right hand, and waits for an answer.

'Well, that's a question you'd have had to ask your granny,' he says. 'But I don't think it was anything to do with religion, I guess she just liked the name. What do you think, Jen, am I a holy Joe?'

I colour for the second time and this time I force a smile. 'I wouldn't accuse you of that,' I say.

'Meaning there are things you'd accuse me of?'

He is teasing me, but I look at him to see what kind of weight his words hold. I've always had a habit of analysing comments and coming up with explanations that occurred to no one but me.

'Uncle Christian, why did you go away?' Emily asks.

Christian's face darkens, he sits back, stretches his long legs under the table. His foot brushes mine and I withdraw as though I've been struck with a burning coal.

'I met a girl. We got married and went to Australia.'

'Where is she now?' Emily asks.

Christian's gold eyes cloud over, and I jump to his rescue as I used to do when we were kids.

'That's enough now Emily. Let Christian eat his dinner,' I say.

My brother shoots me a grateful look, and Barry, ever my saviour, changes the subject.

Just sitting at the same table as my brother has made swallowing a challenge. I take a gulp of water to dislodge the food that seems to have stuck halfway down my oesophagus. Christian may have lost weight in recent years, but it has only served to make him leaner, his jaw more angular, his eyes more striking. I look at my plate and try to pretend that he isn't sitting opposite me, but my brother's presence is not something that I can ignore.

After dinner, Christian offers to help me with the washing-up. We stand side by side at the sink, me with my Marigolds on, Christian with a tea towel in his hand meticulously drying each plate. The silence is palpable, and I try to think of something to say, but everything that comes to mind sounds inane. I am relieved when Christian, who has saved some of his dissected steak, sets off in search of the dog. I turn the outside light on, partly so that he can see, and partly so that I can see him. I stand inside the window and watch as Jess jumps and gambles round my brother's feet and he crouches down, playacting and lets her knock him to the ground. In the next room, Barry plays with Emily, he is crawling on all fours with our child around his neck, and she is laughing. And I realise as I listen to the sound of their laughter that I can never tell them about Christian and me and the things that we have done.

Ro McNulty

Anti-Coagulant

THE PUB WAS CALLED THE SWAN HOTEL; THE BARMAN HAD TOLD TED AND JAKE THAT there were rooms upstairs to stay in, and this had surprised Ted. He'd lived in Leighton his whole life, and was hard to imagine anyone actually wanting to stay there. It'd become a regular joke now. Ted would say to Jake, at eleven o'clock,

"Are you going home, then?" And Jake would reply

"Nah. I've booked a room, mate."

It was September, and although it hadn't started to get dark yet, Ted's eyelids were beginning to move by themselves. Jake sat opposite. He took a long swig from his glass and exhaled loudly, then said

"Well, I guess that's that, then. To be fair, I know he's a bit annoying, but it's going to be pretty fucking quiet around here without him around."

"What? Oh. Yeah..." Ted tried to think of something to say. "I don't know. Most nights it just ends up being me and you in here anyway. It won't be that different. What's he going to do, anyway?"

"He's going to be a gardener." Jake laughed. "Nah, it's something called Landscape Architecture. He'll be alright. He'll probably like university. I think he just wants a ticket out of here, to be honest."

"I know, man. Everyone else has moved away. We're like... We're the last ones left." said Ted.

"Whatever." Jake cleared his throat, looked around the bar, and then said. "So,

listen, I don't know if you know, but apparently you can get an allowance from the job centre if you're caring for someone else. Did you hear about that? I was signing on today, and the woman next to me was going on about it. What do you reckon?" Ted didn't seem to be listening. "I mean... Why don't you try and get that?"

Ted didn't look up from the table. Quietly, he said

"Nah I don't know... I had a look at it. You've got to prove to them that you're doing forty or more hours care a week, or something"

"Well, you are, aren't you?" said Jake. "I mean, fuck, man. I hardly ever see you anymore."

"Yeah but it's getting the... the *evidence* to prove it. That's the problem. It's not like I take a photo every time I Hoover the floor, is it? It's stupid really. I don't know what they think people are going to do."

Ted stood up and went over to the bar, stumbling as he squeezed between the tables. "Do you want... Actually, shit. Have you got any money?"

"That's my point, see?" Jake shook his head. "I'll get them. Sit down."

Ted looked at his phone. He had a text message, which read;

Hi sorry to nag but if ur looking after Simon can u not go out for long? he can't get water himself + if he coughs he needs his inhalers. I dont mind staying in normally but u said ud be home tonight. Thanks Debbie x

"Here you go, mate. You owe me a drink next time, alright?"

Ted tipped his head backward and looked up at the ceiling. In the amber light, he felt like something being preserved.

"I can make dinner if you want. Dad? Did you hear? Why don't I cook tonight?"

"No... no, it's OK. I don't think there's anything here to cook anyway. I haven't..." Simon coughed, loudly, three times, and Ted looked at the floor, embarrassed. "I haven't gone shopping yet this week."

"Well, what were *you* going to cook, then?"

"I don't know, really. There's some chicken thighs in the freezer and some rice. I thought I could make some sort of..." Simon coughed again, waving his hand in front of Ted as he did so as if to apologize. "Urgh. Something with... something with those, anyway."

"I can do that. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I mean, it feels sort of pointless me being here if you end up cooking for me". Simon seemed to give up.

"Alright. I'll stay and help, if you want me to. I don't mind. We can do it together." The kitchen was too narrow for two people and they had to brush past each other, shy of each other's touch. Ted kept putting things down and forgetting where they were.

"Try and... Yeah, that's right." Said Simon. "If you hold the onion together like...*that*, when you cut it, then you can chop it a lot finer. It's supposed to be *diced*, so you need to cut it into little cubes."

"What, like..." Ted looked around for a bigger knife "Like that, sort of thing? You'd better show me. I don't really know what you mean".

"OK. So cut it in half. Go on, cut it in half. No, *half*... That's right. Oh, hang on. Is that the knife you were using earlier for the chicken? It might be a better idea if you use a different..."

"Alright." Ted put the knife in the sink, and it slid down the pile of yesterday's washing up. His eyes were watering. He reached up to open the window but found that the key was too stiff to turn, and gave up. He leant against the window sill, and pressed his

cheek against the dirty glass.

The sound of the pan hissing brought him back into the room, and he looked around.

“Dad, you didn’t need to... I was just about to do that.”

“That’s alright. I don’t mind helping.”

“How long does the chicken take?”

“It’ll be about half an hour.”

“OK. Well, I’ve already put the rice on and that’ll be ready in about fifteen minutes, so, I don’t know what to do, really.”

“Oh. I didn’t... you normally cook the meat first.”

“I thought it’d be quicker. Sorry.”

“It’s alright. We can probably keep the rice warm somewhere” said Simon.

“OK. I still need to chop up those leaves.” Ted breathed in deeply. “Honestly, I always thought cooking would be...”

“Why don’t you wash them first? Just to...”

“Why don’t you *fucking do it yourself*, then?” Ted put the knife down with a clatter, and turned around. He stared out of the back door into the garden, feeling shaken, as if it had been someone else who had shouted and not him.

It was pitch black under the trees. Ted had to feel the slope in front of him with his hands. He could hear Jake panting somewhere down the footpath.

“For fuck’s sake, man. I’ve got new shoes on and everything. It’s muddy as hell up here.” Jake called out. “What are we going up here for?”

Ted laughed inwardly. He was drunk, and to him, the long walk had seemed to be over in only a few minutes. At the top of the hill was a bench, in a clearing in the trees where the footpath joined the road. The two boys sat down, and began to laugh.

“Here you go.” Jake passed Ted a beer. “Oh shit, did I tell you? I got a job interview coming up. Tesco are doing a big recruitment thing at the moment. I put an application form in there this morning and they told me to come in next week. You should give it a try, man. The pay there is really good.” Ted swigged, noisily.

“I can’t, can I? I’ve got to look after my dad.”

“Yeah but...” Jake looked away, and then said, quietly, “it’s just ... You could work part-time, right? I mean, Debbie’s round quite a lot as well so she could do the odd evening while you went to work. I’m not trying to be rude or anything, but you could probably do with the money. What do you reckon?”

“I told you, I can’t.” Ted snapped. His voice came out higher than he had intended, and as it echoed around the hillside, it began to sound like someone else’s. “It’s not like... It’s not a regular thing, is it? I can’t timetable into my diary when he’s next going to have a coughing fit, or another fucking stroke, or when I’m next going to have to call the fucking ambulance, can I? It’s pretty random, Jake. It just... it just happens.”

“Alright. Sorry, mate. Here,” Jake tried to change the subject, “You’re normally at home in bed by eight o’clock. Why so keen to get drunk tonight?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what it is.”

Ted breathed deeply through his nose, and suddenly felt the feeling that he’d been waiting for all night. He could smell something nostalgic on the air, mixed in with the scents of leaf-mould and sap. Ted didn’t know why, but it had something to do with a sense of place, and loyalty, to something he’d only recently known had existed. Something to do with being the last ones left.

“I don’t know,” he repeated. “It’s a nice night. I just felt like staying out.”

“Yeah... it’s pretty peaceful, isn’t it? It’s cold, though. I wish you’d told me you were planning on going for a fucking hike. I would have dressed for it.”

“I really like coming up here, man,” said Ted. “We used to come here all the time when I was little. I just... I really like the *outdoors*, you know?”

Jake laughed, and Ted carried on speaking more quickly, worried that Jake would interrupt him. “It’s like, I was doing the garden for my dad earlier. I really like doing stuff like that. It’s just really relaxing. He’s got this old-fashioned manual lawnmower. It was really hot earlier this morning as well. It’s just... I don’t know. It’s just quite satisfying, like... seeing something finished, you know? I get bored just sat in my room all the time.”

“Sure, mate.”

They parted eventually. Leighton was deserted by the time Ted left the woods. The nostalgic scent seemed to cling to his clothes, as he stepped out from under the trees and onto the tarmac road. It lingered like smoke.

He reached the house, and let himself in through the front door silently, and snuck upstairs without switching on the light.

In the next room, through the thin walls, Ted could hear the sound of Simon’s breathing, with a squeal like a rusty pump.

He woke up. Downstairs, Simon was coughing. Ted lay still and listened, feeling paralysed. Slowly, he got up. Simon was still coughing, and Ted realised that he had left it too late. It was nearly midday, and he should have been up earlier. It’d be obvious to Simon now that he’d heard him coughing and not done anything. He imagined himself waking up all over again, jumping out of bed and running downstairs.

The TV was on, on mute, although the bright afternoon light had bleached the colour out of the screen and it was impossible to tell what was on. Simon was sat on the sofa with his hands palms down on the glass table, coughing as loudly as if someone was kicking down

the door. His face was dark red, like a new bruise.

“Dad?” Ted muttered. Then, more loudly, imitating the tone that he'd heard the hospital nurses use, he said, “Dad? Are you alright? Do you want anything?”

Simon looked up, and tried to smile, but then doubled over again. He pointed towards the kitchen without looking up.

“Do you want water? Is that... Is it water that you want?” Ted stood next to Simon's shoulder, like he was waiting at a table. “Dad? I don't know...”

He went into the kitchen, and searched around in the cupboard for a glass. Then he filled it up from the tap and slowly put it on the table next to Simon.

“Dad? There's water there. Dad? Can you hear me?” Ted moved the glass closer to Simon on the table so he could see it, but Simon waved it away.

“There's... There's... a bowl...powder,” his voice rasped.

“Yeah, but what...”

Ted went back to the kitchen. He found the bowl; a big, whitish, plastic one, on the work top. In the cupboards he found a sachet of something with a prescription label stuck to it. He went back to the living room and put it on the table.

“it's got... You need...” Simon tried to speak.

“Here...” Ted opened the sachet and poured the powder into the bowl. “Is that OK?”

“Dad?” Simon breathed in deeply and then began to cough again. He didn't take the powder, or reach for the bowl, or whatever was he was supposed to do. Nothing happened.

“Dad?” Ted spoke quietly, as if he didn't really want to anyone to hear him. “What should I... I don't know what to...”

“Dad?” Ted noticed that Simon was crying. “I don't know what to do. I don't know what you want.”

Brian Kirk

Flood

THE RAIN FELL HEAVILY ON THE DAY I ARRIVED. I TOLD MYSELF IT WAS JUST A PASSING visit; it had been a long time since I was home and I hadn't seen my only brother Tom in almost four years. The last time had been for our mother's funeral. That time I'd stayed at the Westbury but this time, due to financial constraints, I was forced to impose myself on my brother who lived with his wife and nine year old son in a desirable nineteenth century residence on the charming old streets of Sandymount. As is my way I didn't bother calling ahead to announce my imminent arrival; I just showed up at their door on a rainy Wednesday afternoon in February looking like something the tide had washed up.

I never used to doubt myself. Looks are my thing; I rely on them. I have always suspected that the surface of things reflects their true nature. I am an actor. I only ever compare myself to others in order to show their failings or to accentuate my attributes. Everything in my life is a judgement, a comparison. I have been told that I act as if I am giving some kind of perpetual master class in being naturally vital – or of giving the impression of being vital. But lately I've begun to experience a new feeling. I think it might be self-consciousness. I've known people who have suffered from it. I've known actors who developed it late in their careers and I know that it spells the end for people in my game.

Tom's wife Valerie had grown into her looks over the years. When they married, both were far too young, and my abiding memory of them on their wedding day is of a short overweight old-fashioned young man ill-matched with a gangly, toothy girl got up like a blancmange. In her heels she was a good six inches taller than poor tubby Tom. I dismissed her from the start, just as I had always dismissed him. I was used to being with beautiful people, men and women with fine profiles and clear voices who could simply stand in a room and attract the attention of a crowd.

Now I reappraised Valerie as I stood on the doorstep. She was slim still and taller than ever – in heels on a weekday afternoon – and I had the impression of looking up at her even though I am some way taller than my brother and have described myself in the past in actor profiles as an athletic six-footer.

Exaggeration always came easy to me. My father called me a liar once, but I didn't hold it against him. He was another small man, in spirit as much as in stature; a man who lacked imagination and considered an interest in the creative arts a failing in people generally – but in me specifically.

I can't remember what I lied about back then, something trifling no doubt; where I'd spent the night or whether I'd consumed copious amounts of alcohol or drugs. I have to stress that my lying was not a form of disrespect towards him, but was actually fuelled by a real desire to protect him from the truth about my life. I wanted him to think the best of me and I lied so that he might find it easier to do so, but he could never see it that way. To him I was simply corrupted, debased, debauched. Such words! Old-fashioned words that nobody uses anymore.

Valerie kept me waiting on the doorstep for what seemed like an age before she opened it. She showed only the faintest of smiles as she said my name, avoiding full eye contact, her gaze finally coming to rest on an area just above my head. Conscious that she had the height advantage of a doorstep on me I worried that she might discover the source of my secret bald spot. And I understood suddenly that the last hair colour I'd chosen was too dark for my complexion. I made a mental note to go a shade lighter next time.

Finally she stood back and let me in. My brother's home was warm and inviting, and I was surprised to find that the rooms were tastefully decorated in an understated kind of way.

Valerie seemed in no hurry to talk and as a consequence I began to gab, which is really most unlike me.

'Sorry to be so mysterious Val, but I just had a yen to see how the little bro is doing.' I laughed, most unconvincingly. She said nothing and continued to consider me with that knowing half-smile which disturbed and attracted me at the same time.

Just as I tried to come to terms with this new feeling towards my sister-in-law two small boys came charging down the stairs shouting at the tops of their voices.

'I thought you just had little Paul?' I said as I watched them chase through to the kitchen.

Valerie tilted her head to one side and simply said:

'Who?'

I knew then I'd made an unforgiveable mistake. I could not remember my own nephew's name. I smiled at her amiably, but inside my mind was racing.

'Philip! Philip!' I shouted at last. 'It was just a slip of the tongue when I said Paul. I mean, you wouldn't forget your only nephew's name, would you?'

'No, of course not, especially when you are his Godfather.'

Valerie was making eye contact now and smiling. Was she laughing at me – or flirting with me?

When she offered me a drink I was surprised to hear myself say no. As a rule I never refuse a drink. I pretended fatigue and went up to a room that she had prepared. I lay on the bed with my eyes open and listened. The sound of the TV and the voices of children – Philip and his little friend – drifted up from below. Such alien sounds. I could hear the rain beat against the window. I closed my eyes and dreamt that I was adrift on a boat on a wide calm sea.

When I woke it was evening. The open curtains admitted the yellow light of a nearby street lamp. All was silent but for the drumming of rain against the window.

I rose and straightened my clothes and looked at myself in the dressing table mirror. I breathed in and out slowly and visualised myself in the role as I always do before a performance – this time I was playing the exotic older brother come home on a surprise visit. I rearranged my dark hair, making sure to disguise the bald spot as best I could before going downstairs.

In the living room the lights were turned down low and a huge open fire burned in the hearth. From behind the kitchen doors there emerged the homely smell of roasting meat causing my stomach to groan audibly. I had not eaten since breakfast at Heathrow. It had been a long day. I could hear Tom and Valerie exchange muffled words. Were they talking about me? I suddenly wished I was back in Islington in my poky flat on my own. I no longer wanted to see my brother. At that moment, poised between their living room and kitchen, I had a sense of being someone other than the character assigned to me. Or was it

that I had a sense of who I really was, if that could be believed? Either way, I knew it to be fatal for the actor. I also knew that when I saw Tom and he saw me I would have to suppress any natural affinity I might feel for him. I must let that go. I must always be myself, my non-self rather, playing the assigned role.

Tom's hair had greyed considerably, but it still stood up on his head in those insistent curls. He no longer looked foolish I thought; now that he was in his forties, his peculiarity made him seem interesting. He and Valerie seemed happy, or at least comfortable in each other's company. And they appeared to have a close relationship with little Philip. I have never liked children. They were only ever a nuisance in my limited experience of dating their mothers.

'So you're an actor Uncle Ray?' the child asked me.

'Yes, that's right.' I smiled at him. Avuncular, benign.

'What films have you been in?'

'I'm not that kind of actor,' I replied.

I looked at Valerie and Tom to see if they might help me out. But no.

'Most of my work is for the stage,' I said.

He looked puzzled. I was worried that he did not understand.

'I act in plays,' I went on, 'in the theatre.'

'What theatre?'

'Well... any theatre. My last role was in the Donmar Warehouse. *Huis Clos*,' I said, 'I played the valet.'

At this moment I remembered that I was talking to a nine year old boy. I felt foolish. I was conscious that Tom and Valerie had stopped doing whatever they were doing and were staring straight at me.

'Is everything alright Ray?' Tom asked.

For a moment I considered telling him the truth, but the moment wasn't right. We hadn't reached that scene yet. I smiled my best smile.

'Never better old man,' I said, 'never better!'

That evening, when Philip had gone to bed, the three of us sat in front of the huge open fire sipping red wine and listening to Mozart.

'I don't remember you having such good taste in music,' I said.

'I don't,' Tom laughed. 'It's all Val's doing I'm afraid. She's the cultured one in the family. All I know about is money, and the acquisition of same.'

'It's a perfect division of labour,' Valerie said, 'Tom earns the money and I spend it.' She smiled at Tom and he reached out and touched the back of her hand lightly. The mention of money should have afforded me the opportunity to say what I needed to say, but I just couldn't do it, not with Valerie there.

She was different. She seemed so relaxed in her own body compared to how I remembered her. I watched her all evening, her easy manner, her languorous speech and slow movements, and I could not reconcile her with the skinny awkward young woman Tom had married years before. Typically I ascribed her newfound sophistication to an outside agency: I became convinced she had found herself a lover. I was genuinely upset at the thought of it, but not on my brother's behalf. Selfishly I mourned my own imagined loss. I sensed that I would never be able to compete with her new lover whoever he might be.

The next morning I waited until after I heard them leave for work and school before I came downstairs. My head hurt from the red wine. I stood over the toilet bowl for an age waiting for my piss to flow – cursing myself for not drinking more water – and when it finally came it burned like acid as it always does.

The rain had ceased briefly but the gunmetal sky still hung low over the city. I appeared to be left to my own devices, so I made myself toast and coffee while I listened to the radio. The main news item concerned the shooting of a gang leader in the west of the city. I looked out the window at the reassuring order of the streetscape and felt a pang of jealousy for the way Tom lived. I got my coat then, determined to walk the promenade or perhaps even to go as far as the lighthouse on the Great South Wall. I had been there years before as a boy with Tom and my father. The radio announcer had spoken of high tides and further rainfall, warning of floods in coastal areas along the eastern seaboard, exhorting people to stay indoors.

Before I even stepped out on the road I felt the first droplets of rain on my face, but I was not deterred. I passed two cats sheltering under the body of a Land Rover that was awkwardly parked on double yellow lines opposite the Green. When I got out onto the seafront the wind cut through my coat and I shivered. Seagulls cried above me while on the ground two crows fought over the meagre contents of a paper bag. The sea was calm

enough, considering the talk of high tides but the wind was rising all the time and further out I could see white breakers forming and rushing in to shore. The Great South Wall seemed miles away and I turned back for home when the rain came down harder. By the time I reached the front door I was drenched.

As I shook off my coat in the hall I could hear voices and the clatter of crockery coming from the direction of the kitchen. I fixed my hair in the gilt-edged mirror and patted my face dry with my scarf. I could hear three or maybe four different voices, all female. I put my head around the door and turned on my smile.

‘Ladies!’ I said. ‘I hope I’m not interrupting anything.’

‘No, not at all!’

The woman who spoke was small and pretty with long straight hair. There were three other women aside from Valerie, all of them blonde and overdressed for a weekday morning.

‘You must be Tom’s famous brother?’ the pretty straight-haired woman said.

‘I suppose I am,’ I said, and I laughed, encouraging the others to do so too. Only Valerie remained silent, watching me closely. ‘I’m Raymond,’ I said, ‘so pleased to meet you.’ And I kissed each one of them on both cheeks in turn: Audrey, Mia and Tanya.

‘Have some coffee and a croissant,’ Tanya offered. ‘It’s from Browne’s.’

‘No, thank you. I don’t want to intrude,’ I said.

‘Not at all!’ they exclaimed – well all except Valerie. ‘We insist that you join us and tell us about your work. It must be so exciting being an actor.’ Mia was glowing.

‘It is,’ I said, and I flashed them my smile again. Fish in a barrel, I thought. But Valerie was giving me a very peculiar look. I pretended not to notice and sat between Tanya and Mia.

‘Well, isn’t this nice?’ I said. And it was. They showed such genuine interest in the theatre and they tried so hard to hide their disappointment when I explained that I did not do movies. When I had rattled on too long about the Bard and an experimental production of *The Tempest* I’d directed the year before, the conversation waned a little and we took refuge in the weather as people do. I told them about my walk and how the sea was rising. I explained that I had recently played Noah in a version of the flood myth written by a friend, who’d become obsessed by climate change. My time was up. The girls swapped stories of

previous high tides, the homes that had been flooded and those who had been spared. I was happy not to be talking anymore. Their company had revived me, but I knew it would end and I dreaded the moment when I would be left alone with Valerie.

When they had gone I fussed as I helped Valerie clear away the cups and things. I rattled on about her friends and her house and the impending flood, not wanting to give her a moment to speak, afraid of what she might say. I understood that she could see through me, through the veneer to whatever or whoever was lurking underneath.

‘Winds up to ninety miles an hour,’ I said, putting cutlery in the dishwasher. I couldn’t look at her. ‘This flood sounds serious,’ I went on. ‘It must be impossible to get insurance. Do you have any sandbags? Do the Council not supply them to people in danger?’

All the plates, cups and cutlery were in the dishwasher now so I stood up. Valerie was standing by the Aga, looking at me. Her smile was no longer there.

‘Something’s wrong Ray, I can tell,’ she said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine, never better.’ I delivered my lines, but not with any conviction.

She came to me then and put her arms around me and looked into my eyes.

‘It’s okay, Ray. You can tell me anything, no matter what. What is it? What’s wrong?’

I held her. I let myself enjoy the heft of her strong body in my arms. Everything is a bonus these days, each breath, each moment, each touch. I was glad that Tom was at work. I realised that my coming here was a mistake. I did not want to tell her I was ill. It was just money I wanted. I should simply have telephoned and explained; Tom would have stumped up. He always did before, just as our father did. We are brothers after all, even if we are miles apart.

Valerie took my head gently in her hands and looked me in the eye.

‘Ray,’ she said, ‘look at me. We love you. You’re our brother. There’s nothing Tom and I wouldn’t do for you, you know that. Just tell me what’s wrong.’

She felt heavy in my arms. And much too tall. I never liked a girl to tower above me. I extracted myself from her embrace.

‘What would Tom say,’ I said, ‘if he walked in on us right now?’ I laughed awkwardly. ‘Or little Philip for that matter. He’d be traumatised for life!’ I ran upstairs and began to pack my bag. After a few moments Valerie knocked sharply on the door and asked if I was okay. ‘Never better,’ I called back, ‘never better!’

Fiona O'Connor

The Wall

"WHAT'S HE GOING TO DO WITH IT?" LAOIS HIRE ASKED.

"Dig," I said. It was a digger after all.

"He's used one before?" His eyes narrowed in on mine. They were the bluest I'd ever seen. Like glaciers waiting to melt.

"A few years ago." I took out my Visa, wished I'd put on lip balm.

"It'll come with three buckets and a full tank of diesel." He inspected the Visa Card. "Make sure you send it back with a full tank or I'll have to charge you extra." He waited for this to be acknowledged. "Any structural damage forfeits the deposit you know."

I laughed. "What do you think I'm going to do? Drive over it!"

"I wouldn't do that," he warned and stepped out from behind the counter. He was late thirties maybe forty, short fair hair, tanned for someone who worked indoors. We walked outside into the sunshine. There was an orange digger sitting there. It looked very small. The cab door was open and he reached in and took out an iron bar. It's okay, he wasn't going to kill me with the iron bar. His eyes would freeze me to death first.

"How do you change the buckets?" I asked, "just in case the driver's forgotten."

He leaned across into the cab and his t-shirt rode up. The rectangular gap was tanned and lean. "Tell the driver to drop the arm and push the bar into this hole."

There were lots of greasy looking holes under the jib. "Sure," I said. There was bound to be a manual in the cab. "This is a one and a half ton?" I checked, patting the long metal arm as if it was my pet digger.

His eyes withered me in the sun so I pulled down my shades.

"You asked for a one and a half ton. We'll deliver this evening. Will there be someone in?"

"I'll be there," I said watching him put the key into a bright green bubble on the other side of the cab. At least I'd be able to start it.

"There's a two hundred euro charge to replace the key. Don't lose the key." He was starting to sound like my Dad. "Sign here and we're done." He pulled a flimsy white sheet from his clipboard and closed the cab door firmly.

"Are you watching the World Cup at all?" I jabbered.

He folded big protective arms across his clipboard and studied me. "I don't have a television."

"Okay then! I won't lose the key!" I smiled like the bint I was and got into the Jeep nearly reversing into my new digger.

Out on the road I hit top gear spinning down the windows. "What have I done?" There was no *he* anywhere. I'd just blown 800 Euros on a digger I couldn't drive. I should've booked the city break to Madrid instead.

I ran through a few old boyfriends who'd been handy about the place. The Future Husband was married now, so he was out. The other option was Sky Sports, his brother was a builder. But that probably wouldn't work, not since I'd driven over his flat screen TV, it was a sixty inch and had taken a few goes with the Jeep. That was a UEFA Cup Final he wouldn't forget. We hadn't spoken since. This was all the wall's fault. Curse the damn wall.

"What do you want a wall for anyhow?" Dad asked for like the hundredth time. "You'll be blocking that view. Why would you do that? People would give anything for a view like that." And he looked over at the pale blue Wicklow Mountains on the horizon, the flat fields of acid yellow rapeseed below me. The view did nothing for me. It was just there. Horizontal, wide, lonely. A constant reminder of the five years since parting from the Future

Husband. We were one of those annoying, smug couples who had it all; the joint mortgage, outdoor decking, the Big Dog. Things were going along just fine until he proposed, accidentally slipping that I wasn't really The One, but I would do anyhow.

"It's a pity that took you ten years to figure out, you bleep, bleep, mega bleep." And so on.

And there I was with a cheque for fifty grand sitting in the bank. A one way ticket to Mexico looked good. "I could just order margaritas until the money runs out."

But Big Dog started to cry so we got the cottage together instead.

The view from the back of the cottage was okay, it just needed a bit of fixing. That's what the wall would do; frame the view, give me a Mediterranean patio, perfect for sitting out on alone in the evenings, me and Big Dog.

"You could just build it four foot high," Dad said, "then you'd still have the view."

"Dad!" I couldn't take any more. How come nobody got the wall?

"Have you driven one of these before?" The lorry driver was a wrinkled crocodile of a man with freshwater green eyes.

I could tell he had me pegged as Lara Croft, the ponytail and steel toe caps always did that.

"Jump up there now and I'll show you how to get it started." He wheezed, lighting up another purple Silkcut.

It wasn't difficult to drive, there was only forward and reverse.

“Just make sure you put the stabiliser down before you work the bucket. That way you won’t turn it over.”

Crocodile and I had a great time. I made him tea and gave him a bunch of green tomatoes I’d grown. By the time he left he loved me like a daughter.

“It’s a nine inch cavity block for a wall.” I explained to an X-Pupil of mine. His fingers hovered over the till like Harry Potter in Spell Class.

“What about a six inch solid?” he said, “they’re cheaper.”

“No thanks, find me the cement. I’ll order that and the sand.”

There was a quietly interested queue growing behind me. Ladies with paint brushes. Guys with silicone guns.

“Where’s Dermot?” I asked hopefully, Dermot’s the manager.

“Lunch, Miss.” X-Pupil was getting flustered. “What was that again?”

“Five bags of cement and a ton of fine sand,” I repeated gently. His short term memory was shot to pieces. It wasn’t really his fault, I blamed the blue Isotonic he’d been sucking since First Year.

“You mean builder’s blast?” he said, his finger about to drop on a plastic button.

“No I don’t. I mean fine sand for plastering. Builder’s blast is too rough.”

We battled on for another five minutes. I took him through the Visa card swipe and felt the queue sigh when I left. I had a docket and searched the yard for someone to load me with cement. Not easy at lunchtime on a Friday.

"When does the digger go back?" Dad asked for like the hundredth time.

"In the morning." I handed him a warm beer and we sat on the patio looking up at the orange digger. The key was safely inside and the tank was full to the brim with diesel.

"Who's going to build the wall for you?" He was looking at the eight pallets of blocks sitting on the wrecked lawn.

"I'll have a go myself. You can help me keep it straight."

He gave me a smile, his shrunken arthritic shoulders shaking with delight.

"You got on okay then?" Laois Hire asked me the next morning.

He had a low loader sitting on my driveway. I was expecting my friend Crocodile. Standing up to cover my bum crack I pulled hair out of my teeth. He'd caught me shovelling Big Dog's poo out of the sand. He was wearing long shorts and looked like an Ozzie full back ready to roast kangaroo on the barbie. His eyes were still putting the sky to shame. I walked him past the cottage and round the back. He looked up at the digger sitting on the lawn. There were blocks everywhere, the place was a mess.

"You're going to put a high wall up there. Good idea." He hopped into the digger and started to load her up.

I ran into the house to find lip balm and a comb.

"Sign here," he said coming round the back. I was waiting on the patio with Big Dog. He handed me his clipboard and studied my amateur foundations. I wished they looked better, or were hidden by nine inch cavity blocks.

"You're doing the wall yourself?"

"Can't find anyone to block it."

His laser blue beams fried me. "I could throw them up for you if you like?"

I hoped he wasn't joking.

"If you muck up for me, I'll do it for free." He was eyeing up my steel toe caps. "You can learn from a master builder."

I looked over at the Laois Hire lorry.

"These are hard times for builders." He grinned.

It was like watching him strip off. I should've looked away but I couldn't.

"So what do you think?" he asked me the following week. He had Big Dog in a headlock on the grass.

I looked up from the patio at my six foot plastered wall with the arched wrought iron door in the centre, allowing just a peek at the Wicklow Mountains and fields of harvest spread below. It was perfect.

I handed him a cold bottle of Miller. "It's perfect."

"I'll tidy this lot up for you tomorrow," he said and began cleaning his cement mixer. It was a big kickass diesel thing that he washed down like a baby every night.

"I can throw on the barbie if you're hungry?" I waited shamelessly for another big grin. "So how come you don't have a television then?" I was trailing around after him just like Big Dog.

"You don't want to know," he said.

"Why don't I want to know?" He was getting hotter looking by the minute.

"I gave mine to my brother." He was lobster under his tan.

"Cool." I shrugged.

“His TV had an accident.” He looked over at my battered Jeep. “With a four by four.”

“Sky Sports!” I burned scarlet. “You’re his brother, the builder?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.” He put his hands up.

I stepped back and fell over Big Dog but he dived and caught me in a low tackle and we slammed into the wall together.

“You don’t look anything like your brother.”

“I’m not anything like him.” His hips bolted me still. “What about you and Baby Brother?”

“Your brother’s an asshole.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He wrestled my ponytail and gave me that huge grin.

It was like watching him strip off. I should’ve looked away but I couldn’t.

Marc de Faoite

Finnuala Fiesta

FINNUALA FIESTA WAS AS UNPREDICTABLE AS THE WEATHER. YOU'D FINALLY THINK YOU had the measure of her when she'd surprise you with some new change of tack. The heater might go on the blink, the radio channels would change, or the windscreen wipers would spring into unexpected activity. One of her favourite tricks was to give a sudden lurch that'd drag you into the opposite lane where you could take your chances with oncoming traffic.

Her bodywork was splotted with carbuncular eruptions, some of which had burst open revealing the cancerous rust, Neil Young's eternal insomniac, eating away at her, one crumbly orangey flake at a time.

The blisters were O'Dwyer's fault. He'd be before your time, from the O'Dwyers' drapers above on the main street, there where the Aldi is now. O'Dwyer was a loner. Still waters and all that. Hands like shovels on him. Fond of his pint. After the pub shut he'd drive the Fiesta down onto the strand and park facing the waves, a cargo of take-out cans on the passenger seat, and The Eagles, the soundtrack to his life, on repeat.

Finnuala chewed up the cassettes, copies he'd made from the vinyl at home. You'd see streels and ribbons of thin magnetic tape flashing in the breeze, caught up in the hawthorn hedges, and know that O'Dwyer and Finnuala had passed that way. If he'd lived long enough he would have moved on to the CDs, or the MP3s, but before he could get that far he ran straight into an oak tree, there by the corner of Kelly's. I still feel a pang of guilt when I think of it.

The car was a write-off. For a long time you could still see traces of Finnuala's red paint on the torn bark, the colour of lipstick or nail-varnish. That car was the only mistress O'Dwyer ever knew. The engine was shoved through his ribcage. You could say she broke his heart, and much of the rest of him too.

It was a closed coffin funeral. If he was looking down from above he would have been surprised by the number of people who turned up, people who wouldn't have given him the time of day if they passed him on the street when he was alive. They came for the Mammy's sake as much as anything else. Mind you, he'd be the same with them. He was never a man for words, beyond the lyrics of The Eagles songs, which had a peculiar habit of working their way into his speech.

For a while, there was an on-going debate down in Ryan's as to which song O'Dwyer was listening to when he died.

"It could have been Glen Frey telling him to *Take it easy*."

"More likely your man Randy whathisface encouraging him to *Take it to the limit one more time*."

"Are yiz sure it wasn't *Life in the fast lane*?"

But these discussions weren't mocking O'Dwyer, if anything they were sincere and respectful. You wouldn't hear The Eagles played around here after that. If they came on on the radio you'd change the channel or turn it off, and this must have been the only town in Ireland without *Hotel California* on the jukebox.

A few months before he died we were both caught up in an after-hours card game in Ryan's. O'Dwyer slid the car keys to the centre of the table.

"Are you sure you want to be doing that?"

He nodded. The cards were revealed. My royals flushed his pair of pairs down the drain.

"Finnuala!" howled O'Dwyer, beating his head with his fists. "I'll have her back off you this time next week if you're man enough to wager," he said, leaving the table forlorn and heart-broken.

He could cast aspersions on my manhood all he wanted, I pocketed the keys. But Finnuala Fiesta was no real prize, as those remaining at the table took pains to remind me.

“Sure that rust-bucket, she’d fall apart on you as soon as drive boy.”

“Seen it last week down on the strand, so I did. Up to the axles in the waves and himself asleep inside of it.”

I started to understand why O’Dwyer had given his car a name. Right from the start Finnuala showed a sight more personality than might normally be expected from a vehicle. Whether she was just naturally cantankerous, or whether it was because of the way O’Dwyer treated her, or the manner of her coming into my possession, exchanged on the whim of the cards, I can’t say. Whatever it was, she bore a grudge against me right from day one and was instrumental in the rapid withering of my tentatively budding romance with Brenda Flaherty.

“I swear, she’s neurotic,” I said to Brenda.

I’d had a long-running streak of luck, unanimously declared by the patrons of Ryan’s, as bad, particularly when it came to the ladies. In my mind winning the Fiesta from O’Dwyer marked the beginning of a change in my fortunes and I hoped things might work out well with Brenda.

“That’s just anthropomorphic projection,” she said.

“Antropowhat?”

“Seeing human characteristics in non-human things.”

“Where do you come up with words like that at all?”

“Books. Would you not read books?”

“I might if it was about something that interested me, like gardening, or a bit of DIY, sure don’t I have a library card, but you wouldn’t come across words like antropowhatsit in them.”

Brenda had flaming red hair, though she called it auburn, and it gave fair warning of her garrulous nature, something any of her students at the community college would attest to if asked. Sharp-tongued and short-fused she was and God help the poor unfortunate who dared call her ginger or carrot-head.

She was a well-made, broad-beamed woman, with a set of hips that would give a man's hands ample room to rove and grip if such opportunity were ever presented, which much to my chagrin wasn't. She had a habit of probing her teeth with her tongue that reminded me of the creature in the Alien movies, writhing around inside their hosts, ready to break free and wreak havoc and devastation to all around her, but be that as it may I was happy enough to get a taste of that same flustered tongue, though truth be told it was a rare enough occurrence, requiring the best part of a bottle of Blue Nun apiece over Sunday roast above in Grogan's Hotel. Other than that it was hands off.

"You must think I'm some sort of feckin' eejit if you think you'll be getting the milk for free without buying the cow," she said, which was her way of bringing up the subject of wedding bells and rings, which wasn't exactly what you might call forefront in my mind.

Like all school teachers back then she had a wardrobe of cardigans and A-line skirts, but the way Brenda wore them had a particular way of bringing the attention down from those womanly hips to the shapeliest set of calves this town has ever seen, all pure toned fibrous muscle, like marble statues of Greek Gods.

It was the hill walking gave her the legs, she was a demon for it. I joined her a few times, panting over a profusion of granite and heather and up into the clouds. You'd never really know if you'd made it to the top, or even if there was a top. She wouldn't say much on those hikes, but you could sense a certain calmness from her, though being true to herself she was always smouldering away beneath it, like a fire under slake.

It all started to come apart when we arranged to go to see a film. I can't remember what was showing, not that it matters anyhow, since, thanks to Finnuala Fiesta, we never made it to the cinema.

Brenda could have driven herself, but I wasn't long after winning Finnuala and pictured myself a gallant prince charming come to collect his damsel in his carriage. Some carriage – more like a bloody pumpkin, and some prince as well, the sweet self-delusion of youth.

It was the type of evening you might call soft, if by soft you meant grey and drizzling enough to justify windscreen wipers screeching back and forth at low speed, and not yet dark enough to warrant the use of headlights, though it would be understandable if you did, the type of evening you could encounter at any time of year in these parts, with the taste of salt on the air and seagulls suspended on the wind blowing in towards the land, with their moans of existential angst. *Plaintive*, I imagined Brenda saying. My best conversations with Brenda were always the imaginary ones.

We'd talk about the way gulls are so unlike other birds. There's a sense of menace about them, I imagined saying to her, like a gang of rowdies you might cross the street to avoid, and she'd say I know exactly what you mean, an aggressive aloofness in their sleek white-barrelled bodies, like miniature pit-bulls with beaks and wings, and I'd say always the vague threat that if you looked at them sideways they'd take out your eye with their curved yellow bills, though on a good day they might content themselves to just shit on your car.

Brenda was renting rooms from Mrs Maloney, up the top of the town in one of those old granite houses with the slate rooves. Mrs Maloney wouldn't tolerate her tenants having male visitors, of any sort, at any time. I suspect that was precisely why Brenda chose those particular digs.

I parked out front and announced my arrival with a goose honk of the horn. The drizzle distorted the evening street through the wet windscreen, melting it into an Impressionist painting.

I remembered the umbrella on the backseat and got out to meet Brenda, swinging the car door behind me, leaving the keys still snugly in the ignition.

We walked to the car, sharing the umbrella. She was wearing some sort of perfume. A good sign, I thought. Rust, or some other form of corrosion, whether moral or physical, caused the car door handle to jam.

“Amn’t I after locking myself out of the car,” I said.

“And with the engine still running as well,” replied Brenda, in a put-down tone refined over years of use on recalcitrant adolescents. I blushed like a teenager.

“Well that’s the evening ruined,” she said, letting out a sigh. “I hope you have a spare set of keys about you somewhere.”

I didn’t, but if anyone did it would be O’Dwyer.

“Wait here until I go back upstairs for the keys to the Corolla,” Brenda said through tightly clenched teeth.

I almost answered, “Yes Miss.”

I stood under the pattering umbrella watching the grey evening fade to dark, breathing in the fumes from Finnuala’s exhaust while she shuddered in a manner not unlike someone caught in the throes of laughter.

“Fuck you,” I muttered. “Anyway, I’m not the one with gull-shit on her bonnet.”

There were only two places O’Dwyer was likely to be found, three if you counted his house, which was a long shot at that time of day, and since it was still too early for him to be parked down on the beach with the gulls and The Eagles the obvious place to look was Ryan’s. Brenda drove and waited in the car while I went inside.

I offered O’Dwyer a pint for his troubles, but he refused.

“I’ll give them to you on one condition – you put them back in the pot on Friday night,” he said. “Plus you’ll have to give me a lift home now to find the keys as I’ve drink taken.”

That was never something to stop him before, and I was reluctant to take the wager, but I had little choice if I was to try and salvage the situation with Brenda. She was none too impressed at missing the film, and I guessed would be little pleased at the prospect of playing taxi for a beery-breathed O’Dwyer.

Whether it was bad luck or good I can’t properly say, but when the keys of the Fiesta were

placed in the pot in Ryan's that Friday night I won.

"Double or quits ye coward," roared O'Dwyer, which made no sense of course. I pocketed the keys again.

"One of these nights!" he called after me as I left the table, quoting his heroes, as was his wont.

A week later I drove up the grey drizzle street to Mrs Maloney's. Brenda had been acting cool since our last attempted date and even in our imaginary conversations she wasn't saying much. I had a box of Milk Tray and a bunch of flowers on the seat beside me as peace offerings. I parked and honked and saw the upstairs light go off.

Carefully taking the keys out of the ignition I gathered up the chocolates and flowers and reached into the back seat for the umbrella. But my hands were too full, so I got out and put the keys on the roof while I wrestled the brolly out of the car.

I closed the car door with my foot and as I did saw the keys slide down the curve of the wet roof. Instead of falling harmlessly into the gutter the trajectory of the keys' slow-motion decent intersected perfectly with the arc described by the closing door, which clipped them and sent them sailing through the air to land in the passenger footwell at precisely the moment the door clunked shut, locked from the inside of course.

Mrs Maloney's front door opened and Brenda stepped out on the pavement.

"Were you going to open that umbrella?" Brenda asked witheringly. I felt like one of her classroom idiots.

"Amn't I after locking the keys inside again," I stammered. "It happened just this instant. Can you drive me home so as I can pick up the spares?"

"Won't you come into my parlour said the spider to the fly," she said, and then increasing the volume, "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me," the last three words spat out in short sharp barks.

"You wouldn't even have to come in, just wait in the car while I get the keys."

But she had already turned and gone back inside, but not before taking the Milk Tray and chrysanthemums.

At least I had the umbrella. I finally opened it and walked home in the rain, cursing Finnuala Fiesta all the way.

Spare keys safely in my pocket I retraced my steps, heading back up the town to reclaim my recalcitrant vehicle, passing the video shop with its buzzing blue neon, past the chipper with its steamed-up windows and greasy chip smell. I paused outside Ryan's, collapsed the umbrella and went inside.

O'Dwyer was sitting in his usual spot nursing a pint behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Is it yerself?"

"Indeed and it is."

"I thought you might be avoiding me."

"Ah now, why would I do that?"

"You can't hide those lying eyes," he sang.

I reached into my pocket for the car keys and dangled them in front of him.

"Is it a game of cards you're after?" O'Dwyer asked.

"I'd rather not take my chances. That car has been nothing but trouble to me. You keep them."

I thrust the keys into his giant hand, not realizing that by reuniting him with the vengeful Finnuala I was sending him off to a meeting with an oak tree up by Kelly's and a definitive place in a much too early grave.

Anne Hayden

High Tide

WHEN SHE TURNS AROUND TO FACE THE SHORE, SHE CAN SEE HIM THERE, SITTING ON THE wall in front of the Martello tower. He raises the brown paper bag as if it's a prize. She swims back in and clambers out of the water, skin tingling from the cold and salt. He doesn't like swimming in the sea, something about a problem with his ears, although she suspects it has more to do with the scrotum-tightening-ness of it.

She walks up the slip, careful in her bare feet to avoid the patches of green slime, squeezing water from her hair and holding in her tummy, although two marathons and three triathlons a year ensure she doesn't need to.

'How is it?' he asks.

'Cold, but it's lovely once you're down, didn't take long to get used to it at all,' she says, wrapping the towel around herself.

'Well I still think you're mad.'

He produces two cans of Coke from his jacket pockets and unwraps the fish and chips.

'Now, don't ever say I don't look after you,' he says, emptying packets of salt on to the golden batter. He opens a can and hands it to her.

It's true, he does look after her, she can't fault him on that. But she's not some fragile little thing that needs minding. She takes a handful of chips.

‘Here, have some fish,’ he says, pushing a plastic fork loaded with battered cod towards her. ‘You always say it tastes better after a dip.’

‘I’m ok a minute,’ she says, keeping one eye on the other swimmers.

An older man walks gingerly up the slip, his dripping shorts leaving a snail’s trail behind him. He nods at her, acknowledging one of his own, and says ‘Beautiful isn’t it?’

‘Lovely,’ she replies, sticking to the unwritten code. No-one ever admits it’s too cold, that would be letting the side down. Sea swimming can be a great leveller, billionaires and paupers are all the same in their togs in the tide. But sometimes it also feels like being part of an elite club, with the strange moral superiority that that brings.

At the other end of the wall, a small girl starts to wail, an ice-cream has slipped from its cone and lies in a sad white puddle on the ground. The sounds of the child crying and the seagulls squawking grate on her nerves, disrupting the serene feeling she’d had gliding weightless through the sea.

He looks across and smiles that sympathetic smile of his. ‘Ah the poor thing, sure that’s galling. I hope they buy her another one.’

‘Ah, I’m sure she’ll live.’ She can’t seem to help herself, his softness brings out her sharp edges.

Goosebumps are rising on her arms and a scar on her knee from a bicycle fall stands out, raised and deep purple. The skin on her thighs is starting to look mottled like corned beef, all trace of a summer tan gone. It’s late in the year for it, but she doesn’t want to give in yet. She has already broken last year’s record of October 21st and this time she is determined to make it to November and then even December. She wants to be the kind of person who swims in the sea in December: strong, brave, wholesome, hardy. Not soft, the opposite of soft.

Of course, she enjoys the bragging rights it brings too. Not that she’d ever openly gloat, but in the pub later John will tell her friends of her courage, and she’ll play it down. ‘Sure it’s grand once you’re in, it’s refreshing,’ she’ll insist, making sure not to sound smug.

She might casually drop it into conversation at work tomorrow when her colleagues start talking about the weather getting cooler and the evenings closing in. 'Without a wetsuit?' they'll ask, impressed. 'Ah, sure it doesn't count in a wetsuit,' she'll say, brushing it off, no big deal.

She eats some of the cod – it does taste better – and starts to change out of her swimsuit. He looks politely away out to sea. She thinks about dropping the towel and baring her body as she pulls on her underwear, like an unselfconscious German or Scandinavian might do. But then she thinks better of it and dresses awkwardly under the towel instead. The temperature is dropping as the sun is lowering behind the shield of grey clouds.

'We'd better get you home and warmed up,' he says. There he goes again with the minding.

She is shivering but says 'I'm fine, I feel great after that. Let's go for a drink, I think I've earned it.'

'You certainly have. I don't know how you do it in this cold.'

She doesn't need to be minded but sometimes it's nice to be admired.

They cross the road to a pub where fisherman's nets and sea charts adorn the walls, like some sort of maritime theme park. She orders a pint of Guinness, he asks for a shandy. She wishes he'd have a real drink but stops herself. He's driving after all, driving her.

Noticing her wet hair, the barman enquires 'Have you been in for a swim?'

'Yeah, it was lovely.'

The barman doesn't look convinced. He knows her type.

They take a table near the window and watch the fading light fall on the water, turning it a murky, almost sinister colour. She takes a sip of Guinness, sighs contently and says again 'Ah, I feel great after that. It's good for the soul.'

'You know, one of these days I might try it myself,' he says.

‘Try what?’

‘Going in for a swim with you.’

‘Really? Now? In late October?’

‘I know, it’s probably not the best time to start. But you seem to get such a buzz from it. What is it you always say? You never regret a swim.’

‘You have to build up a tolerance though, a bit of hardiness, it’d be dangerous to just start this late in the year. And what about your ears?’

‘I’ll leave it off for this year I suppose. Next summer, maybe.’

As the cars passing the window start to turn on their headlights, he adds ‘You’d notice the days getting shorter alright.’

The weather turns that night and a week of rain and gales follows, churning up the sea and making it unsafe for even the bravest of souls. With every day that passes, she frets a little more, fearing that she’s losing her sea hardiness, as an athlete laid up by injury might lose fitness. By the time the weather settles, the clocks have gone back an hour and the calendar has moved forward a month.

It’s too dark in the evenings now to fit in a dip after work so she has to wait until the weekend. Saturday provides a clear, crisp winter morning. It’s November 3rd, her birthday, and she’s going to kick 30 in the face. She gets up early and puts her swimsuit on under her clothes. She stirs chocolate into her porridge to provide extra insulation. Once fuelled up, she fills a flask with strong coffee and packs it in her gear bag. She is ready.

He’s in cheery form when he collects her, excitable almost. With the Beach Boys blaring from the stereo and the blue skies outside, it’s easy to believe they’re in California rather than Ireland. But when they emerge from the heated cocoon of the car, they can see their breath on the air and they’re not in California anymore.

The ice-cream vans have moved on to wherever it is they hibernate for the winter and the lifeguard station is boarded up. Parents push buggies and dogs lead walkers along the sliver of land that's left at high tide but there's no sign of human life in the glass-like sea.

'Well,' he says. 'How do you feel?'

'Good. It looks perfect.'

She sets her bag down and surveys the scene for a while before slowly starting to remove layers, hat and fleece jacket first, socks last. She tiptoes down the slip and stops at the water's edge, every hair on her body standing to attention. The still water bounces back the blue of the sky and gives the hill across the bay an upside-down mirror image.

She jumps up and down in a vain attempt to warm herself against the chill in the air, then takes a few steps forward so the water reaches her ankles. Her feet turn to blocks of ice and she drags them out a bit further, up to the knees. Her shins sting where she had shaved them earlier but slowly, slowly, she keeps wading out. It would be better to plunge in and get it over with quickly but she can't bring herself to do so this time.

As the water laps up against her belly in short, sharp assaults and she prepares to dunk the rest of her body, she hears a thudding splash behind her, then another and another, an act of violence against the stillness. She looks around with a fright and there he is, in a pair of swimming trunks, plundering through the water with a wide grin on his face.

'Whohoo!' he shouts, playfully flicking some water in her direction as he gets closer. He has the audacity to get down before her, even ducking his head under. The surprise has distracted her from the cold for a few seconds and she immerses herself fully.

'Holy shit! Have you lost your mind?' she says, trying to sound jokey but not doing a very good job of it. Spontaneity isn't usually his strong point and that's ok with her, no alarms and no surprises.

He's delirious, probably in shock. He whoops and laughs and splashes around carelessly. He looks good in his swimming shorts without ever having run a sub-three-hour marathon. She envies him that but is also glad; one sub-three runner in a relationship is enough.

‘I’m gone completely numb,’ he says. ‘Ha! Wait till I tell the lads about this. It’s a good thing you’re here to see it.’

‘Be careful, there’s an undercurrent.’

He doesn’t last more than a few minutes but she sticks it out a bit longer, swims out to a buoy and back. She realises he probably thinks of it as a birthday gift, sharing this with her, maybe sees it as a way to get closer to her. But she doesn’t like it one bit. This is *her* thing, his role is that of cheerleader, surely after ten months he should have figured that out. That’s another new record for her, eight months was her longest before this. If they get to Christmas, it will be a full year.

She follows him back to their bags, where he is jumping from one foot to another as he changes, still giddy. She plays along, congratulates him and acts impressed. They share the flask of coffee and watch the tide turning.

Later they go out to meet her friends for a birthday dinner. He tells them about the day’s adventure, joking ‘It’s easy, lads, I don’t know what people complain about.’

But he is unable to brush it off lightly, goes on about it a little too much.

Her friend’s boyfriend winks and says ‘You’ve met your match here, Aoife.’

As they walk from the restaurant to a nearby bar, the boys go ahead, talking about football or music or whatever third thing men use to communicate with each other.

Her friend links her and says ‘He’s in good form, isn’t he? Something different about him, he seems more confident or something.’

‘High on the wine and the glory. You’d think he just swam across the Atlantic.’

‘Ah, it’s sweet, sure he’s only trying to impress you.’

‘Either that, or he’s trying to piss me off. I can’t tell.’

But her friend is right, he does seem more confident. It's irritating and yet kind of attractive.

Something has changed, a power shift that would be barely perceptible from the outside.

It's as if he had put her on a pedestal, and now he has climbed up and joined her on it. She's not sure yet if there's room for two of them up there.

Níall Kitson

Openings

"THIS IS ALL WE ARE: FODDER FOR SMASH CUTS."

—Headpress

Six months ago if you asked me what I did for a living, I'd tell you I watched circuits form. The coming together of lines of knowledge, points of friction, sound and vision. The collision of stock footage, live feeds and found sounds gathered by a network of confederates and streamed live across the web. I was in the Arqebus business – the first obsessive compulsive chaser of the Dark Web's most obtuse producer of remixed media.

At my peak I could pitch any cash-strapped editor an inside story on the raw materials behind the next event stream, and the budget would come free for a 2,000-word preview. Not just the national mastheads, either. If anything, the internationals were quicker to embrace the possibility that the 'Internet's own Banksy' finished each mix with a Guaranteed Irish logo stamped at the end.

Breadcrumb trails to the next webcast became social media fodder and I was usually first with a tip off to the next faked blog ring, the next calculated bulletin board troll, the next faked Wikipedia entry, each one part of an invitation to a happening shared by tens, then thousands then hundreds of thousands of viewers.

I was called everything from a shill, an apologist and a fanboy but hunting Arqebus paid my bills, kept my crazy and even got me a spot on the speaking circuit, delivering presentations to social media marketers on 'leveraging the commercial appeal of self-sustaining transgressive communities'.

It was when the money came too easy that my leads dried up. The rumour mill started filling my inbox with chaff. Sources' e-mail accounts were shut down or went dark. Rumours of fresh streams popped up and died within hours on message boards in the clear and below the line. My exclusives became think pieces and overviews banished to the slush pile of feature ideas with 'the best cities in the world for ethical snacking' or 'the artisan fuel craze'.

Then a posting on an old Arqebus Facebook page. A poll: We're looking for a live venue in Dublin, where should it go? I e-mailed my entire contacts book. Was this the real thing? The trail went cold until a ten-page fanzine-style document of scanned and crumpled A4 paper full of terms and conditions landed in my inbox. An official opening of a retrospective, Extropy, to take place at the Science Gallery in Dublin with an exclusive presentation 'by the artists'. Arqebus was going public. He/she/they were coming out from behind the avatar. I was back in the money.

"A person. An idea. A manifesto. A collided cultural artefact. An excuse to spend your weekend watching strangers get up to weird shit."

—Omni

At the gallery a hostess scanned the QR code on the last page of the invite and pointed me in the direction of the cloakroom where a girl with a tattoo of a circuit across her next, handed me a flute of clear fluid that smelled vaguely of citrus and what looked like a clove to swallow it with.

"It's part of the Ts&Cs," she said.

I downed the drink and looked for something more familiar to kill the acetone aftertaste.

The ground floor was rammed with broadcasters, critics, hipsters and fanboys. Some were invited guests, others had cracked a ten-step augmented reality game to earn a ticket.

Hanging from the ceilings were giant projector screens with Arquebus' greatest hits. Green

fields and brain surgery. Two shots edits of a garden outside a nursing home and the inside of a Berlin fetish club. A cell in an unmanned maximum security prison, a hospice and a school yard, fields of grazing cattle and couples walking on a beach. The earshredding blast beats of Burzum and Deicide.

I breezed through the crowd, picking up half-sentences of conversations on cyberculture and craft beer. How Arqebus had elevated the stream to a new level of collaboration, becoming an a-geographical phenomenon – that’s a direct quote.

A fanboy caught me by the arm and leaned over to take a selfie.

“You’re amazing, man” he said. “You were there right at the start.”

“I was the start,” I said, shrugging him off.

“A risen medium.”

–Wired

The start. A barren night scouring video sites on the Tor network for a feature I was doing on cam girls and the men who try to date them. Cycling through hours and hours of looking for a story that I came across Arqebus for the first time. I was cycling through dozens of live streams, nodding off at the sight of yet another badly framed desktop confessional. The next thing, I was looking at a montage of footage of public spaces from Opentopia with an ambient soundtrack. What this was doing on a website where guys paid used virtual tip jars for stripteases and sob stories was anyone’s guess. Yet the page views showed there was an audience for it. The below the line comments were hopping, as well. The longer I stayed the faster the cuts came, hitting breakneck speed with a Napalm Death soundtrack. The viewers were lapping it up until after about two hours the stream came to a juddering stop with lines of static and pause marks like a video tape and that Guaranteed Irish logo. I subscribed

to the channel but nothing like that was posted again. Instead there were random URLs posted on a static screen. Endorsements for different channels, some of which had never posted. Every so often one of these breadcrumb trails would lead to a dark stream with a countdown clock to the next stream.

I began a blog charting my efforts which was read by about a dozen people. At the time I was pitching ideas around to editors, one of which suggested I do him 1,500 words on Arqebus in anticipation of the next happening. It went well enough to warrant a follow-up.

In the meantime I had set up a separate a spoiler blog to publicly piece together, advertise and post recordings of past streams. It was like this great perverted dance and I was the judge an MC. In time the blog even brought in a few ad pennies of its own, though barely enough to cover the price of a few pints in town.

Thanks to the articles Arqebus' following was growing at an exponential rate. The source material got more daring. The b-roll was getting added to with footage taken with what I found out were tiny LED cameras placed anywhere and everywhere. The hive mind was doing all the legwork now. Dublin, Berlin, New York, Belfast, Leeds, fucking anywhere. It was coming in from all angles.

Intermittent happenings became weekly releases complete with a parodic Twitter feed full of fundraising requests for non-existent charities and invented quotes from politicians that qualified as news in tabloid press rooms. I had to rely on fan tip-offs to keep up and hope I wasn't being screwed over too often. Yet still no face to the name. I suspected Arqebus was becoming more than one man, woman or label. It was becoming a perspective, a style, a meme. Whatever, it had to be the work of more than one person. It had to be.

"As Warhol was a maker, Arqebus is made."

—Make:

theincubatorjournal.com

A girl in a fibre optic layered dress handed me what I was told was a fortified smoothie that I was also obliged to drink. I took the drink – which came in a plastic beaker – and tried to neck it in one only to choke on its thickness. The girl pursed her lips and shimmied back into the crowd.

I turned away and slinking through bank after bank of feeds. The place feeling like a Disneyfied grindhouse, thick with the sweet smell of smoothie. Richard Cheese piped through on the sound system crooning a version of White Zombie's *More Human Than Human*. I craved clean air amidst sanitised orgies (faces and genitalia blacked out for public consumption) and green fields. Then a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you Mr ____?"

I nodded at the girl. This one in jeans and a t-shirt with 'Scientific and Loving It' across her chest.

"The artists want you upstairs."

"Artists?"

Well that was one question answered.

The girl took me up a side stairwell. We go up three flights, each floor dishing out a fresh blast of cool, processed air. The usher led me to the balcony overlooking the show floor. Leaning back, drinks in hand were a small bald man with wide-rimmed glasses and a girl with electric blue hair.

"Mr ____," the girl said, then left me with my hosts.

I looked them both up and down.

"So which one should I be talking to?"

"That depends," said the man. "Who's paying your way this week? *Hotpress*? *Salon*? *Woman's Way*? Different outlets deserve their own voice, don't you think? If you're feeling emotional I suggest you talk to her. She's better with people."

"I assume there's some sort of happening planned for tonight," I said.

The woman fixed me with a stare. "What makes you say that?"

"It would be a terrible opportunity to waste. Although I thought you'd get a rougher venue. This is all a bit, nice, isn't it?"

"Fucking online polls. I know for a fact the responses were seeded by the staff here. I wanted a found location. A building site. A barn. A brothel would have been fun. We won't be doing it this way again. Our agent says we should be thinking bigger, anyway."

I gulped down the last of the smoothie, forgetting for a moment that it wasn't a real drink and that it really wasn't agreeing with my stomach.

The man stared at me. A different gaze from the woman. Impatient and sharp. "You don't think we can be 'real artists'. Like we're a novelty act?"

"You're as real as anything I've ever covered," I said. "Though you make it hard to convince people otherwise."

"Because we're online?" the woman said.

"Because you're... ill-defined."

"We're more coherent than you think," the woman said. "Numerically and ideologically. We're only two of... many. How to describe it to you. It's not a unifying philosophy, our sources are too disparate, it's more like..."

"A paradigm."

"Well put. You should include it in your next piece. You're a good summariser. Always have been."

"I've had a few chances at it."

The man checked his watch and gave a sniff of recognition. He nudged the woman and they turned around to look down on the crowd. "Finish your smoothie, you'll like this. Part three is about to begin."

Another troop of ushers started making the rounds, handing out flutes of champagne in exchange for the empty beakers. Arqebus – both of them – were handed microphones and I shrank back from the balcony for as far as I could, knowing there would be plenty of cameras at work.

“Thank you for coming this evening,” he began. “As you know we don’t do things in half measures. Nor are we in the business of not giving people what they want. We, Arqebus, are givers and tonight we’re giving you something new. Something we are sure will stay with you for the rest of your lives.”

She raised her flute. “But first a drink.”

The crowd raised their glasses. The monitors blacked out and the fleet of ushers reappeared to gather the glasses.

“If you bear with us we’ll show you our latest creation. Give it a few minutes to warm up.”

The woman turned to me and winked. “Are you ready? Consider this our gift to you.”

“Sounds ominous,” I said.

One by one the screens around the gallery winked on. Blurry at first, each one settled on an image of an organ at work, images from some kind of medical scan.”

“What is that?”

“We’re calling it a three-point portrait,” the woman said. “When you came in first, you had a shot with a clove. Only that wasn’t a clove. It was a new kind LED camera we’ve been working on.”

He added: “The shot is contrast, like you’d find in an x-ray. It may have applications later on.”

I felt my stomach knot. “And the smoothie?”

“Lining. So we’d have something to show at work. A lot of these girls don’t eat anymore.

Isn't that sad?"

"The toast?"

The woman girl folded her arms. "A reactant to power the camera."

"So we're looking at?"

"Basically a room full of tummies, and, eventually, assholes. A room full of assholes. Streaming live online. All night long."

"Cute trick," I said, the knot opening, releasing only queeziness.

"It gets better. The screen over there? Number 7. It's the biggest screen where we have the biggest asshole of them all."

He smiled.

"That's all you."

Tomás Dearg

Production

HE COULD SEE FIELDS, POWER LINES, AND A SCRUTINISING SKY. MORGAN WITHDREW HIS first two fingers from the venetian blinds' maw and it snapped back into place like rows of dusty teeth. He ran his palm roughly over his face – starting at his forehead, then flicking off at his chin, as though he were a blind man trying to identify himself. He noted that neither his palm nor his face was free from sweat. The slices of sunlight and shadow over his torso and face made him imprisoned by human and natural design; though of course Morgan himself couldn't see that.

He sat down at his computer, but couldn't bring himself to look at the screen. Instead his eyes fell on an impact stain over on the far wall, a stain that the sunlight had caught and illuminated. Morgan's imagination ran wild. What could have caused such a thing? A mug of coffee, thrown in anger? A predecessor of Morgan's letting their child run amok fifteen, twenty, thirty years before? Or was it from someone's head being smacked against the surface? Had this place been an interrogation room at one time? What could have *caused* such a thing?

Eventually Morgan determined that there was nothing else for it and he engaged with his computer. His fingertips hovered over the keys like they were expectant clitorides. There were grids of numbers and superficially chaotic dots on the screen that represented vectors and incidences of production, export, by-products and ingestion in the Greater South Bann region. Morgan saw meaningful patterns in these numbers and dots in his dreams, but never in reality, and in waking hours this left him with a certain sense of being unfulfilled, as though he were missing an arm or a leg, which was strange, because he still got *paid* the same, whether he produced cohesive trajectories for his superiors or not.

It was funny because the rest of the building was blemish free. Not "clean", exactly, but certainly plain browns, oranges and creams, surfaces in front of which an invisible 1960s musk seemed to hover.

Sometimes, when Morgan had to move filing cabinets or desks, implementing some directive or other, leaflets from this bygone era would fall out onto the swirling carpet – depictions of space age infrastructures, infrastructures which happy and efficient citizens could avail of and utilise, citizens represented pictorially in stickman form. It gave Morgan pangs of nostalgia for an era he never even knew; at least, never even knew beyond these drawings. That optimistic sense of a brand new country, a frontier that could be started off from scratch.

The door banged open.

“Well, it’s good to see *someone’s* working in here!”

Wilson, the Director for Output Generation, marched in. The door swung meekly back to its original position behind him, but not before two of Wilson’s direct reports, McGribbon and Kilinkelly, scuttled on in in his wake, their demeanours somewhere between officious and deferential.

Morgan noticed that there was no mark left where the door had hit the wall. This building was like an impermeable animal. He quickly shifted his eyes back over to Wilson, who was taking a seat. He was smiling, but the smile was icy. Morgan found it difficult to read other people at the best of times, and he found Wilson especially resistant to attempts at analysis. He didn’t know whether Wilson’s opening remark was sincere, sarcastic, or somewhere in the multitudinous spectrum of inference in between; Morgan not being fluent in the common currency of Ulster banter. Morgan studied the lines on his boss’s boss’s forehead for clues, but they were as deep and unknowable as the furrows in the fields that he studied daily from his office window.

“I- I have the Q3 reports ready to go here, John, I just need to wait for that software update to send them-”

“Tony, Tony. Relax. That’s not why I’m here today.”

Wilson still grinning his fixed grin. He was leaning forward, shoulders raised, his hands clasped together like a prayer or a business deal. McGribbon and KilinKelly were scribbling

away at their notepads like seismometers on the flanks.

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’m here because we’re letting you go.”

“Letting me *go*?”

Morgan’s thoughts raced, like an animal in a trap. He had to assess this information quickly. He had to categorise and compute it. Number one. He had plenty of money saved up. Number two. He had transferrable skills. Number three. He took great pride in his professionalism, and felt that this news was ignominious.

“But – but – in my last appraisal I–”

“Tony, Tony. Relax! We’re not *sacking* you. We’re not making you... ‘*redundant*’.”

He paused to flick a piece of accumulated fluff off his pinstriped suit with an expression of distaste.

“We’re letting you *go*.”

And Wilson smiled more broadly, stretching back with his hands behind his head now, as though everything was out in the open and explained. Morgan looked to McGibbon and Kilinkelly, but their eyes were fixedly down on their notes.

“What do you... what do you *mean*, John?”

“What I mean is. I’m the Director for Output Generation. That includes all sorts of outputs. Materials, services, ideas and what have you. But it also includes people. And now it’s time for you to be produced.”

“But I– I’m not sure I understand–”

“Look, you know the game, Tony. This is a *good* thing! Remember when I met you here, ten years ago? And I told you your predecessor had moved on? Well, now it’s *your* turn to move on! We’ll still see to your *needs*, of course.”

“So – what – when do I – “

“Right now.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

Silence hung in the air, like a living thing. Even Wilson’s aides had stopped their scribbling.

“Look, you don’t mean to tell me you *liked* it in here, do you? Well, do you?”

“Well – I just thought – we were getting so close to completion on Project Order I –”

“Tony. There’ll be a new Project. A new Review. A new stratagem. But you know the game. Surely you know the game, by now? It’s all about stasis. All about containment. All about confinement. A snake that eats its tail. But you? You! You’ve broken free! Think of it like a nirvana.”

“So what do I – how do I –”

“LIVE!”

Morgan thought that Wilson was looking towards the emergency exit, though again he couldn’t really be sure. His superior certainly didn’t betray any objection when Morgan rose to his feet. From this vantage point, he could see that McGibbon and Kilinkelly hadn’t been writing words, rather they had been drawing intricate patterns, the patterns of Morgan’s dreams.

Morgan half expected an alarm to sound when he pushed the emergency exit. He hadn’t been through this door or even seen it opened in his twenty years of service. But though it was certainly *stiff*, no alarm sounded.

Morgan wandered out into the pastoral scene, the scene he had studied so many times, a living painting on his office wall. Now he was a *part* of it. His senses started to overload. He felt like he had been released into outer space. He became very conscious of the air that he was breathing, of the physical process of it moving into his lungs and oxidising his blood. He

became very conscious of the huge white orb of fire in the sky. Live? He didn't have the first clue of how to do *that*. He didn't know how anything in this world *worked*, outside of the confines of his computer and office. Only *there* had he truly been free.

Morgan looked back to the building, seeking some sort of prenatal comfort, but it just stared back at him implacably, its multitudinous windowed eyes as unknowable as Wilsons' had been. The South Bann Output Centre seemed to grow terrifyingly vast and sublime before him, so that it was towering above, but when Morgan turned away, he saw that the same was true of the pylons, the grass and the cows. Morgan felt like ancient hands were pulling him down, and the land he had spent so many years in servitude to impersonally swallowed him up.

flash fiction

Anne O'Leary

The Question

7.00am – YOU WAKE AT THE USUAL TIME, TOO USED TO THE ROUTINE PRE-EMPTYING OF the alarm clock. Your breakfast is on the table when you get downstairs – she's used to routine, too. You're still in your pyjamas, a nod to freedom. She's already dressed, her short hair fused to perfection with hairspray. You're going up to town for the day, doing a bit of shopping, having lunch, visiting a gallery. This is the kind of thing you've both always said you should do more of, but rarely got around to.

9.10am – You'd usually be at your desk by now, sipping your first coffee, scanning the umpteenth email. Sneaky looks at the sports headlines in between, not really supposed to use the internet for personal purposes. Trading banter with colleagues across desks, disembodied voices rising from behind walls of screens. Instead, you're queuing to get into a city centre car park, traffic snailing up the entrance ramp as those ahead circle for elusive spaces. Once inside, she calls out, "There's one! Oh, too slow." You go up and up, around and around, searching.

11.05am – Shopping for shoes completed, you stop for a scone. She's picked a fancy café with net curtains. She says it's cosy, but it just looks flouncy, like the past.

They'll all be in morning conference, tempting the editor's fussy palate with ideas for news items. The latest one's a tough nut, not much gets past him. Instead, he has lists of what he wants, commands for how he wants it. He was brought in to shake things up, he warned them on his first day. You were among the first things to be shaken up, like dust off a rug. "Early retirement, nearly there anyway so you might as well take it while you can enjoy it," he'd said, a shark's dead gaze behind tiny square glasses. "The newspaper's days are numbered, get out while you can, buddy," your colleagues agreed.

12.15pm – You’re in the gallery. You’re familiar with it, of course, bringing the kids occasionally when they were young and in need of entertaining somewhere dry. The girl enjoyed it, and would get out her paints as soon as she got home. The boy said it gave him the creeps looking at pictures of dead people. You’ve never come here of your own accord, wouldn’t be here now if she weren’t so keen to see the new exhibition. You climb the stairs slowly, legs aching from all that hiking around shops and banging of knees in the pokey, extortionate café. At the top of the stairs, there are three possible directions to take. To the right looks interesting, but she’s already striding straight ahead, her determined little shape compact in a stiff raincoat. She clutches the strap of her bag tight to her chest, ever vigilant of bag snatchers. You come to a dead end and look around for the art. There is none. Instead, you see frames without maps, globes without countries. On posters in a hangar-sized space next door are questions without answers.

“What’s the point of it all?” you say.

“Exactly,” she answers in her church whisper.

At work around this time, you would be wondering what sandwich to have for lunch. That could also be hard to find an answer to.

12.20pm – You’ve done everything you set out to do. Might as well go home. She suggests lunch, but you’re still full of scone, and the restaurant she has in mind is the opposite way from the car park. It’s a filthy day, the kind that makes people unaccustomed to exercise run to escape it. You tell her there are some jobs you’re hoping to do at home, and she looks at you with a doubting eyebrow. But she gives in, and you lean into each other under her umbrella as you dash back to the car. Because of the height difference, it’s impossible for you both to stay dry, it’s one or the other.

3.30pm – You can’t take much more. You stare at your pouchy, bulldog face in the bathroom mirror and ask yourself what on earth to do. She’s downstairs, researching cruise prices and signing you up for ballroom dance classes – you’re up here, clinging on to the his’n’hers towel rails and wishing yourself back at work. Back at your cramped desk in the corner of the newsroom with the view of the motorway. You used to think, sitting at that desk, watching the clock, how wonderful it would be not to have to be there. You used to

fantasise about the office syndicate winning the lottery and all of you chucking in your jobs, walking out that door in a blaze of glory. You never thought about it beyond the victory drinks in the pub next door. Never considered the hours and hours stretching ahead, needing to be filled, clock watching still.

You don't want to let her down. She deserves her own retirement, having held the fort all these years, pouring her life into the management of yours. She, more than you, has done the job of producing two functioning adults, so smart and capable that big-deal companies in far-flung lands have learned of their value and lured them away. They've left behind an empty void and a clean house. She's counting on your undivided attention as you seek out new interests together. The thought of having hobbies is exhausting.

And how do you describe to her that awkward moment at the barbecue yesterday, when that attractive blond asked what you do, and for the first time since you were 17, you didn't know what to say? When you told her you were retired, panic flitted in her eyes and she'd slid away, lost for anything else to strike up a conversation about. What are you if not a journalist?

You study yourself in the mirror. You are a frame without a map, a globe without countries, a question without an answer.

Tim Lavery

Wherefore Art Thou

THE SQUAWK BURST THROUGH MY WALKIE-TALKIE A FEW MINUTES BEFORE TEN, CUTTING through the stillness of the empty kitchen. My shift was almost finished, but Marie's voice sounded panicky and insistent. I fired the plastic bowl and spoon into the industrial sink and clattered through the steel security doors down towards Unit Four, aware of the muffled yells echoing down the high-ceilinged corridors of the residential block. Big Matty. Again.

The scene in the TV lounge was becoming typical. Two frightened agency girls crouched in the corner, one holding a wad of blood-damp tissues to her forehead. A television set lay on the floor, wrenched from the wall unit, pouring static into the room. Marie stood in the centre, arms flung out as per the SKIP training, as the rest of the house staff came crashing into the room. Below on the carpet tiles Diane burbled happily, clutching her incontinence mat and seemingly unconcerned about where her clothes had gone. Matty meanwhile occupied the far corner, half-clad, his face a red howling mass as he thrust his cock in and out of the cushions of the sofa. Having been thwarted in his attempted copulation, the sofa seemed to provide an acceptable substitute.

We left him to his hormones: the guy was non-verbal and had more learning difficulties than you could shake a stick at. He was also six feet five, and powerful with it. Marie threw a blanket around Diane and bundled her back to her room upstairs while Dale broke out the first aid kit for the agency girl, who we knew wouldn't be accepting further shifts in Unit Four. Once Matty had finished romancing the sofa, Dale cajoled him back to his room without further trouble. Left alone with the hiss of the broken TV, Lee and I exchanged glances. One of us would have to clean the sofa. One of us would have to clean the sofa. One of us would have to clean the sofa.

Five minutes later, hurriedly filling out another swathe of incident report forms in the tiny office, the night staffers ran through the same conversation yet again.

‘Either he’s moved or she’s moved. This can’t keep on happening.’ Marie shook her head. ‘I’m going to have to let the Directors know what’s going on, and see if they can get him placed at the Special Unit in Magheramourne or somewhere.’

‘Look, Diane’s the one who keeps sneaking down to see *him*. And it’s quite clear in the handbook that residents here are free to express themselves as they see fit – including autonomy in sexual matters.’ Dale shrugged. ‘I hate it too, but it does seem to be their choice, and we need to *respect* their choice. It’s our job to manage this. This is their home, not a prison. It’s all about respect. Mutual respect.’

‘It’s nothing to do with fucking respect. Neither of them can speak, they can’t even toilet themselves. This is about duty of care.’ Marie was furious; twice this week now, she’d had to haul Matty off the thin, pale girl with the too-wide eyes. ‘We have a duty of care to Diane and her parents. How the fuck are we going to explain if she gets pregnant? How’s that gonna look in a Health Trust investigation?’

The conversation looped on as Lee and I shoved our reports into the overflowing red in-tray for the clinical psychologist to find in the morning and, unnoticed, made our way out of the old convent building. We lit cigarettes wordlessly in the chill January air, the lighter flare bruising the deep star-flecked night and the curled smoke mingling with our condensing breath. Lee gave a brisk nod, and started off down the long driveway to the main road for the last bus home. There weren’t really any words. The few remaining parked cars crouched silent under their coating of frost, and from within the walls I heard a familiar rhythmic banging start up. Matty, shagging his wardrobe.

It wasn’t my concern, really. I was just a support worker. A zero hour contract at minimum wage with no real breaks, which I supplemented with all the coffee and Coco Pops I could steal from the kitchen. It wasn’t where any of us wanted to be.

I glanced down and noticed that someone had traced a lopsided heart on the hoar-frosted window of my car, now freezing over again. Probably Eimar from House 2, coming off her shift at 6. I tried not to think whether she meant anything by it. Just a wee joke, a geg. Maybe. I drew hard on my cig and, without thinking, added an M and a D to the centre of the heart, and a crude arrow. My frozen finger throbbed with a fierce, burning cold. Matty and Diane. Maybe the two of them were madly in love. Maybe they were too mad to

be in love. Fuck knows.

As I rasped the frost from the car's windscreen, the pale, naked figure of Diane appeared once again in the stair window, dimly lit by the night-lights. No-one else was around. I was off-shift now: 7am would come soon enough. I could see the night staff through the small office window at the other end of the hallway, still bickering, as Diane vanished from view through a bedroom doorway that wasn't hers.

The banging stopped, and a blessed calm fell over the old building. I put the scraper through the frozen heart, cranked the engine on the old Toyota, and left the night to take care of itself.

Peter Jordan

The Little Things

THE HOUSE WAS A THREE-BEDROOM SEMI WITH A REAR GARDEN. I PLANNED TO FIT A NEW kitchen and bathroom but keep as many of the original features as possible. I would live in the house, do most of the work myself then put it on the market in the spring.

Fixing up houses is what I did. When I was fixing them up, doing the hard graft, I was fine. In between is where the problem lay: while waiting for a deal to finish I'd drink. That was the cycle. My older brother was the first to suggest I had a problem. He guided me to AA. After a binge I'd go back to my meetings, drink coffee and listen. Sometimes I'd share but mostly I'd listen.

The back garden was a good size, south facing, and completely overgrown. So I borrowed my brother's petrol strimmer. It took me a full two hours to cut it short enough so I could mow it. While I worked on that garden I felt good, there were no thoughts in my head.

On the right hand side of the garden was a large patio built with flagstones, it was a good barbecue area. I was planning on removing the grey flagstones and putting in cobbles. Little things like that help sell a house. I was good at the little things.

At the end of the garden, where it bordered the neighbour's, was a perfectly trimmed hedge. I looked over that hedge. The neighbour's lawn was like a bowling green. It was cut in perfect lines. On either side of the neighbour's back door were two large hanging baskets with flowering pink and red geraniums.

'Just moved in?'

He caught me by surprise; he was bent down at the hedge, right in front of me, weeding.

'Jesus, you scared me!'

He reached his hand over the hedge. It wasn't a tall hedge. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.' he said. 'My name's Norman.'

‘No ... no problem,’ I said. ‘Pleased to meet you, I’m Peter.’

I shook his hand over the hedge. He was in his sixties and bald, though he needed a haircut at the sides. He was slow and deliberate in his movements, his actions, his speech. He was everything I wasn’t.

‘Old Mrs Burke will be glad you’re fixing up her garden,’ he said. ‘She used to be in it every day. Well, I mean, it’s your garden now.’

‘If I could get it like yours I’d be happy.’

He turned and looked at his own garden. ‘You know I didn’t really bother with it until I took redundancy, now it’s part of my life.’

‘Can I ask you a question?’ I asked.

‘Fire away.’

‘The hanging baskets ... how do you get them to flower like that?’

He looked behind him.

‘I’ll let you into a secret, the bigger the basket the better the plant. If you want them to flower you need to look after the roots. What’s under the surface is the important part.’

‘I’ll remember that the next time I hang one,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the tip.’

‘No problem.’

‘I think I’ll hang one either side of the back door. Just like yours.’

He looked over the hedge to my back door, and he looked at the timber fences I had propped up there. Then he said, ‘Those fences, are they five foot?’

‘Yes, five foot,’ I said. ‘I got them from Woodlands.’

He placed his arms across his chest, his expression changed. ‘I hate to tell you this but, well, it’s just the boundary fence can’t be over four foot.’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘Read the small print ... really,’ he said. ‘Your solicitor will confirm it.’

I looked at the fences.

‘Woodlands will replace them,’ he said. ‘It’s better you know now before putting them up.’

I went inside, sat down at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette. Then I went out for a drink. When I came home I walked out into the back garden and pissed on Norman’s hedge.

The next day as soon as I woke I started drinking again. I don't know how long it lasted: three, four days. On the final morning someone was at the door but I wasn't getting up for anyone.

Later that afternoon I got up, walked downstairs into the kitchen and made up some liver salts. Then I walked out into the garden and stood looking at the timber fences. I was shaking. I didn't need to check the small print I knew Norman was right, people like Norman were always right.

I got in the car and drove to the off-license.

When I got back to the house there was a hanging basket on the doorstep containing big red flowering geraniums. It was deep, with plenty of room for the roots. When I saw that hanging basket I knew the drinking was over.

I walked inside and put the bottle in the cupboard under the kitchen sink, behind the bleach and floor cleaner. I knew I would need to be careful in the coming weeks: some bad news, a phone call or three days of rain, could set me off again. I went straight to bed and slept right through to the next day.

The next morning my brother paid a visit. 'Where've you been?'

'Busy.'

'Why didn't you answer yesterday?' he said.

'Yesterday?'

'I came over ... your car was in the driveway. But you didn't answer. Then I called back and you were out.'

'Oh ... trouble with the neighbour,' I said. 'But it's sorted.'

He looked at me. 'I thought you were off it.'

'I *am* off it.'

He thought about that.

'What do you think of the hanging basket?'

'It's good,' I said. 'Plenty of room for the roots.'

'So, are you gonna thank me for it?'

'*You* brought the hanging basket?'

'Yep,' he said. 'Why, who do you think brought it?'

Paul Anthony

The Dead Counter

P JAMES O'MEARA RISES FROM A ROUTINELY DREAMLESS SLEEP AND SWITCHES OFF THE alarm at five twenty seven am just before it has a chance to wake Miriam, his wife of forty one and a half years and two weeks. He kisses her lightly on the cheek and goes to the *en suite* to do his ablutions. It is no different from any other morning: a cold water shave with his Wilkinson's Sword Single Blade (he rejoices in the fact that he can still source them on 'that eBay thing'), a splash of Old Spice, teeth are cleaned once in a clockwise motion, then twice anti clockwise with Pepsodent, then a rinse with Listerine Original Flavour.

He checks his moustache. It is not Monday so it is not time for a trim but it looks a trifle unruly which it had not been on the previous night's inspection. He dithers. A quick selective pluck with the tweezers or a more all-embracing cut with the nail scissors? He decides that he must look his best for his clients so he chooses the former and rinses the offending two hairs down the sink with the panache of a victorious boxer dispatching his opponent to the canvas.

He selects a white shirt from the six others in his walk in wardrobe (Miriam has her own) and a red tie to go with it. He dons his black non-iron trousers with grey braces, and puts on his horribly contrasting green cardigan, brown tweed jacket, and grey brogue shoes with steel heel tips both worn down on the right hand side.

A final check of the bedroom, and he creeps downstairs. The heel tips echo like those of a prison warder on the linoleum tiles of the kitchen. His cranberry juice and prunes are waiting for him in the fridge. He likes to be regular. They are prepared the previous night. It cuts two minutes and twenty seconds off his morning routine. He fills the kettle just enough

for his one cup of tea, Tetley of course, and places a single piece of bread in the toaster. He spreads the latter with Lurpak and nibbles and drinks the former noiselessly then takes his clipboard from behind the biscuit tin.

Having checked the list, he needlessly licks his pencil stub and enters the new date at the top. He will sign the bottom later.

He checks the order of the day. It is indeed in order. Order is good. He opens the front door. A glorious early sun invites him to embrace the summer, but before he accepts, he takes his haversack, packs his clipboard, his pre-prepared lunch (another five minutes and twenty seconds saved) *and* his umbrella, just in case. One can never be too sure with modern weather forecasting.

He cleans his teeth for the second time in the downstairs toilet and closes the door behind him. It is five fifty seven precisely, two minutes ahead of the previous day. It puzzles him as he has done nothing differently and vows to review his routine with his eleven o'clock hot milk and sweet digestive biscuit.

He goes to the shed and retrieves his green Raleigh bicycle with the three speed Sturmey Archer gears – three gears are plenty for anybody. He puts on the bicycle clips and does a running start, mounting as a cowboy would do with a galloping horse.

The journey to his place of employ takes thirteen minutes precisely. He parks his bike, locks it to his usual lamp post and retrieves the bunch of keys from his haversack.

Primrose Grove Sheltered Housing is always his first port of call. Each of the ten buildings has four separate dwellings. If there are no problems, he can be finished in two hours then on to Fruithill Court which has twenty seven semi-detached bungalows. This takes him a little longer.

He knocks on the first door then opens it with the key and shouts into the bedroom

“Everything alright, Mrs Murray?”

“Fine, thank you, Mr O’Meara!”

That’s what he likes to hear. He tries not to engage in any further conversation. He ticks off her name on his clipboard and moves on. In exactly two hours he is finished. It is important that he notifies the office immediately if there are any irregularities. People are waiting.

Today there are none. It is another clean sheet for the Dead Counter – the third one this week. The people will have to wait a little longer.

Susan Burke Trehy

Silver

THE SMELL OF CATS STILL LINGERS HEAVILY IN THE AIR, THROUGH IT IS SIX MONTHS SINCE they too have gone. I hold my breath for a second before exhaling slowly, trying to steady my nerves. Though it is late September, there is real heat in the sun and the hallway feels airless. I push open the kitchen door, half expecting to see her standing there, washing up at the sink or peeling spuds, pot of tea stewing on the stove, cats curling around her ankles.

The kitchen is mostly bare now, my uncles having disposed of her belongings as soon as she'd been settled in the care home – far too quickly for my liking, and I told them so.

"You're only her granddaughter – stay out of it," they said.

I step back into the hallway and open the living room door. Sunlight seeps through a crack in the curtains and I watch as dust and cat fur dance in the air, before settling again on the uncarpeted floor. Glancing around the newly bare room, my eyes settle on the thing I have come for – the photo albums. They are in a pile on the floor where once a dark wooden cupboard had protected them from prying eyes and greasy hands. She had promised me these albums since I was a little girl, back when I would sit on her lap and visit the past with her.

"That's my daddy," she'd say, pointing to a face not too far from my own, my eyebrows and nose an echo of his. Day after day throughout my girlhood we re-enacted this ritual, me and Nan, alone and happy together, until the clock struck four and my teenage uncles would pour through the door from school, loud and hungry. At five, my grandfather's key would turn in the lock, his arrival announced by a loud "Jesus Christ, it's like the madhouse here." He would laugh and scoop me up in his arms and call me his best girl, slip me sweets when Nan wasn't looking. By half past five, my parents would come to collect me, their jobs done for another day.

It is hard to believe that it's all over – our family broken and dispersed throughout

the city. She was the glue that kept us together and now she was gone, we find ourselves untethered and divided. I put the photo albums in my bag and take a last look around. Tomorrow the estate agents sign will be erected in the garden and the end of an era is heralded. I turn to leave, emotions bubbling up inside me and I am overcome by a longing for fresh air. As I turn to close the door my toe connects with something and I bend to look. It's a curler, one of Nan's. Its red spikes are stuck with dust and cat hair but underneath are the silver hairs of my grandmother. They are twisted between the bristles and the sight of them breaks me. The tears come thick and fast as I remember my own lovely Nan, curler clung to the front of her head every morning and night.

"Sure my hair sticks up on its own. I have to tame it," she'd explain.

My hand clamps around the curler and instantly I am three years old, my chubby toddler hands squeezing the spikes. I slip the curler in my cardigan pocket, pick up the photo albums and let myself out the front door, pulling it gently shut behind me. I walk in the sunshine away from the house, a faint smell of cats following behind.

AJ Black

She Hates the City

SHE HATES THE CITY, AND WHAT IT HAS DONE TO HER. SHE HATES THE GRIME, THE THIN film of filth that clings to everything. Hates the fact that she can't seem to keep her fingernails clean, and the black slick she deposits in her handkerchief every time she has to blow her nose, which is often. She hates the warm fetid air of the underground – stale, unchanging, still the breath of people since dead.

She hates the streets: battling her way across the city every morning through throngs of fractious commuters, along pavements pockmarked by discarded fast food and vomit from the previous night. Sometimes there is blood – a sticky pool, still slightly wet, thick and lustrous under the new day's light, or a splotchy bruise-purple trail leading from a bus stop, or night club entrance, to somewhere she'd rather not think about.

She hates the noise, her inability to discern what people are saying to her above the throaty white roar of the city's traffic. Hates that there never seems to be a moment when there isn't a car alarm going off nearby, or too-loud music blaring out of somewhere, or people shouting at one another. Or sometimes themselves. For a week after she first moved here, she turned to look every time she heard a car horn, conditioned by years of village life to presume it was someone she knew. Her blind waves in eager response petered out in the second week with the realisation that the driver blowing their horn wasn't someone who knew her, wasn't ever going to be someone who knew her. No one here knew her. It was just a driver whose anger at the city had boiled over and found a convenient, impotent outlet.

The heat in the summer. The smell caused by the heat in the summer. The nausea and headaches caused by the smell caused by the heat in the summer. She hates it. And the food. "Delicacies from every corner of the globe," the guide books crowed. Celebrity eateries, world-renowned temples of haute cuisine, stands selling the rustic indigenous food: she'd tried them all yet still found herself feeling unaccountably hungry almost all the time.

But the thing she hates most about the city is what it has done to her, for she has joined the great mute conspiracy. The conspiracy that holds that what just happened, over there, didn't actually happen. Nothing happened. That thing you just heard, you didn't hear it. In fact, it wasn't even said. And the people you see? They aren't really there. There's no one there. The unspoken, insensible consensus: the eyes averted have it.

She stood on a beggar's hand today. She's not sure she should call him a beggar, but he was begging. She didn't mean to stand on it. Or at least that's what she's been telling herself, over and over again, since it happened. The beggar was under a covered walkway, outside a building being renovated. The walkway provided shelter from the freezing slushy rain driving into the faces of the people scuttling along outside. He was sitting on the dry pavement, his legs stretched out for comfort, one arm extended for donations. His head had slumped down onto his chest: he may have been asleep. His hand lay flat on the ground, the fingers curled slightly upward into the air in idle implore.

She'd been hurtling through the walkway, as quickly as she could go. She was late back from her lunch hour: rushing, stressed. People hadn't put their umbrellas down, even though they were under cover. At the narrowed space where the beggar lay, there had been a bottleneck and near pile up. She was right in the middle of it before she realised. At speed and with little notice, she had been forced to sidestep to avoid a collision. To retain her balance she had planted her right foot down and wide to her right. Straight at the beggar's hand. She couldn't stop herself.

Or to be more exact, she couldn't easily stop herself. Not without trying to throw her entire weight in the other direction, into the onrushing crowd. That would only have caused more mayhem, because everyone would have collided with each other, and probably crushed the beggar beneath them. And so she had just watched as her right foot plunged directly toward his hand. Weighing up the relative merits of evasive action and inaction, she had decided to do nothing. To just let it happen.

She'd felt the soft resistance of the meat of his hand as her heel sank into it, by the base of his thumb. Her ankle buckled slightly, and she tottered. He yelped in pain and pulled his hand away sharply, unbalancing her. But she managed to remain upright, stepping over his outstretched legs to carry on walking. From over her shoulder she heard him spit after her a long list of words in a language which, mercifully, she didn't understand. In that moment, she wondered if perhaps she should stop, go back, check he was alright. But what would that achieve? And what if he weren't alright? Then what would she do? Best left well alone, she decided.

She began to pick up speed again, trying to put as much distance as possible, as quickly as possible, between her and the unedifying incident. She lifted her eyes to look at the people coming toward her through the walkway. Those who had seen what had happened quickly glanced away, as if to even look at her was in some way to admit complicity. She didn't stop. She didn't turn around. She didn't even look back. She hates the city.

Dan Malakín

Calculations

I'M ON TOOTHBRUSH NUMBER THIRTEEN, BUT ONLY TOOTHPASTE NUMBER TEN. I DO THE calculations, dividing days by number of brushes, allowing for an average squeeze size.

Eventually I work out that for every ninety-two brushes I go through a new toothbrush, but only two-thirds of a tube of paste. That wastes ten minutes.

(...three minutes to brush his teeth by six years and two months and three days, which is two thousand, two hundred and fifty two days, twice per day, which is six thousand seven hundred and sixty two minutes brushing his teeth...)

I go downstairs, defrost some cheese and eat these weird freeze-dried crackers that taste of sweet powder. I have to open a new barrel of coffee, but that's ok as I still have three left. Taking into account flat spoons of fake milk, cup size and average daily consumption, I work out that I have enough coffee for another two hundred and twenty eight days. That wastes another thirteen minutes.

(...five cups of coffee a day by six years and two months and three days, which is two thousand, two hundred and fifty two days, which is eleven thousand two hundred and sixty...)

On TV I watch this thing about surveys. Apparently eight out of ten cats prefer some food or other. I remember this statistic that there are eight hundred thousand cats in England. I don't care, but I do the calculations anyway. I divide the number of meals per day, size of cat food tins, and work out that the country's cats go through three point eight two tonnes of fucking cat food a day. Another twenty-two minutes gone.

(...three meals a day by six years and two months and three days, which is...)

I switch off the TV, pace the room. A man's average stride length is two point five feet. The circumference of the world is twelve thousand seven hundred and forty two kilometres. I do

the calculations and worked out that it would take sixteen million eight hundred and nineteen thousand, four hundred and forty strides to walk around the earth. (How many steps did he take into the road?). It would take over twelve and a half billion strides to get to the moon. Three hundred and fifty billion to get to the sun.

(...how many steps did he take...)

It takes five hundred and seventy two billion gallons of crude oil to produce tires for all the cars in the country. I just can't help myself. Seven gallons per tyre. At fifty miles per hour your braking speed will be about 140 feet. How many steps did he take? A child's reaction time is three hundred milliseconds in response to an approaching object. It always comes down to this. The human eye can see a hundred frames per second.

Once again, I do the calculations.

review: Kelly Creighton

on Sifting: Uncle Ned and Other Stories

by Mike Mac Domhnaill

IN 2013 MIKE MAC DOMHNAILL WAS THE WINNER OF RTE'S FRANCIS MCMANUS SHORT Story Award, by that time he was already a poet with two fine collections under his belt: *Mac Baintri/Widow's Son* and *Macalla Maidu*. Being recognised for his poetry foremost, I was interested to see how the author would step into the short story genre, and how the fifteen stories in *Sifting: Uncle Ned and Other Stories* would work together.

Overall the book has constant themes of family, storytelling and history. The style, this will surely come as no surprise, is strongly lyrical. At times biblical. In *Uncle Ned*, the first story of the collection, the language is lilting and dreamy in a story about memory and storytelling. It appears to ask the questions: what is real and what is remembered and what is altered by being remembered? These questions could serve as a disclaimer for all the stories that follow *Uncle Ned*, and indeed all the stories we tell, and are told.

In the next, *Uncle Malachy*, it is 1973 when Mac Domhnaill's 19 year old narrator Paddy gives great insight into his uncle's thoughts on the North at the height of the Troubles when he listens to the chat of older men who have visited the family home. The stories are told in rapid span and steeped in Ireland's history and the personal histories of its people. There is comfort to be enjoyed in the warm, familiar dialogue, and onto the page oozes a great deal of humour to boot. The collection pulses with rhythm and observation, and at times you must slip in between the lines to find the story. This could have the potential of becoming a

barrier, yet, saying that, *You Give Witness* (a lilting, repetitive tale) is my standout favourite story, it is here that stream of consciousness style works at its best. I suggest you let the words wash over you and enjoy the musicality of the prose, as quite often Mac Domhnaill's language is simply delectable:

'The Golden Apples of the Sun' will bring them to the doctor's orchard, where we sported and played and rawked apples in the autumn, and then I'll string them through the demesne, 'At Swim Two Bucks', will bring them to McCann's Pool, the poor man's Ballybunion, where we dipped.

I have to admit that when I am looking for something to read I will normally opt for a somewhat 'louder' book than *Sifting*, but was surprised by how much I liked it and am delighted to have come across it. From time to time there would appear a treasure of an observation that would make me have to pause, set the book down, and absorb it, such as in the final story *One Christmas Eve*:

The head was ringing, not the bells of Christmas Day, the head was ringing out, over the turkey, the ham, the leamh taste of everything. I'm sorry there's no English word for it, you'll have to make do.

Mac Domhnaill is authoritative, concise and poetic at the same time. *Sifting: Uncle Ned and Other Stories* is refreshing and confident with a consistent voice that does not tell you the story but sings it to you. The author knows storytelling well and this collection is something of a love letter to the art of carrying a story and divulging it with heart. I can imagine Mac Domhnaill writing these tales with the intent of them being read aloud.

The poet has made his unique mark on the short story genre.

Sifting: Uncle Ned and Other Stories is published by Liberties Press, Dublin

Brian Gourley

on The House of Small Absences

by Anne-Marie Fyfe

ANNE-MARIE FYFE IS A POET AND A WRITER CONCERNED WITH PRESENCES AND ABSENCES. The trajectory of her collected oeuvre to date shows that her own highly distinctive poetic language and discourse carves itself out of the emotional and psychological vacancies that paradoxically occupy physical spaces that appear abandoned and forlorn. *House of Small Absences* is her fifth book to date: some fifty or so poems spanning a variety of locations, and touched by the lingering presence of the past, are arbitrarily siphoned off into four sections. At its heart, the book purveys a striking sense of the familiar and the alien and how they simultaneously co-exist and transmute into each other in the blinking of an eye. A poet who has exchanged the sylvan tranquillity of the Glens of Antrim for the concrete and high rise world of London, Fyfe's work shows an intimate familiarity with a wide variety of geographical milieux and an enviable ability to create a sense of place that is virtually self-constructed by the process of reading itself. Within the confines of the volume, readers find themselves transported from the streets of Manhattan to the foothills of the Romanian Carpathians: scenes range from "an orphaned snowy owl [who's] lost his night sensors' ('Carpathian Flyer') to the 'Lancia swerving closer than you'd like' (Camino Real) to 'apartments for rent in upper floors, unclaimed, tenantless,/their marble door-plaques as yet unlettered' ('Lower Manhattan')

The latter best sums up the glaring paradox that fuels this collection: that of the physical space occupied by human beings that now finds itself abandoned and alone. The collection is driven by the imperative need to recreate, or at least, to re-imagine the kinds of

lives led by the invisible individuals that haunt the pages and the imagination. For Fyfe, it is this idea of vacancy and its contingent atmosphere which becomes essential to the (re)creation of lives either lived to their fullest or constrained by circumstances. The eponymous poem of the collection cites Emily Dickinson and reveals with incremental build up towards shock the harsh reality of existence for inmates in a psychiatric hospital:
In her room at the eaves of the world/She's stuck again on the perplexity of fly papers.

The poem is fixated with the idea of fixation and obsession, with an unresolved sense of conflict between keeping memories alive and learning to let go of the past. One might be a touch fanciful and say that Fyfe is playing with being obsessed by obsession itself and fully in awe of its power to hold onto individuals in spite of their potential for damage.

Nor is Fyfe afraid to shun the domestic and the familiar for more arcane discourses. She reveals a refreshing ability to engage with the language of scientific experimentation and discovery, finding in it a way of discussing profoundly distressing personal experience. In 'Splitting the Atom', the imagery of dark matter and atomic fission becomes a conduit for the exploration of a mother's descent into the depths of depression:

Blackness that had defeated her/A corridorred room. Manicured grounds.

Yet within the apparent darkness of confinement within a mental institution, there is a moment of unexpected and surprisingly joyous revelation:

Striking out/on orbits, tangents, rewound neurons/irretrievably forced landings/on solitary uncharted dark stars.

Whereas mental illness incarcerates the physical body within a supervised space, it also has the power to liberate the imagination and to forge new ways of seeing. At their most profound, the poems invoke a sense of the random and the arbitrary, and the powerlessness of human beings in the face of unknown and immutable higher powers and this spiritual awareness is perhaps the most surprising aspect of this collection.

At its heart, this collection interrogates the concept of home and whilst acknowledging its role as a bedrock of identity and security, seems to leave the reader purposefully uneasy about its meaning and validity in an age of globalisation and dislocation, a reality that Fyfe tacitly and painfully acknowledges throughout the collection. To her credit, Fyfe resists the temptation to make 'home' a secure and settled notion, rather she earnestly acknowledges that the twenty-first century has imposed a transitory nomadism on individuals whose lives

are constantly shaped and re-shaped by ever changing circumstances and locations. Her knack is for pointedly reminding the reader of the key and salient reality that Home in the hypermobile and hyperconnected twenty-first century has become an ever more unstable and uncertain concept. The fiction of home is a cherished one, but one that Fyfe accepts is a fallible one whose comfort is at best skin deep.

For all its preoccupation with the familiar and the domestic, this is a collection that is not afraid to venture into a diverse of territories and physical spaces: within a few pages the reader travels from the Carpathians of Romania to the streets of Lower Manhattan. Fyfe's sharp eye for observation is that of the outsider's: she sees these places with a new insight and a profound acknowledgement of the complex interactions between human beings and their physical environment, whether it be rural or urban. If there is perhaps one criticism that one could level at this collection, it could be that the division into four sections seems to add no sense of added meaning, especially in a book that calls the reader to accept the reality of random dislocation and isolation. However, that is really more to do with the arrangement of the poems rather than their content and does not detract from their aesthetic achievement and vivid image. The experience of living in these poems and reading them is a simultaneously comforting and unsettling experience, and one that most certainly lingers in the reader's mind.

The House of Small Absences is published by Seren

essays

Csilla Toldy

A Meeting

I MET DAME IRIS MURDOCH AT THE AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER'S LONDON residence in the summer of 1995, twenty years ago. I was only visiting London then, aware of its pull, but not fully sure of whether I would really move there soon. The occasion was the premiere of "A Year of Birds" at the BBC Proms, Malcolm Williamson's collection of songs set to words by Iris Murdoch.

I experienced the Proms for the first time: the circular architectural shape of the Royal Albert Hall with its powerful acoustics wrapped me up into a soft ball and I was hovering in the middle of a crystalline hourglass of vibrations. When the music was over it amazed me to see Iris walking up the stage. Although she was well over seventy, she looked like a middle aged girlish woman wearing a forget-me-not printed wide cotton dress and a light blue ageless cardigan. Alice in Wonderland without the apron. The conductor Barry Wordsworth and the composer Malcolm Williamson were holding her hands from both sides. Although there was no dress code to adhere to at the Proms, the two gentlemen were wearing dark suites, and it seemed as if they were trying to keep her on the floor. She seemed to be hovering, too. The three of them bowed together in front of a full house of standing ovation.

The party was splendid, a mixture of laid-back Australian homeliness and loosened-up English eccentric snobbery. I loved it. My silver plimsolls were greatly admired.

Iris received the treatment of a queen; her translators were introduced to her. I remember an exotic lady from Israel, terribly shy and obviously overwhelmed by her fortune to exchange a few words with the bearer of that brilliant mind whose manifestations had occupied hers for infinite hours of deep study. Meanwhile, I got involved in a long and gentle discussion with a young scholar about Iris's work. He wanted to convince me that Iris was a Buddhist.

After a while I came to talk to Iris who was standing, quite lost and lonely, near the entrance. She was waving in her long dress like a flag on the beach, seemingly out of place and uncertain of her role, as if she did not realise that the party was in her honour. She looked at me with her huge dark eyes and asked me whether it had been a good party. She put this question to me with such seriousness, as if she had been blind or had not been there. It felt that she had sent me on a mission and I had to make this judgement on her behalf and inform her of my findings. I did not know anything about her illness at the time. The way she asked me made her seem like a child and I was filled with compassion. I sincerely assured her that it was a great party and I had a wonderful time. As a reply she just smiled insecurely, and I was wondering whether she had heard me at all. After a long pause she enquired who I was and I could not say much more than that I was a Hungarian writer and translator. I praised the music and her poetry, while I kept feeling that I was having a spiritual experience. There was a vast space in her that I could only feel but not comprehend and in a way I was taken beyond myself. Being with her reminded me of my meditations – when you empty yourself, stopping the chit-chat of the mind and let the powers of the Absolute, that you experience anew each time, into your being. I remembered another discussion that day with a neighbour, who had thought it strange that in Iris's novels people just appear from nowhere. For me, she was like the characters in her novels. She could appear and disappear. She was magic.

It was very late when we left with my partner and it was hard to get a taxi. We had to share it with three illustrious gentlemen who were heading to Oxford. They were to drop us in Kensington. On the way home in the crowded taxi I heard one of the gentlemen complain in plain Oxford English that "Iris was so stupid". There was desperation in his voice, but in the posh accent I seemed to be discovering a hint of triumph and male superiority, too. Well, I had been drinking, this might have just been the effect of alcohol on my sensitivity, who knows. Quite clearly, like myself, the gentleman had no idea of her condition, or if he did he showed no compassion for her at all.

Some time later Iris died and I realised what a gem this encounter had been. Only then I found out that she had been very ill, suffering from Alzheimer's, and perhaps the premier at the Proms had been one of her last public appearances.

God for the Buddhist equals nothingness. I thought, reflecting on my discussion with the Buddhist scholar at the party that Iris had been already with God when I met her. She had to forcefully drag herself back from there with every conversation. Her silences were the praying sheets that she pegged on the line, to let them wave in the wind of eternity and to caress the ones that happened to pass her.

Lucy Sweeney Byrne

Whom, Me?

I AM A WOMAN BECAUSE I WAS BORN WITH A VAGINA, AND WITHOUT A PENIS. I AM A woman because I am envious.

I am a woman because after a decade or so, I develop jellied, protruding swellings on the front of my ribcage, to give milk to any children I may bear (be they men or women). I have wide hips, to release them out, and apparently – so I am told, although I have never seen any evidence to corroborate the claims – there is a womb, a sort of soft, fleshy casing, somewhere beneath my navel. Like those made of skin, that men traveling across the desert use, to carry water, to quench their thirsts.

...Is that not how cheese was first created? Inadvertent gestation, in one of those water wombs? Milk being transported and slowly curdled by motion into solidity in a skin, secured to the side of a lolloping camel, across a desert. Perhaps that is something I have dreamt.

I am a woman, so I decide to believe it anyway, and tell it as fact at parties, swaying, lunging forward, yes, ha, me too, yes, splashing my glass towards you. Parties at which aforementioned cheese is being served in hard small cubes on platters, pierced with toothpicks, sticking out dangerously, alongside limp clusters of grapes, Lidl, and assorted crackers, fanned. You think I am talking shit, but you smile, and raise your eyebrows, and say how interesting, that's very interesting, as you picture what I would be like to fuck, back at your place, in the semi-darkness of the streetlight through your bedroom window, later.

I am a woman because you look at me. Because I want / don't want you to look at me. Yes, that's it. Just like that.

I am a woman because I grow my hair long. Because I am weak, comparatively, and have small hands and feet. I am a woman because my voice is high, and because I bleed, monthly, when unfertilised.

I am a woman because apparently I don't desire sex as much as a man. As a woman – a good woman – I am reluctant to succumb to sex. I am supposed to not so much desire sex, but love, and as a woman I am, of course, incapable of separating the two. Whatever I may say. So when on an early date, I have sex with you, after a film, lit low by a computer screen's white iTunes, playing German post-punk, on the scuffed leather couch, and you pull my hair and push down on my neck so that I am highly aroused, I am reminded I am a woman when you text me the next day to apologise, for taking advantage. I know I am a woman then because I discover, retrospectively, that I did not partake, equally, in the act of sex; I was taken advantage of. A man had sex with me. I am also a woman, because I text back, and reassure you that it's fine, I'm fine.

I am a woman because the bad words reserved for me are bitch, tramp, whore, slut and cunt. Most of these are designed to suggest that I, as a woman, give sex away to men too easily. The first one is also the word for a female dog.

I am a woman because I am forgiving. When you are kissed by a woman, not me, on a side street, under yellow light, reaching you in piercing beams, as thin and straight as rapiers, you all wrapped around her, encasing her, a new thing built, for that moment, between you. When I see that, unbeknownst to you, through passing windshield, and back again framed, in rectangular rearview mirror: Well, I don't even mention it. The next day I crunch cereal with low fat milk and read the paper and let the rage blacken the room as though I can't see it at all, not one bit, and you say nothing, and wash up my delf at the sink, shoulders hunched.

When, conversely, struck by the reality of my own wrongdoing, head-on, caught, perhaps licking lightly – as though saving dripping ice cream on a sweltering day, from the sides – all around the taut tip, of another's. In a car maybe, or, heaven forfend, sprawled out across our very own bed! Well. Around it I, as a woman, find my way. Silence, or unburial of grievances

long lain, held tight, for ammunition. Distractions, sent out at you, wild-eyed cavorting with fireworks and rockets and whistles, on the flanks of the real thing. Or I might simply poison your morning coffee.

I am a woman because I am devious. I do not like to say unpleasant things outright. I do not like violence, in words or thundering actions. I am a woman, and so you mistake this for gentleness.

I am not a man because the bad words not usually used to describe me are prick, dick, dickhead, shithead, cock, asshole, bastard, cocksucker and faggot. These words have more varied meanings than those given to a woman. None of them suggest a man gives away his sex too easily, except perhaps cocksucker and faggot, which are reserved for men who give their sex away to other men.

I am a woman because you enter me and I cannot really enter you, although I would, of course, love to. Fingers and tongues just aren't the same. Although thanks for trying.

I am a woman because things are done to me more often than I have the power to do them. I am a woman because a part of me loves this, but then I wonder whether that part of me has been made to love it. If even the love of submission is a result of submission. I wonder if being a woman is in fact not dissimilar to having Stockholm syndrome, or agoraphobia, in the face of the vast expanse of what lies outside of my control, inside the strong, hulking shape of man.

I am a woman because I love to dance at parties, and wear nice dresses, and apply red lipstick, open-mouthed.

I am a woman because I ought to cry during sad films. You would like me to, and look over in the cinema, and squeeze my hand, to make sure I'm ok. I try my hardest to oblige, but can't always manage.

I am a woman because I'm sorry when I let you down like this.

I am not a man because I am not the strongest, or the smartest, or the leader. Not really, although you might let me pretend sometimes. You might let me drive, or do better in an academic test, or you might cry in front of me, to show we are the same, that you are weak in places too. But really you are still the best one, and we both know it.

I am a woman because when I share a bed with you, you sleep on the side closest to the door, to protect me from potential intruders. This also means that you can leave with greater ease, unimpeded, in the night.

I am a woman because you pretend you want me to be more like you, but if I pretend to be more like you, you secretly hate it, and want me to be a woman again, so that you can shake your head and roll your eyes and smile at how silly I am. When you see me give directions to a tourist in the city on a Sunday, and witness me struggle with left and right, flustered, using my hands and looking up, focused on the distance, frowning, to reteach myself, again, you smile knowingly, and politely step in and take over, showing me how simple it is, and we all laugh. And as we walk away you put your hand around my waist, your little woman, and I wish my skin was made of acid, to burn you off.

I am a woman because when empathy is required of me I offer sympathy instead, because I cannot bear the pain not to be mine, for it not to all be really about me, me, me. I am a woman because although I seem as though I am caring, and willing to listen, I am really only awaiting my turn, to release upon the air one of my own red-hot, sooty grievances, from the pit within.

I am a woman because I pretend – even to myself – that I am not constantly, entirely aware of my surroundings, of a situation, of how events will unfold. As a woman, I may seem to be allowing the skein of time to unravel at its own pace, in its own direction, but because I am a woman, this is a lie. I am a woman because when I inevitably submit to being proposed to by you – the dream! – I act as though I am surprised, and, if I am very good at being a woman, perhaps even momentarily believe myself.

I am a woman because you are my man. You as a man could have chosen another woman. But somehow I am the one that you landed on, and now I must keep my eye on you, when we go out in public, to cafés, or restaurants or supermarkets. I must watch out for competitors, younger women, women with astoundingly pert breasts, or flat stomachs, or kinder eyes than mine. I must avert your gaze with my wit and beauty, the illusion of my having a special something (I in fact have nothing. We all have nothing). I must familiarise myself, casually, with the women with whom you work. I must check your emails when you're out, and go through your trouser pockets while you sleep (closer to the door).

I am a woman because you hold doors for me so that I can walk through them first. As though letting me enter and exit rooms before you makes up for coming in breathless second for everything else.

I am a woman because when I walk through doors or down streets or across pub floors to the bar, men look at my ass move up and down and side to side with the motion of my legs, to remind the other men around them that they enjoy putting their penis in and around there. I am a woman because in spite of what I say, I secretly enjoy this, and do not carry things in my back pocket, so as to ensure a clear view.

I am a woman because when I, aproned with hair tied back, ask a bulging, milky-eyed man with an off-white crusty residue at the edges of his lips, what he would like alongside his coffee, he says how about a nice slice of you, love, and nobody beats him to death, or even bats an eyelid. I am a woman because I laugh and continue to serve him, and accept the tip he leaves me. And because he watches as my ass shimmies away from his table.

I am a woman, because when my colleague who is a man strides into work and makes jokes with me about what a bitch his girlfriend is, and how he likes to joke with her after they've had sex, as though she's a whore whom he has solicited, and now wants to leave, I laugh along with him, so that he'll know I am not like her. I am not 'no fun'. So that he'll think I am an exception, a cool woman, a woman who gets it; not like those other ones.

I am a woman because the saying is me and children first.

I am a woman because I despise all other women, even my best friend, my sister, my grandmother, and especially my mother.

I am a woman because when another woman is more beautiful than me I decide that she is a cunt and I find things to dislike about her, to point out to men or dissect with other, similarly less attractive women.

I am a woman because when another woman excels intellectually above and beyond what I have achieved, or perhaps could ever achieve, I pray that she is ugly, or bad with men, or a cunt. If she turns out not to be any of these things I dismiss her as superhuman, a freak of nature, or console myself by imagining that she is secretly desperately unhappy, or unfulfilled, or psychotic. As a woman, I may try to attract the attention of her husband, or perhaps create a bond with her children, to spite her.

I am a woman because I uphold, with my life and everything in it, the truism that no woman can or ought to have it all. There must be some aspect in which a woman falls down. As a woman I am aware, publicly, that this truism also applies to men, but of course, I don't really believe it.

I am a woman because I grow dark hair on my upper lip but pretend that I don't.

I am a woman because I am a leech.

I am a woman because I eat the pears, almost over-ripe – you have bought too many and they will rot otherwise – juice dripping down my front, leaning forward, to catch, over the kitchen sink, soft, so soft I can mush them with my tongue, against the wave-ridged roof of my mouth, sucking back between my teeth, flesh giving way beneath my grip, my fingers wet, sticky.

I am woman because when I do this, when I watch the soft wet white flesh reveal beneath the skin, raw, dripping, disappearing into me, I think of rape, but I am a woman, and so I am not sorry.

I am a woman because that night you make your way into the kitchen, long after you have eaten dinner, Tesco Finest, pierce the lid, four minutes, stir, four minutes, to forage; open and closing, clicks and paces across, shifting and light thuds, and then you pause, no doubt staring at the place, the Nicholas Mosse bowl, fuchsia patterns, from my mother, by the kettle in the corner, and you say aloud, what happened to all those pears I bought, although you are not actually addressing me, or anyone, or asking at all, really, and I keep scrolling through my phone, on the couch before the television in the next room, burning, soundlessly.

I am a woman because this is all there is.

contributors

Paul Anthony's first book, *The Adventures of the Tricycle Kid* is a humorous account of growing up in Belfast in the Fifties and Sixties. He is also a contributor to anthologies such as *The Blue Hour*, *Crannog* and *A New Ulster*, and is proud to have his work featured in the *Big Issue*.

AJ Black's work can be found online at theincubatorjournal.com & spontaneity.org, in print in the NFFD 14 anthology, 'Eating My Words', and in Finnish (no seriously) at hesainprint.com. His long short story 'Nora' has just been published as a chapbook in Australia by In Short Publishing. www.ajosephblack.com @A_Joseph_Black

Susan Burke Trehy is a writer with a background in film production and teaching. Susan is completing her first novel and working towards a short story collection. Her work has appeared in Long Story, Short Literary Journal. She lives in Cork with her husband and four children. @SusanBurkeTrehy

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.

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

Tomás Dearg was shortlisted for the Fish Memoir Prize in 2013. He reworked version of that shortlisted piece at an event called 'Work In Hand' at the MAC in June 2013 that was curated by Damian Gorman. Dearg did the MA in Creative Writing at Queen's and lives in Belfast, married with two children.

Marc de Faoite was born in Dublin and currently lives in Malaysia. His short stories and essays have been published both in print and online in Malaysia, Singapore, France, and Ireland. Tropical Madness, a collection of his short stories, was longlisted for the 2014 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Prize.

Tanya Farrelly's work has been shortlisted in such competitions as the Hennessy Awards and the RTE Francis MacManus Awards. Twice runner-up in the William Trevor competition, her stories have appeared in Cuirt and Crannog magazine, among others. Her debut collection, 'When Black Dogs Sing' will be published by Arlen House in 2016.

Anne Hayden is from Cork and lives in Dublin where she works in journalism. This is her first published story.

Peter Jordan spends his time between Belfast and Donegal with his wife, three kids, Labrador and two cats. He is happiest in the summer in his bare feet. At present he is in the process of editing his short story collection for a small UK publisher. @pm_jordan.

Brian Kirk is an award winning short story writer and poet from Dublin. In April 2014 he was awarded an Arts Council bursary for fiction. His work has appeared in journals and anthologies in Ireland, UK, Germany, India and USA. <http://briankirkwriter.com/>.

Niall Kitson watched too many episodes of the Twilight Zone when he was younger. Now he writes on Technology and how it changes our lives and tries not to spend too much time curating Spotify playlists. He lives in Dublin.

Tim Laverty started in Bangor and ended up in Carrickfergus, via Brighton and Brisbane. Over the past three decades he has written poetry, prose, drama and music to some acclaim, while embezzling advice and guidance from better-known authors. Visiting <https://datsuncog.wordpress.com> may or may not make things any clearer.

Bernie McGill has written for theatre, the novel, *The Butterfly Cabinet* and a short story collection, *Sleepwalkers*. Her short fiction won the Zoetrope:All-Story Short Fiction Award. She is a recipient of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's inaugural ACES (Artists' Career Enhancement Scheme) Award in association with the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University, Belfast.

Ro McNulty writes literary and genre fiction, and has been published in markets as diverse as *Corvus Review* and *Dark Chapter Press*. He also edits *Empty Oaks*; an up-and-coming speculative zine. In the real world, Ro lives in Bristol, UK, and works in adult care services.

Dan Malakin has something like a hundred stories published online and in print, and has also been shortlisted twice for the Bridport Prize, as well as the Manchester literary prize and the Aeon Award. He is currently working on his first novel. Come say hello at danmalakin.com or on Twitter @danmalakin. www.danmalakin.com @danmalakin

Fiona O'Connor lives on top of a hill in County Laois with her husband, son, four cats and two pet mice. She is completing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. Her flash fiction is currently published in UL's literary journal *The Ogham Stone*.

Anne O'Leary is a former journalist and theatre director living in Cork. She was longlisted for the RTE Guide/Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition 2015, and has had fiction published in the Sunday People newspaper and *Spontaneity* (issue 8, forthcoming). Her blog is at www.anneoleary.com

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

Lucy Sweeney Byrne is a writer of short fiction and poetry. She has had work published in *Icarus*, *Banshee* and *Headstuff*. In the last few years Lucy has lived in London, Madrid and New York, and is presently residing in Ireland. She is persevering.

Csilla Toldy was born in Budapest. After a long Odyssey in Europe, she moved to the UK to work on films, finally settling in Northern Ireland. Her writings appeared in literary magazines, and in two chapbooks "*Red Roots – Orange Sky*" and "*The Emigrant Woman's Tale*", published by Lapwing Belfast.

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reviews: Kelly Creighton on Sifting, by Mike Mac Domhnaill
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fiction: Tanya Farrelly. Ro McNulty. Brian Kirk. Fiona O'Connor.
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