the incubator

issue 8 | fiction | poetry

the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(March 2016)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 9

(due to be published in June 2016)

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

*and **memoir** (3000 words max.)*

Guidelines are at

theincubatorjournal.com

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ISSUE 8, IN WHICH WE FEATURE POEMS, HAS COME TOGETHER AT THE SAME TIME THE Forward Prize for Poetry has started to accept submissions from online arts journals in the Best Single Poem category. Only twenty journals have been given a chance to submit, and luckily *The Incubator* is one of them. The poems in this issue are simply stunning, and choosing only two to nominate for the prize was incredibly difficult. In the end, Glen Wilson's *A Line of Hawthorns* and Fiona Smith's *Paris 10.15* stood out. We wish both poets every success.

Staying with poetry, Martelle McPartland has reviewed *The Last Fire,* a debut collection by Helen Harrison.

Anne Caughey has selected great, punchy pieces of flash, while I have chosen short stories I'm sure you will love. And Claire Savage has interviewed Donal Ryan, author of the wonderful award-winning collection *A Slanting of the Sun,* about what attracts him to short stories and the difficulties that are attached to perfecting a great one.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Donal Ryan

author of A Slanting of the Sun

IN THE WRITING COMMUNITY, ACHIEVING RECOGNITION FOR SHORT STORIES IS SEEN almost as a rite of passage before tackling a novel. This is despite the fact that both novelists and short story writers agree that creating a short piece of fiction is often more challenging than writing a book. The brevity of the work leaves no room for error and yet – the form is still irresistible to many and done well, is incredibly satisfying to both reader and writer.

Limerick-based author, Donal Ryan, is one such writer who has felt compelled to make his mark in the short story genre, gifting readers with his now award-winning collection, *A Slanting of the Sun*.

Donal has already won numerous awards for his novel-writing, including the Guardian First Book Award, EU Prize for Literature (Ireland), and Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards for *The Spinning Heart.* He's also been nominated for many more, while *A Slanting of the Sun* won the 2015 Writing.ie Short Story award at the Irish Book Awards. Having enjoyed so much success with his novels, what then inspired him to turn his hand to shorter fiction? It grew, he says, from a desire to prove himself as a writer – something most people would argue that he'd more than already done.

"The one thing I find very hard is confidence," he says. "I still don't see myself as a writer. I found I had to take on short stories for myself – for my confidence. I still get knocked down every day."

With two novels already to his name, Donal decided to pitch a short story collection to his publishers at Random House, but found the process challenging at first.

“Short stories are much more difficult,” he says. “Each story is self-contained – they’re very intense and take more out of you. I found it very hard, particularly with ideas and making each line do the work it has to do. There are no places to hide.”

Indeed, when it came to getting inspiration for his tales – which unfold in rural Ireland and are written in his trademark style using authentic Irish dialect – Donal found running the ideal muse.

“When it came to the short stories, they were very weak at first,” he says. “Then it started to be that I had to go running to get an idea. I remembered Stephen King saying in *On Writing* that ideas came to him out of the ether. I never really believed it until it happened to me, but every short story idea came to me when I was running.”

A Slanting of the Sun is subsequently packed full of contrasting tales which are at turns poignant, shocking and hopeful. Feedback from his readers, says Donal, shows a general consensus that his stories are often quite bleak. He says, however: “I see lots of happiness in my short stories, but nobody else does!”

Perhaps it’s because the characters in his tales are so deftly drawn, that their circumstances impact upon the reader more forcibly. They are, says Donal, generally inspired by people he knows, although the details of the stories are fictional.

“I always start with people I know when I’m creating characters,” he says. “I say – don’t write what you know, but *start* with what you know and write towards what you don’t know. Most of the experiences in the books I haven’t had, but the *voices* are real. I can only try in fiction to make something real.

“I kind of feel this responsibility, writing about people outside your own experience. As you write, things are revealed to you - characters generate their own strength.”

Citing some of his literary influences as Roddy Doyle and John Steinback – “he was perfect as a writer” and “cuts through everything to the very core of humanity” – Donal says characterisation is key.

“When you create a character it’s like tuning a radio,” he says. “When you find the right frequency all you do is listen. I can always spot when a character is contrived and forced.”

One of the most beloved characters from his writing to date is Johnsy from *The Thing About December,* who immediately captivated his mum and wife. Indeed, although this was the

first book he wrote, when *The Spinning Heart* was published before it, his family despaired that Johnsy would ever see the light of day. Such is Donal's power, it would seem, in creating strong, believable and likeable characters.

"In the early days I did feel like giving up," he says. "But my wife kept me going. She really had fallen in love with Johnsy – he had become real for us. We even started to kind of relish rejections. I had no idea what I was doing - I just sent manuscripts everywhere.
"*The Thing About December* was on the slush pile for about three years and *The Spinning Heart* came out first. There was a lot in the media about the effect of the economic crash and the publishers saw a gap in the market for that kind of story I suppose. My mother got very upset when *The Thing About December* was overlooked, as Johnsy felt very real."
With his dad a poet and his mum a "very tough, but fair" reader of his work, Donal grew up in a house that "was always full of books."
"My parents had lots of American books in the house and I read a lot of Steinback, but I also read Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl," he says. "The first thing I ever wrote was a story about the boxer, Barry McGuigan. It was after he lost his belt to Steve Cruz and I was traumatised because I loved him, so I wrote a story of a comeback fight where he wins back his belt, and I felt a kind of relief – a hint of the power of stories.
"I also had teachers who were very encouraging. My English teacher said on my last day of school – 'If you don't become a writer, you're a waster'!"
It was only after 15 jobs and 12 years in the civil service that Donal turned his hand to writing however, and ended up fulfilling his teacher's wish. Working full-time, he wrote *The Thing About December* and *The Spinning Heart* between 9pm and 12am each night, taking weekends off to spend with his wife Anne Marie and their two young children.
"I didn't write at weekends because it felt like work and I wanted it to be work, not a hobby," he says. "I was still working full-time for the first two novels, then I took a career break and I was totally lost for the first two months because I was so free. Then I got a job as writer in residence in the University of Limerick. It was the most amazing thing to be asked to do that. It was very important to me to be able to leave the house though, and go somewhere to write. I need the structure."
He adds that after getting "so involved with Johnsy" in the first novel, he thought using multiple voices in *The Spinning Heart* would be an easier way of writing. It would also mean

he wouldn't get as involved with any one character – "And I would tear through it and write it quickly. Each chapter was written in one go."

Donal, who has a law degree and worked for the National Employment Rights Authority until April 2014, recalls one particularly memorable moment at work after his writing took off.

"I was a labour inspector, so I had to go into court and one day the judge recognised me and forced the court to applaud me because of the Booker nomination!"

With three critically-acclaimed books under his belt, what's next then for Donal Ryan? A return to his work as a labour inspector might be on the cards, he says, after his writer in residence term is up. Or maybe more books. We'll have to wait and see...

As to the possible style of any further writing, Donal adds: "I don't feel the need to change my setting. All you're doing as writers is to cast some light, and there's an infinite amount of stories in any one place."

Interview by Claire Savage

A Slanting of the Sun was published by Random House in September 2015.

short story

Susanne Stich

Isobel's Time

A SEA OF FACES AND BODIES DISSIPATES INTO DARK BLUE, ROWS AND ROWS OF silhouettes, too many to count. At the centre of the painting a shimmer of yellow surrounds a scattering of thinly sketched lines in light blue, a hint of eyes, arms, a torso, one or two specks of gold.

He promised to make me stand out from the crowd just a little, and perhaps his painting will explain something about me. The thought of it is comforting. It fits with the silences that make up my days. I look out the window to see fragments of cloud and sky, sometimes the sun. When it rains I make an effort to spot the individual drops as they fall. I love the moment when I finally see them and can't quite believe how long it has taken me. It's incredible how many different sizes of raindrops there are.

A year ago I still rushed through neon-lit supermarkets, avoiding eye contact. Pop music played in the background. I never cried, but sometimes I wanted to. I saw the packed trolleys of families, the half empty baskets of singles. Sugar, plastic, rubbish, I thought, every time. It played in my brain like a vicious chant. When people jumped the queue in front of me I cursed at them without saying a word. The noise in my head was unbelievable. There were other voices, too. Depending on the day, they reminded me of my favourite primary school teacher or a fat and smiling Buddha. I cringed at them. They never left. Standing amongst thoughts and groceries I felt migraines take hold. Torn between philosophy and despair I was as lost as I'd been in childhood playing ballgames, piggy-in-the-middle. When I got home I was shocked by my own reflection in the hallway mirror, as if lightning had struck me. I still went back to the supermarket, twice, sometimes three times a week. Nothing stopped me for a long, long time.

Now memories lie in my head like discarded packaging. The people and places I've known, the things I've wanted, and all the sleep in between, so much sleep. And still, I'm tired all the time. It doesn't stop me wanting to bend down and pick things up. I want to do something with all this stuff, something that might be good, reduce the horror a little, cut it up into smaller bits at least. Bitter tastes run through my mouth. I move differently, don't recognize myself in the mirror straight away. I go for short walks and think about long ones I didn't take, in the past, during sunny lunch breaks, while years flowed into each other. Instead of going for walks I sat with colleagues in the tearoom at work. People showed each other photographs, somebody's trips to Thailand or Spain, the same scenes over and over. Some of my colleagues knew each other well, others didn't. The wall was covered in postcards and thank-you notes. For special occasions some of the staff brought in cakes, mostly shop-bought ones, precious few of my colleagues baked their own. I never did. We poured boiling water over instant coffee and teabags. These celebrations were festive only to a point, and still, everyone smiled. The older people were missing colleagues who had already retired.

'It used to be different here,' they said, and I wondered what exactly they meant, but I didn't ask anyone. My own conversations usually ended with a reserved smile, especially after my divorce. In the meantime, throughout the thirteen years I worked in the city library, there always was a basket with women's magazines in the tearoom. Everyone leafed through them, the same topics time and again, new beginnings, illnesses, births, separations, recipes, and so many beaming models in between.

Straight after the diagnosis eleven months ago I drank water constantly. Shortly after, on a cold spring afternoon at the stationery shop, when a sales assistant showed me different fountain pens, I started to shake all over. The central heating was on, I could tell by the dry, warm air. My body didn't notice, it felt frozen from the inside, as if all the water had suddenly turned to ice. The assistant offered me a cup of tea. She so much wanted to help. Her smile floated into the space between us like a ladder for me to climb.

‘You have to understand, I’m very ill. Before I go I want to write a few things down,’ I was going to say and didn’t. Instead I took one small sip of tea, placed the cup on the glass counter, selected a pen, paid and walked home. Half an hour later I was in bed, staring at the ceiling from under three blankets.

Now that another spring is about to start, crying is easier. Despite the new pen I haven’t written much. It would be easier had I learnt to paint or take photographs, easier still, had I learnt to talk to others more. Before I got sick I sometimes sat with colleagues or acquaintances in cafés or restaurants, having conversations that didn’t go anywhere. Every now and again the people I was with looked past me to glance at passers-by. It made me furious. This moment should be different, I thought. Everything should be different, and, regardless of how many people were sitting around me, I felt utterly alone, determined never to sit with anyone again.

Imagining bright, natural light, even as the days slowly get longer again, is by far the biggest challenge. I spend whole afternoons mustering the courage to picture such light, as if light is the only thing I should ever have pursued. I close my eyes and take deep breaths. Sooner or later I run into all sorts of obstacles. Getting ready to go requires practice. When I first started I spent weeks doubting my capacity to die. It was like trying to get past a massive, dark door. I feared that other people in other places were already more successfully dead than I could ever be. Over time, every once in a while images of light emerged like lifeboats on the horizon. I suddenly remembered moments when I lit candles as a child, alone or with others, in church or at birthday parties. Now I light them every day. Gazing into candlelight coaxes my body into believing that the pain has left to run a few errands.

I’ve been lucky. Two friends and a neighbour are caring for me. The first few hours after I was told, I didn’t contact anyone. In the middle of the night I panicked. I rang the handful of people I trust in my life. My voice sounded like a stranger’s, but they recognized me straight away.

There still are people I remember, who were important at certain times, but they don’t know about this yet. Every so often they appear in my dreams and I wake up over it. If I feel strong enough I take out the pen from my bedside drawer and add their names to a

list. Some names have been crossed out, others have exclamation marks beside them. My friend Francesca has started to contact them on my behalf. Depending on who it is, she sends letters or e-mails. Sometimes she makes a phone call. When she comes to see me, she always asks about the list.

'Any updates?'

I nod or shake my head. Francesca looks after the rest. The fact that there haven't been many responses doesn't concern me anymore. I've had some wooden telephone conversations, received the odd card or e-mail. None of them made the difference I must have believed they would make when I first scrawled the names on the list.

A couple of afternoons a week my neighbour leaves his brown Labrador with me. The dog has got used to it, he walks straight up to me on my sofa by the window. He loves it when I massage his ears. Once in a while he looks at me as if he knows every last thing there is to know about me. When I stop the massage he gives me his paw and I start all over again. Francesca took some photos of the dog's coat with my hand in it, my crooked smile and the dog's long tongue as it reaches for my face. She gave me three postcard size prints in a golden envelope. Occasionally I look at them before I go to sleep. Later, when I close my eyes, I still see them and wish the dog could be there with me in the dark.

The week before I die there is an earthquake in Japan. It is followed by a massive tsunami. Francesca's voice shakes when she tells me the news. She has been to Tokyo once and knows a family north of the city. We sit together for a while. Soon after, she goes to buy a newspaper and reads several articles to me. In the evening I turn on the TV and feel like praying, but I fall asleep before I even start. When I wake up, my friend David sits beside me.

It's hard to fathom how they manage to look after me, three people I met at different times in my life. They arrange visiting times and share a key. I hear them prepare food and tea as they help me with this ending. Sometimes I'm struck by how little they know about me, how little I know about them. They're good to me, and I need them. It's simple, and it's bigger than anything I could have imagined in the past. Now I imagine all sorts of things.

I have never been a talker, but today I say to David that I wanted to pray. Then sleep set in, the TV was still switched on. I describe what I remember seeing: devastated coastal areas, grey skies above them, snow in the distance. Pale-faced, with huge hiking boots and a navy North Face coat, my favourite foreign correspondent scrambled amongst ruins. In a special report he showed what was lying on the ground, a small, golden statue of Buddha amongst unrecognizable debris. A few yards away there was a pink skateboard, sticking out from the wreckage like a large, healthy tongue.

'And right behind me, the correspondent said, *I can smell death*.'

I hear my voice hover in the room.

'Isobel,' David says and takes me into his arms. For the time being he holds me. Soon, he will leave and paint the picture I have often imagined. He's been telling me about it for a while now. I trust him. He doesn't just dabble. He's an artist. What's more, he will look after the savings I made. I never knew what to do with them.

'Please, send them over there,' I say as reports emerge of a nuclear disaster caused by the tsunami.

David nods, releases me from his arms and clasps his hands for emphasis, as if we have just been to a yoga class together. At a safe distance, where I can see it from my favourite sleeping position, he lights a fresh candle. He sits with me for another couple of minutes, and then he goes.

In no time at all my toenails and fingernails will continue to grow for a day or two, even if I haven't finished anything. There are others like me, so many others I don't and will not know.

'The canvas is ready. And even if I add in other people, you will be at the centre,' David said before he left. He'd already bought the paints. He showed them to me, on the last day, small tubes with fancy names printed on them, Aureolin, Ultramarine, Quinacridone Gold.

Paul Anthony Corbett

Dipsotopia

‘NOT EVEN THE ONE?’ MURPH’S BROW CRINKLES IN CONFUSION.

‘Nah, I’m grand.’

‘Seriously? Not the one?’ Carroll’s eyes widen. He looks to Murph who just shrugs his shoulders.

‘I’m grand with the water tonight. Really.’

O’Neill the Barman looks up at me from his pour. O’Neill never looks away from a pour. He nods to indicate he has our order.

‘What’s up with you these days?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘It’s that one you met. What’s her name?’

Her image comes to me now. Long black hair pulled aside to reveal a tiny purple Gerbera tattoo on the back of her left shoulder; a mischievous dimple smile.

‘Molly.’

‘Molly,’ Murph repeats with an equal weight of derision and disgust.

‘And for this Molly, you’re on the water?’

‘It’s nothing to do with her,’ I lie. ‘I just don’t feel like a drink tonight.’

‘Suit yourself then.’

Carroll and Murph squirm in their bar stools before looking up to the screen above the bar. *Absolut* Premier League is on. I used to follow it but can’t tell the teams apart since they all sold their names off. We watch, in silence, the absurdity of men chasing a leather ball around a muddy field. A news ticker slices through the bottom half of the screen spewing text and images of floods and forest fires from around the globe. Carroll mutters a ‘fuck’ under his breath and swipes the images away with the back of his hand. These endless pop-ups have become the primary source of complaint for the avid football fan.

‘Was a great shame what happened to Thompson.’ Murph shakes his head.

‘A great talent, that young fella was,’ Carroll says. ‘Being kicked to death like that in front of sixty thousand. It’s just not…’

O’Neill the Barman places down two pints and my glass of water in front of us without a word.

‘Civilised,’ I add, as an image of drowning boatpeople swooshes below a dribbling winger. ‘Not much is anymore.’

It’s then I notice him staring at me from down the bar. A stocky fiftyish man; slicked-back blond hair with a dangling Elvis curl and a bulging gut propping up the bar. I’ve seen him here before, always with a pint and chaser, always hawking the locals from his perch at the end of the bar. He watches me take a sip of water before breaking out in the lecherous smile of a man who’s seen some very bad things and committed even worse.

‘Not drinking tonight, pal?’ he calls down to me.

‘Just ignore him,’ Murph whispers.

‘I said, “Are – You – Not – Drinking – Tonight – Pal”?’ Blond Elvis twists to face me front on.

‘Not feeling it tonight, no.’ I reply into my glass. I feel his gaze on me as I take another sip.

‘D’you know what I say?’

I look up at O’Neill the Barman but he’s turned his back and is fiddling with the till.

‘You can’t trust a man who doesn’t take a drink, that’s what I say.’

Saved by the bell, the football zaps to nothing and we’re plunged into darkness.

‘Another fucking blackout,’ O’Neill spits.

He places a single taper candle on the bar in front of us and lights it with a zippo. As my eyes adjust to the light, I look down the bar and make out the shape of Elvis’s square head. With his body still turned to face me, he knocks back his chaser and I feel his eyes on me. I think I hear a low growl, like a guard dog sizing up a new arrival at the gate.

‘Lads,’ I say, knocking back the remains of my water. ‘I’m off.’

*

I walk out to the blare of a siren and watch as one of the city’s privatised ambulances speeds down the street. It sways in and out of lanes before mounting the kerb opposite and narrowly missing an old woman who just about manages to shift herself out of the way in time. The ambulance wails past me, its siren fading into the balmy night.

Eyes on the ground, I make my way down George’s Street.

‘Spare change.’

It’s more a demand than a question. I ignore the skeletal beggar and keep walking. He takes a swig from his cider flagon and lunges forward to spray it on my back. I turn back to tell him where to go but there, stepping out of the pub, is Blond Elvis. He looks up and down the street before spotting me. His face breaks out in that hideous smirk again and he marches down the street towards me, ostrich legs somehow supporting his monstrous belly.

I chance a dash across George's Street and jump clear of a hackney with his foot on the pedal. Smog clogs my lungs and I cough a right on Exchequer Street before taking a quick left down Dame Court. Veering off the main streets is risky but I need to get to Tara Station by the quickest route. If last night's storm hasn't banjaxed the signals, the trains will still be running and I won't need to walk the five miles back to Molly's.

Back to Molly's. Back to her tiny, perfect flat with its bumpy floor and fridge magnets of all the places she tells me we'll visit someday. Like the sprawling Tuscan vineyards or the majestic Norwegian fjords and we go silent as we both know these places don't exist like in the pictures anymore, but neither of us wants to say it and break the spell. And the art. Molly is the only person I know who still has art. I see a blood red sunset over calm waters hanging proud and centre above her bed, before a low groaning noise turns my head. In behind a skip, a half-conscious man is propped up against the wall, his head slipping down and jerking back up violently like a worn-out Japanese commuter. Straddled on top of him, gyrating nonchalantly, is a middle-aged woman with spiky peroxide hair.

'Wanna go next, love?'

I keep walking.

'Just 20 yo-yos for you sunshine,' she laughs. 'Special rate.'

Blond Elvis steps into Dame Court. I sense it before looking back to see him following in my steps. I quicken my pace but resist the temptation to run, to draw attention to myself. I reach the narrow alleyway which leads to Dame Street and pass a man in a grey hoodie bent over a wheelie bin. As I approach, he looks up at me with a rolled-up fiver still stuck up his nose and blue powder speckled around his nostrils and upper lip.

'Here, take this.' I place a tenner in his hand and he looks at me confused.

'Listen bud, I'm not into…'

'No. Just slow him down for me will you?' I point at Blond Elvis before darting down the alleyway and out into the chaos of Dame Street.

*

A crowd has gathered round the front of the old Central Bank, the main walkway into Temple Bar, or the Diageo Entertainment District as we now have to call it. A digital image blankets the building's façade and I look up in time to catch a wink off a 150-foot bikini-clad model holding a pint of stout. She takes a generous slug before wiping the froth from her mouth and breaking out in a winning smile. Below her a group of forlorn-looking illegals are being prodded into the back of a Paddy Wagon by a few Guards backed up by a dozen or so members of the Dublin Defence Force. Most of the DDF lads look like they've a few years of school left in them. They wear Dublin-crested sky-blue shirts and swill cans as they shove the immigrants into the back of the van.

There's not a snowball's chance I'm heading anywhere near that commotion or through Temple Scar, where the Ferals roam in packs and will pull a blade on you for the craic and a bit of loose change. I turn right and head towards College Green instead. Looking back, I see Blond Elvis a hundred yards or so behind. He seems happy to keep his distance but stays close enough to keep me in his sights. He shoulders a staggering drunk out of his way without breaking stride.

As I look forward again, I stumble over a black rubbish bag someone has dumped on the footpath. Broken bottles and used needles spill out and a cheeky fox scampers over to investigate. He scans me for a second before turning his nose back to his loot. I steady myself and pick up the pace across Trinity Street and onto College Green. Two helmeted and heavily armed Guards protecting the recently erected statue of our long-standing Taoiseach-Uachtarain turn to watch me walk past and I slow my pace. They'd love any excuse to try out their new Russian sprayers on anyone they felt posed a threat to the 60-foot tribute to our dear leader.

I boot across the street at the lights just in front of Trinity Technological College. A student protest has gathered just in front of the main gates and a group of excited-looking Guards are standing nearby and readying their batons and Tasers. I consider diving in amongst the students for cover, but it won't be long before a ruckus kicks off and I don't

fancy being thrown in the slammer with the crusties and illegals. I opt instead to keep walking around the perimeter of the college and, looking back, I see Blond Elvis hasn't given up the chase. He still wears the same sadistic grin, the kind of smirk you see on a wicked child with a fondness for amateur insect dissection.

I follow the railings around to the top of Pearse Street, stepping over fresh pats of puke and ignoring the glares and yells of the dealers and scammers. I pass the old Screen Cinema, now DDF headquarters for the city centre. A massive sky-blue flag with the *Ath Cliath* crest blows in the breeze above the grey building and a big unit in blue watches my every step from the front doors.

It's then I hear his footsteps approach. I look back. He's moving in. Elvis's head is tilted down. He's so close now I can make out darker roots sprouting from a red raw scalp. I try to quicken my pace again but the path is crowded and I get stuck behind a swaying shirtless man. Blond Elvis is so close now, almost within arm's reach. I look to my left and see the entrance to Pearse Street Garda Barracks and decide to do something I never in my life thought I would. I voluntarily walk below the gaze of the CCTV cameras, through the metal detectors and on through the final steel doors of the Guardians of the Peace.

*

'Tell us why you're here.'

'There's this man. He's after me.'

The two Guards standing over me share a look. One's a beast of a man with a thick northern accent, the other a lanky Dub with hollow cheeks who could easily be mistaken for a junkie if it weren't for the uniform.

'And what does this man look like?'

'He's a big fella. Blond. A fierce look about him.'

The Beast nods to the Dub who disappears out of the interrogation room and I realise that, yes, it is an interrogation room. Four bare stone walls narrow in on a single table and two opposing chairs. I sit facing a metallic door with only a small rectangular mesh for a window. It's as I ponder the stupidity of my decision to walk into this place that the Dub returns to the room just ahead of Blond Elvis who casually takes the seat directly facing me. I instinctively fly back out of my chair and up against the wall, which causes the Beast to break out in a snigger. Blond Elvis reaches into his pocket and takes out his wallet.

'Inspector Hurley.'

He shows me the ID to prove it and the other two Guards struggle to contain their laughter. The Dub walks over and sits me back down at the table.

'But why?'

'Why what?' The laughter stops and Hurley grows a foot in his chair.

'Why were you chasing me?' I say, the volume having fled from my voice.

'I did not *chase* you, pal. I followed you.'

I look over to the Beast and then to the Dub, but they're stone cold now. I shiver as Hurley continues.

'Tell me. Why were you on the water this evening?'

'Sorry?'

'Have you a hearing problem, pal? D'you need me to repeat the fucking question?'

'No. I…'

'You what? Your two mates were drinking, why not you? Why go to a pub if you're not having a drink?'

'No, I just.'

'You just what? You just don't want to support Barman O'Neill? A small business

owner struggling in these challenging times?'

'I don't know what to say, I…'

Hurley turns to the Beast. 'Who'd you say, Sergeant McLaughlin, doesn't take a drink in this day and age?'

'I'd have to say, terrorists, Inspector.'

'That's right, Sergeant. Wanna find the terrorist in a bar, look for the man sipping water. Isn't that so, Sergeant Coyle?'

'Sounds 'bout right to me, Inspector,' the Dub replies through a wicked grin.

'Terrorist? Jesus no, you've got it all wrong.' The three Guards watch me expressionless, waiting for me to dig my own grave.

'Look, it's a girl. I met a girl.'

Hurley smiles up at the Beast before turning back to face me.

'Tell me about her.'

'She doesn't drink, doesn't like it when I come over reeking of it.'

Hurley glares at me without a word for a few seconds.

'And tell me, what's the name of this young lady friend of yours?'

'Why do you want to know her name?'

Hurley tilts his head down and an Elvis shadow creeps across the table towards me.

'I would hope,' he says, 'that you are going to cooperate with us, pal.'

'I just don't see why you need to know her name. It's not important.'

'I'll decide what's fucking important,' Hurley screams as he shoots up from his chair.

I wipe spittle from my face and brave a look up from the table to meet Hurley's eyes, which boil with a primal rage.

‘I’m sorry, but I cannot tell you her name.’

Hurley looks at me for a moment without expression before breaking out in a grin and then an ear-splitting laugh.

‘Did you hear this, lads?’ He looks around to the Guards standing behind each of his shoulders. ‘He’s not gonna tell us.’

The three of them laugh now, none louder and more manically than Hurley. The Beast pulls a hipflask from his inside pocket, takes a quick slug and passes it to the Dub and then on to Hurley. I know what’s coming. There’s only one way this will go. I think of Molly, propped up on one elbow in her tiny single bed, scanning me with that mischievous grin. I reach over and touch her face, drawing a line with my finger down the groove of her dimple. Three shadows creep up the table towards me. She takes my hand in hers and I move my face in closer.

Below the painting of a blood red sunset over calm waters, as three shadows bury me in darkness, I draw Molly close and kiss her with all the life I have in me.

Mary O'Donnell

I'm So Lucky

GALO AND ME HAVE MADE OUR WAY HOME FROM THE TOWN'S NEWEST WATERING HOLE, the Bogoda Bar, which describes itself in the local paper as

"A MEETING POINT FOR ALL THINGS LATINO —
MUSIC, DANCE & THE BEST OF VINO!"

Someone had hung castenets — *castanets!* — on the walls, along with pictures of flamenco dancers, and posters of bulls. I liked one framed black and white photograph which showed the horses of Argentina being ridden by gauchos with wicked looking little spurs flicked like scorpions' tails at the backs of their boots. But I'm disappointed. I'd expected tangos, at the very least, even if Galo and I wouldn't have dared to try and tango. It would have been nice to watch. Instead, it was pretty much the usual pub scene if you forgot the posters. People sat and drank, with some flamenco music playing very low in the background.

So we stumble out into the night and head along the canal towpath, taking the shortcut home. There's an unseasonal fog, and it's so chill our breath creates new swirls within the fog, and every inhalation is like a ragged drag on the lungs. I've lost my key and we need to get back to the house to find the spare which is kept in the back garden on a narrow ledge beneath the coal bunker lid. This means we have to scale the back wall. Galo shivers and whacks his upper arms as he tries to warm himself in the freezing night. Even the swans are curled up, their heads and necks tucked back in a sinewy letter U that ends just beneath the edge of the wing. He's always complaining about the damp of Ireland. For a

man who's survived winters from hell this surprises me. I pause for a moment and tighten the neck scarf on his short, Armenian neck.

The back wall is studded with broken glass embedded in concrete but as we make our way along the canal, all things seem possible. We've faced down worse than a jagged wall. But Galo is as bad for me as I am for him, and sometimes we make unpredictable decisions. We also attract attention in a town where Galo's red jeans, and his orange and blue bandanna stand out like bleeding wounds to masculinity. None of the men around here wear colours like that, so they have it in for him when I'm not around. I'm his lucky talisman, his girl, I stand between him and all harm as he survives in these backwaters.

We find a bin and Galo hoists me onto it, we're breaking our sides laughing at nothing but trying to stay quiet, shut de fuck *up* Maree he tells me in his heavy accent. It's amazing how the most un-fluent people can swear fluently in virtually any language, I think, trying hard not to laugh, but once on the bin I have to get onto that wall. I'm taller than Galo so it's obvious it has to be me, the giraffe with the llama I tell him, both of us with long necks and backs but my legs are longer than his. I glance down at his stolid body, its chaos of hand-scissored steel-grey hair that never lies down even when there's no wind, and I wish he was the one doing the manly thing, trying to scale the wall to see what's possible and what isn't.

It's how he's spent his life, wandering between the possible and the impossible. Back in his own country he got himself raped when he was fifteen, which makes it sound as if it was his fault and it's not what I mean. One night a man he didn't know asked him to carry a load and said he'd pay him. Galo, a village boy, took him at face value, but soon discovered the hard way that the load wasn't cases and bags, it was this big dangling scrotum and in no time at all he'd twisted Galo's arms behind his back, threw him over the bonnet of a car inside a rusty open shed, and broke him. The muezzin was calling out just then, he told me one night as I held him in my arms, kissing him to calmness on his forehead and temples, and a rooster was asserting itself among a bunch of chickens in a coop, so nobody heard his screams. He needed surgery afterwards. The doctor was not sympathetic and didn't use enough anaesthetic. Galo says the man looked at him as if he'd brought it on himself, or had wanted this. It was weeks before he could go to the toilet properly. His parents would look

strangely at him, wondering why he was pale, and when he said he was constipated, they offered him stewed figs and senna leaf.

Mostly, Galo and I hang out because we treasure one another's company. And treasure is the word. There are friends and friends, and on the matter of friendship I've ridden the rainbow of colours. Galo's at the high end, almost beyond colour, he's that pure. Let's just say, all things considered it's not every girl he takes to. And I'm so lucky it's me.

So here I am with the triangles of glass glaring at me beneath a street light, like crooked teeth dying to gouge my flesh, and I have to lift my bony knee and angle it to find a resting place on the wall so that I don't damage myself. Then I haul Galo up, feeling his wiry wrists, God the strength of him despite his stature. Before long we're both precariously balanced, our knees are splayed, arms stretched awkwardly, heads facing one another, and we're like two cats, what with his striped canvas coat and my furry hoodie.

Getting down the other side isn't a problem. There's a bench which the landlady Mrs. O'Loughlin set in concrete at the bottom of the garden many years ago, perhaps when she believed tenants would take an interest and sit out of an evening to admire the view. There isn't a view as such, just the house itself with its white, peeling paint, and the neighbours' wandering shrubs from both sides which sidle down into our garden. Neither Galo nor I is interested in planting geraniums and nasturtiums, but we mow the lawn to keep the peace. Mrs. O'Loughlin can't stand us but can't throw us out as we haven't broken any contract. It took her a while to get the measure of me, her eyes running over me every month when she called for her rent, staring — initially mystified, then later, critically — at my clothes, my hair, my high heeled shoes. I go nowhere without heels, which is why they're caked with muck by the time we get home. She's dying to pass some remark every time she sees me, but doesn't dare, because she's not one hundred per cent sure of her ground. Even so, she'll shove the rent up first chance she gets.

Tottering around the back garden, I suddenly start to feel sick but manage to control it. I'd love to be able to say it's my time of the month, but I can't say that. I mixed grape and grain, that's the problem. Galo steadies me, his arm around my shoulder for a moment. Then we check out the coal bunker, lift the lid carefully, feel around in the dark. It's not there, Galo hisses. I open my phone and switch it on to throw some light. He's right. There is no spare key. Where the fuck is it, I whisper. Relax Maree, we are not thieves he says calmly. Then we both stare at the downstairs toilet window. For once, it's closed. Galo normally

leaves it wide open, despite my admonishments, but this time it's fixed tight. I glare at him. Now I'm worried about having to spend the night in the open, we'll catch our deaths from the damp air rising from the canal. Already, we're dripping with a mixture of mist and sweat. There's nobody we could ask for shelter, and the neighbours, though civil, ignore us.

We're going to have to break a window, I tell him. We can't do that, he says. I can see the whites of his eyes as he scans the patch of garden with its high walls and impossible catty odours. Seems like every cat in the neighbourhood chooses to mark its territory here. I look up at the sky as I realise the fog has cleared. A wind has blown in from the west. Now there are drifts of coppery clouds, and a few tossed stars. Nearby, someone's burning coal, the mephitic odour is catching my throat, and someone else has passed by on the other wide of the wall eating chips. I can smell the vinegar and my belly is aroused, imagining a paradisal feast of chips and battered chicken, just the thing for Galo and me if only we could get into the house.

Nothing for it, I tell him. Use your elbow on one of the small panes. I cannot do that, he protests, agape, flexing one of his heavily quilted arms as if examining it. He fancies himself in the striped canvas coat and is afraid of ripping the fabric if he elbows the glass. We can't use a stone, I say. Too much noise. He stares at me. And I'm not doing it, I tell him just to clear up any ambiguity. He sighs and looks at the ground as if considering, then starts to breathe in and out, heavily, like one of those Japanese guys about to smash through twenty layers of concrete with the side of his hand. Okay so, here goes, he says, lunging forward rapidly and bringing his elbow against the glass with a strength that sucks my breath away. It isn't a clean break so much as a significant crack, enough for us to push and wiggle the glass until finally a large piece comes loose from the putty and falls into my hand. I throw it inside the house, where it drops more or less soundlessly onto the brown carpet of our living-room.

Hey, we're in, Galo cheers as he lands neatly on the floor. His automatic fear of authority means he doesn't like to attract attention. Ironic really, given the get up of him. I've tried to take him in hand and occasionally suggest a trip to the better class of charity shop to tone his appearance down a little. How about a simple navy fleece, I suggest, or how about these jeans? But no, he will bargain and haggle in George's Market on trips to

Dublin, and comes home with an exotic array of colour and texture that won't work this side of the Bosphorous.

Immediately he sets to looking for a strong piece of cardboard to replace the broken glass, emerging from his bedroom a few moments later with something from the bottom of his wardrobe, where he hoards everything. His room is tidy compared to mine. The bed is made and there are no clothes lying on the floor. His fur coat is hanging from the door of the wardrobe. Those who can afford it like to wear fur in the Armenian winter, he once informed me, which was why he bought this squirrel coat in a charity shop. He likes the notion of being able to afford his own fur now that he's in Ireland, oblivious to the fact that he's now a marked man locally.

His small plastic holdall is packed and zipped. No reason why it should be, but occasionally he considers moving on, fleeing. I tell him he's in flight from himself but he smiles and says he wouldn't want to leave me behind. Even so, the plastic holdall stays. He's like one of those pregnant women who pack a small case months before they're due to give birth, so as not to be caught out at the last minute. He rarely enters my room, disliking the untidy boutique appearance of it, endless dresses and skirts draped on hangers, and often strewn across the unmade bed. I never sleep without having planned my outfit for the next morning, having checked the weather forecast beforehand. He doesn't have to plan his, working in a burger bar. Every evening, he carries in the smell of deep frying and garlic and sauces, it's in his hair, on his skin, deep in the fibres of his clothes.

We're hungry. Galo phones up the local pizzeria and orders in. I've put a match to one of those instant fire bricks and there's a pleasant glow in the hearth. Later, we'll add the dried out wood we've been collecting since summer, stacked it in the kitchen until needed. I change into a matching green and silver maxi dress and shawl, anything to shed the now filthy jeans, the frilly blouse (which ripped as I was clambering the wall), the fringed suede jacket. Taste counts. Even so, I'm not immune to the sniggers that come after me, or the brazen grins of teenage boys down in at the canal lock, the sniggering guff of them, the howya Marees that come from their mouths.

We enjoy library evenings. The people who attend readings and presentations know to keep their looks to themselves, to concentrate on whatever author has been rolled out for the evening. They are the town's finer spirits, largely female, with a sprinkling of cultured men thrown in to run things. I think writers stabilise Galo and me. In their presence, we can

think of higher things. We can make our own minds high like great floating sheets attached with silken cords to our feeble bodies, and consider how lucky we are. Well, I sometimes think I'm lucky, without actually believing in luck. I have a home and I have a companion and I can lead my life as I wish. When we leave the town library, it opens onto a tree-sheltered square. It's safe and quiet, and it doesn't attract the lower elements.

I collect welfare every week, ignoring the talk in the queue, the worst of it unrepeatable even with so-called professional people also queuing, but when I get to the top the woman on the other side is polite and businesslike and often smiles at me. I mean, she really smiles. And that's another reason I think I'm so lucky. There are people like her, gentle islands floating around all the time. It's just a matter of picking up the current that leads you to the right shore.

The doorbell rings and I say I'll get it. I open and the delivery-boy looks me up and down before handing over the pizza. But he isn't thinking anything. He's just looking, the way boys do. I pay him and add a tip. He thanks me. Thanks Mrs, he says. Thanks Mrs! Why do you smile, Galo enquires as I enter the living-room with two plates in one hand and the pizzas in the other. Ah it's nothing, I tell him. I'm in a good mood I add. And it's true. Sometimes the booze sends my mood up rather than down. I've sobered up, but I'm content in myself.

What's on Netflix, Galo asks suddenly, his mouth stuffed with pizza. The smell of cheesy garlic has filled the room and our bellies are tightening too and it's a glorious feast. We drink tumblers of cold water to wash it down, then Galo raids the fridge and finds a slab of salted caramel chocolate, which he breaks up into rectangles and puts on a plate beside us. We'll have to get another key, I say anxiously, dreading another encounter with Mrs. O'Loughlin. I'll deal with her, he says, anyone can lose a key. I guess so, I mutter, but I'm doubtful about how she'll view it. She imagines everyone wants to break into her precious property to squat. Once they're in, they can stay for three months and it's legal, she once told me when she was talking about security and locking windows. You can't get them out, it's terrible what happens to decent people like us, she said, staring at me vehemently as if I was a squatter. But I knew what was on her mind. Why she felt herself victimised in some way. She thought I'd taken advantage. Pulled the wool over her eyes the first dark night she met me when I wanted to view the place.

We settle down and watch Christmas with the Kranks. Galo loves that sort of thing. It's only the end of September and the trees are mostly still green but already he's looking forward to an Irish Christmas again. He thinks Jamie Lee Curtis is hot. Yeah well, I tell him, I guess they don't make them like that in Armenia. I think she's just okay, but then I'm not a man, am I?

When the movie ends Galo is still chortling to himself. It's time for bed, like it's four in the morning and tomorrow is welfare day for me. I can't be late. It's been a while since Galo invited me to his room, but he does it now. I'm not sure I want to go. He can be very equivocal about things. Does he or doesn't he want to make love? And how does he want to make love? He can't decide, but he always treats me gently, he doesn't lash out like some might do, he can forget about everything that defiled him, because he knows I won't harm him.

I agree to go with him. I undress him slowly, peeling the hoodie that was beneath the canvas jacket, peeling the green sweatshirt beneath that, and the blue vest beneath that again. He's always cold. I've told him he should get his bloods checked, but he won't do that. He's afraid of what it might show, although that's neurotic of him. He doesn't want doctors and nurses hovering, taking decisions, referring him God-knows-where. And then I unbuckle his jeans and remove everything else, even yanking his socks off, catching them by the toes.

By now, his nose is moving gently along my collarbone although I'm still fully clothed. He enjoys that part of my anatomy, tells me it's a piece of bone sculpture. He's like an animal on the scent, checking me out. It's familiar, this routine, and I remember the last time, about six weeks before, how long it took him to even remove my top, to allow his eyes to look. There are no scars. My breasts would be the envy of most women.

We always stop right there. He doesn't go below my waist. We move furiously against one another now, and perhaps this friction is as good as it gets, the gripping of one another's thighs, his hoisting me against him, the release of odours as we grow warm, the sweet, refined humanity of it. This satisfies him. I learned quickly to control myself, that it was a small price to pay. Once, when I began to lift my skirt, to draw his hand down, he reeled back. He could not bear the sight of me, my unconcealed delight in him. He did not — at that moment — trust me enough to believe that I want rid of it, that I am his, that a time will come when all things are possible, and he need no longer be afraid when we live together as man and woman.

Niamh MacCabe

Hirundo Rustica

HE FLIES TEN THOUSAND KILOMETRES FROM THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE. HE COVERS

nine hundred metres every minute. He is heading north, his pointed wings beating seven times per second. Just eighteen centimetres long and weighing twenty grams, he feeds on the wing, beak gaping open. His cream body and shimmering dark blue breast band reflect in the lakes and rivers below as he swoops to drink. His long, deeply forked tail skims the surface of the water when he rises back into the air, his cinnamon-tipped head always pointing towards home, his second home, his breeding ground, his purpose.

He arrives in late Spring, flying straight into the old stone barn he left seven months ago. His mate will join him here in two weeks. After raising their young, they will make the ten thousand kilometre journey back south in early Autumn, when the weather turns.

He won her favour several breeding seasons ago through an elaborate display of circling flight and song. They are now paired for life, reuniting at this exact spot every year, she always two weeks behind him. Their neat, cup-shaped nest has been constructed mostly by her, using mud carried in her beak. The interior is lined with soft grasses and feathers. They will use this same nest every season, repairing it together when necessary. This will be established as their territory. They will defend it aggressively, not allowing any intruder to come within six metres squared of their home. She will lay five red-spotted, white eggs, and will incubate them for two weeks, at which point the tiny helpless nestlings will hatch. As soon as they are able to maintain their own body temperature independently of her, she will join her mate foraging for food. Three weeks after hatching, the young will fledge,

though they will continue to rely on their parents while they learn the art of flight, and feeding on the wing.

She returned home for lunch as she had promised him. The car wheels crunched the golden gravel when she turned up the driveway. She winced and slowed down to blur the announcement of her arrival. She stopped in the enclosed courtyard, where the large two-storey house on the right faced the old stone barn on the left. Turning the engine off, she remained in her seat, insulated. She looked at her house.

The old Georgian windows laid out in perfect symmetry had charmed her when she bought it with her husband five years ago. Now, as she stared at them through her child's smudged handprints on the windscreen, they looked pretentious, their useless outdoor shutters stiffly folded up into themselves like ancient bat wings.

She thought of him within, in the kitchen, at the back of the house, waiting excitedly for her midday return. He would be preparing a fresh salad for them both, using sparse cherished leaves harvested with childlike pride this morning from his newly planted organic patch.

Uncharacteristically, the large front door was agape. In the silence punctuated by the cooling ticks of her car engine, she heard him call their child. His voice sounded strained, tired, and, something else. She closed her eyes in shame when the thought came to her; his voice sounded grating. She fought the small irritated flutter rising in her throat. He called again, louder this time, his plea an accusing beacon reaching out from deep within the old house. Then she heard her child's voice. He was quietly singing to himself, ignoring his father, his warbling getting closer, was he in the front hall? Had he seen her car? Was he coming out to her, all loud delight, all questions and pleas, all small clutching arms and sticky pink cheeks reaching up to be lifted and embraced?

In one swift move, she found herself getting out of the car and running to the door of the old stone barn, not knowing why, just knowing she needed to hide. She stooped into the dark mustiness of the barn. Its door was permanently ajar, the rusty hinges having locked in place years ago. Her heart was beating fast. She felt ridiculous as she struggled to calm her breath. She muttered, berating herself,

‘What the hell am I doing in here? What the hell is wrong with me? Get back out there, you idiot!’

She burrowed deeper into the darkness.

She had entered into the swallow’s territory. His mate safely hidden inside the nest with their unhatched eggs, he silently observed the intruder from his perch in the rafters.

Through the old barn’s broken door-frame, she peered at her home, into her hallway, waiting for something, she wasn’t sure what. Heavy with inexplicable dread, she brought her hands to her face. With that, the swallow swooped.

A loud ‘churee! churee! churee!’ echoed around the dank barn as he dived at her, skimming her hair, banking just beyond her shoulders, turning and attacking again. Terrified, she flailed her arms and sank to her knees in a self-protective, submissive pose. Glancing up and seeing the little swallow, she filled with anger, humiliation and resentment.

‘Get the hell out of here, you little shit!’

She grabbed a wooden handle left against the wall and swung at the flying bird who deftly outmanoeuvred the blows, diving at her relentlessly. She spotted the cup-shaped nest above, implanted where a roof beam was attached to the wall. Teeth bared, she hit out at it but the wooden stick bounced violently backward off the hard beam. The swallow, with frenzied alarm calls, hovered around his nest, his wings flittering specks of dried mud down on her. His little cream body received the next blow, sending him in a fluttering spin towards the open barn door. He flew out into the courtyard, a broken staccato of chaotic wingbeats.

Shocked, spent, horrified at her own rage, she watched him with guilt and regret as he spiralled wildly between the exterior walls of the old barn and the house, loudly remonstrating. Just as it appeared his outrageous circling was regaining him his sense of place, one of his flight arcs directed him straight into the open front door of the house. She let the stick fall from her grip. Above her head, the female swallow remained quiet in the nest, listening.

The child heard his father calling him back to the kitchen but felt a surge of unfamiliar excitement when he chose to ignore him. He quickened his step. Singing to himself, the four-year-old turned the corner into the wide Georgian hallway, the space his father referred to as the 'foyer'. He noticed that the front door was open. This stirred nervous unease in him. He knew his father would ordinarily never allow him near an open front door unsupervised. Pausing to consider it, he still registered his father's persistent calling in the background and now found comfort in it. As he stood there, a small dark shape whirred in through the open door, screeching furiously.

The father left his salad efforts on the polished concrete worktop to go in search of his son. He felt a small annoyance at having been ignored but his love for the child blunted all sharp edges. He couldn't bear to have him out of his sight for long, though he knew no harm could come to him within the walls of the house. He had childproofed it on an industrial scale, reviewing his efforts every few months to stay one step ahead of his son's development, and yet he still needed to see him before he could be at ease.

He followed his son's footsteps. As he turned the corner, he saw the bird swoop in through the front door, and attempt to circle in the confined space.

Frightened and disoriented, the swallow bashed his wingtips ferociously against each hard surface until he flew head first into the wall beside the child and fell in a soft heap at his feet, beak gaping open.

'Don't touch that!' he roared as he saw his son reach down to the wild bird.

But the child only saw a frightened thing, a soft thing, a small thing, a lovely thing. He scooped it up into his chubby warm palms.

'S'okay Daddy, see, t'won't hurt ya.'

He held the dazed bird to his chest and looked up at his father.

'Doesn't belong in here, Daddy.'

The child walked purposefully towards the forbidden open front door with his prize.

He watched his small son stop at the threshold, unfurl his grip, and fearlessly release the bird back up into the sky. The swallow flew freely and without injury, stuttering chirrups, delighting the child with aerial acrobatics right above his head. He laughed and clapped and cheered his bird on, his little arms reaching up towards him. From a distance, he heard another cheer and saw his mother walk out of the dark barn towards them, red-faced, arms outstretched, jubilantly cheering him, cheering the bird, cheering them all.

Gareth Fox

Landmarks

TO BE HONEST, I HADN'T EVEN NOTICED THE FOREST UNTIL TWO WEEKS AFTER I MOVED into my friend's house. It's my fault – I've been short sighted about the whole move. I lived somewhere else before – which is quite an obvious thing to say, actually – but now things are completely different and I'm only very slowly coming round to the idea that this is my lot.

One afternoon, while sitting at the kitchen table, my friend asked if I wanted to go for a walk. Yes, I said. I didn't even change my clothes. I just said yes, I might like that. And after a quick discussion about who was taking whose keys or if we could maybe dare leave the door unlocked, I went out with him.

I didn't enjoy it, not one bit. I had assumed we were going to walk on the footpath for a little stretch then cross over and return. I was wearing the boots I had bought in France, you see; they were quite expensive, but the man at the market had guaranteed that I would get three winters from them. They have lasted six because I don't wear them that often, actually. They have quite a substantial heel and given that I am already somewhat tall it doesn't feel very pleasant to overwhelm people. Having to hunker down, from time to time, is no agreeable pastime, if you must know, and I'm quite often alarmed when I catch sight of myself in the window of a shop, walking with someone else. But again, given that I don't wear them that often, I've still managed to make holes in the bottom and in damp conditions my socks generally become sodden and foul. So when my friend said that we would walk in the forest, I immediately regretted wearing my boots – which aren't in any way French, by the way. I looked them up because I wanted to buy another pair and it seems they are from Spain. And having just looked at the right one now, it is clearly marked on the sole 'Made is Spain'.

Yes, I immediately regretted going there with my friend. I wanted to explore it myself, you see, I wanted to explore it myself and get right into all it's dirty secrets, but I couldn't. I wasn't dressed for it. I was wearing my boots and all I could think about was having to slowly feel the damp setting in on my socks. And then how long would he make me walk like that? I wouldn't tell him about my socks. No, I wouldn't want to sound amateurish about the whole thing. But really, what irked me deep down is actually very hard to explain. I tried not to look at the forest, but it didn't matter, I knew something had already gone; my first experience of this forest had been defiled. I can't get that back, and what I experienced had been contaminated by his pointing to this and that, offering me the landmarks of his own journey.

Forests are incredible things in that they conjure such surprising upheavals in people. I've never known anyone to return from a forest and not have some half-stolen sentiment to share about something or other they felt or thought-up – I find it all very amusing. Damp air and unreliable light have a lot to answer for, if you ask me.

I've been going there often – sometimes twice a day. The path I take runs left, close to the river and I nip in now and then through holes in the shrubbery to watch the slow moving water nibble at the stones. I stand for brief moments, felling very good about myself, then withdraw and continue. Sometimes I stand with my back to the water expecting something to reach out with arms or teeth and drag me under – that would be new. It's pleasant to think like that; it's pleasant to think that there is something lurking, just out of sight. And from time to time I imagine the stones being forced to part by some invisible thing. But the more I focus on the stones the less this seems tenable. That's something to note – a stone doesn't move easily of its own accord. And I don't think there is anything breathing in the river anyway, after all, I haven't seen anything, and that should be enough to state that there isn't. The only sign of life I've seen in the forest – except for others out walking - was a spray of feathers, where something had feasted and something had died, and I remember, quite clearly, how I found that amusing – that death was the sign of life. In fact, there doesn't appear to be signs of anything else – a few half-formed footprints, but those aren't enough to convince me. No worms or mice or birds or squirrels, just spiders it seems. When I go walking in the morning I catch every fucking web and I'm covered in little moving legs trying to come to terms with the fabrics of my clothes. Perhaps

I'm just not wild enough yet for other wild things to come out and have a look at me. But if I'm honest, I think I've left all that a little too late. I don't think I'll ever get the hang of being wild – in the right way.

The stream moseys along the left of the forest and then, just like that, the stream is on the other side and much lower down than foot level. And I'm surprised when I notice it there, flowing as before, but on my right. I'm surprised because a stream doesn't just pass under you without you noticing. And every time I go back to the forest I tell myself I'll stop on that bridge and witness the water pass under my feet. That feels like the right thing to do – to watch it go from one side to the other – that feels like it would be significant, to note the movement of the water and find my place within it all. But by the time I arrive at the bridge I'm already tied up in some matter of the heart that I don't even realise I've passed it until the stream is down by my right again, just like that.

Often I see a man from the village, filling two shopping bags with wood. I don't see why he has to walk so far in; there are bits of branches and logs everywhere. I hide behind some of the trees and observe him, trying to figure out why he has come in so deep. It can't be to conceal his crime, I'm sure of that because I often see him walking on the street with those bags full, and I'm not stupid, I know exactly where he took the wood from – everyone knows, for that matter. Sometimes I feel like I should creep up behind him and smash him over the head with a piece of rotten log that would explode on impact. That often feels like the thing I'd like to do, to crack his thieving skull open and drag him off to flush down the stream. And then, I wonder if I could run fast enough to the bridge, to see his sodden body drift under me to snag along a bank somewhere else.

There are many uprooted trees, and I'm not sure yet how or why that happens. It can't be manmade, no I wouldn't think it; men normally leave stumps, fractures and joints that show they have been there, tampering with things. But when a tree is uprooted it has been done so by nature, by either a force from below or above. And the roots stick out like matted hair. There is one in particular, and when I saw it I stopped transfixed for a long time, actually. It left an abandoned pit in the earth, and for reasons that I can't yet put certainty to, I had an overwhelming desire to have sex in that pit; to be naked, coiled around another, a specific other. I tried to give some abstract sentiment to the dead tree; I thought that was the right thing to do. I even looked to put the word insignificant into something, some statement that I could repeat quietly, profoundly, but nothing would budge.

One day something was different, something big had been omitted and the composition of the forest had been altered. I returned home immediately and it took me a few hours before I could settle myself and go back. People just change things like that. People change things without letting you know, or asking if you'd mind. Not one bit of consideration as to if you liked something just the way it was.

There are benches nailed in place where someone thought it would be agreeable to sit – along the bank of the river or on a little mound, looking out onto something. I've sat there and tried to find the picture they wanted to frame. I can't see it, if you must know; perhaps it's just a little resting bench, a stop before they continue on. But that doesn't quite fit. It's only a few hundred yards into the forest and it's impossible for anyone to be so fatigued that early on I should think. Unless it's for those who begin where I end? Yes, that would be a reasonable explanation. That would clear the whole thing up. I've set on them all, the benches, but I get the impression that I may be alone in that. Nowadays no one sits on benches or at least no one likes to be seen sitting on benches, myself included. I thought I wouldn't mind; I sat down one evening, occupied by a heavy heart. I sat for a long time, coming to the conclusion that there was nothing wrong with yearning; there was nothing wrong with pining either, for that matter. I told myself that I would email her and tell her. That she had no right to be so distant, after all, isn't it romantic to meet someone capable of getting in a right state over you? And then I saw a woman running in my direction, in a high-vis jacket. I got up instantly and walked on. I like to think of the benches as relics or symbols or something wishy-washy like that, of a time when things were more-or-less something else, and the people who walked in there were more-or-less something else, too. Sometimes it's nice to be still in the forest and work things out, or get very close to working things out in a way that suits. To suspend movement so that you can spill deep into your surroundings, however briefly, allowing the world to make what it wants of you. It is only when you pick up again and start back that things are compromised and you lose out.

It's raining quite heavily here now, and I've had to go outside and get a bucket for a leak that seems to think it is fine to come into my room. And now the drip is putting me right off. At first I thought it was loud because the bucket was empty, so I filled the bucket a little. But that didn't help. I thought that maybe it was to do with the distance the drip had to fall, so I put the bucket on a stool that no-one sits on. But the stool hasn't helped either. I

can still hear the drip and to be honest I'm feeling quite chafed by it, which is not like me, not usually, but this time I want it to fuck right off. Truth be told, I really want to note this, this thing I've started about the forest. I want to note it down correctly, without distraction, so I can find out precisely what it is I'm trying to say. I'm hiding something, you see. I'm hiding something behind something else, and that's fine by me, but I can't help feeling pricked as to what it is. I don't want to go back to the forest tonight, you see, I don't think I can go there again, if I'm honest. I know it now; I have pressed against its boundaries and I can't get lost anymore. I can't try to figure out how to get back.

flash fiction

Eoín Murphy

The Conspiracy

HE TOOK ANOTHER DRINK AND SIGHED BEFORE PUTTING THE GLASS BACK ON THE COUNTER.

“Another thing,” he said, voice slurred, just a touch. “Every time I meet someone new here they ask where I’m from.”

“We’re an awful people,” Pat said, sitting back down after his third visit to the toilet that morning.

“Sarcasm isn’t helping.”

Pat grinned and raised his hands. “Sorry, force of habit. You were saying.”

“Yeah,” Evan said. “I say ‘I’m from Canada.’”

“As you would, being from Canada and all.”

Evan pointed a finger under Pat’s nose, glass still clasped in his hand.

“Exactly.”

Whiskey slopped over the brim and wetted his fingers but he didn’t seem to notice.

“So they say, every one of them, ‘Canada, eh?’”

Pat nodded. “Ah,” he said. “I think I can see where you’re going with this.”

Swinging round on the bar stool, Evan opened his arms wide, spilling more of the drink.

“I didn’t notice at first,” he said. “But it’s every time.”

He leaned in close enough to Pat that he could get drunk on the fumes if he took a deep enough breath.

Evan’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Every. Time.”

“Aye, well you see, they’re taking the piss,” Pat said, leaning back a bit and wiping spit from his cheek.

Evan’s face screwed up, like a toddler that just saw his first aardvark and doesn’t quite know what he’s looking at.

“The piss?”

Nodding, Pat took a look at the clock over the door. Twelve thirty. Almost time. He plucked the glass from the Canadian’s hand.

“You see, you folks have a reputation for saying ‘eh’ at the end of every sentence. It’s a stereotype, like how the Irish like a drink and the Welsh like sheep.”

He leaned over the bar and poured the clear liquid down the pub sink.

Evan waved his hands in the air.

“I know what a stereotype is,” he said. He planted his hands down on the wooden bar and took a long, slow look behind him, eyeing everyone in the pub.

“Are you saying every Irish person I’ve met since I got here have all been taking the piss out of me, using exactly the same joke?”

“Aye,” Pat said.

“But I’ve met the heads of banks, the Taoiseach. Even Rose’s mother said it.”

“Maggie wouldn’t miss a chance like that,” Pat said, levering Evan up off the stool and leading him in the general direction of the door.

“Not Maggie,” Evan said, shock clear in his voice.

“I’m afraid so.”

He stopped at the exit, one hand on the handle. Pat leaned into him, trying to get the six foot Canadian moving but he had the solidity that only came with prodigious quantities of alcohol.

“Rose did as well,” he wailed, leaning against the doorframe. “My fiancé took the piss.”

“Like mother like daughter,” Pat said before giving him another hopeful shove.

Going nowhere, Evan grabbed Pat by the lapels of his suit and dragged him in close.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “We were in Canada at the time. She asked me where I was from, in Canada, to a Canadian, just to make that joke. I thought she was chatting me up. And…” He paused for a second, weaving on his feet. Evans face shifted from tan to green in a matter of seconds.

“Good God,” he said.

“Probably not him, he’s not known for his sense of humour,” Pat said, “The young fella’ now…”

Eyes glassy, Evan pushed Pat back, staring around the room.

“You’re all in on it,” he said. “Every one of you, you’re all part of the conspiracy.”

Pat looked back at the fifteen year old behind the bar.

“How many did you give him?”

The girl shrugged and held up three fingers.

“Doubles?”

She shook her head and then lifted a bottle from behind the bar. It was unlabelled, a clear, unassuming liquid in it.

“You didn’t,” Pat said.

“It was their idea,” she said and pointed at a trio of men in the corner.

They grinned back at Pat. One of them raised a glass.

“For the day that’s in it,” he said.

“Fecking eejits,” Pat said.

Glaring at the pub residents, Evan backed out the door, waving a warning finger at them.

“You’re all with them,” he said, before disappearing out into the street.

“Rose is going to kill me,” Pat said and followed him out.

Evan stood in the middle of the street, turning in circles, the boutonniere falling loose from his jacket and landing at his feet. He started pulling his shirt clear of where he had it tucked into a pair of grey trousers, the waistcoat all but destroyed in the rush to get it off.

A small crowd began to gather, most of them guests for the wedding. Auld Barney joined Pat as they watched Evan rip his white dress shirt open and fall to his knees, exposing the maple leaf he had tattooed over his heart. “That the Groom then?” Barney asked.

Pat nodded. “Aye, that’s the lad who’s going to be my son in law.” He walked over to Evan, Barney following.

“What happened to him, cold feet?”

“He got in the Poitín,” Pat said.

“That’ll do it all right.”

Barney nudged Evan with his boot. “Are you all right there lad?” he asked, speaking slow and loud. Evan turned his head. Wide, staring eyes fixed on Barney as he pointed at the tattoo.

“I’m Canadian. Canadian!”

Barney nodded. “Canadian, eh?” he said.

Evan screamed.

Sandra Coffey

#PeriodPositive

ON THE SEVENTH OF EVERY MONTH, LIDIJA PLACES HER RED ARMBAND IN HER HANDBAG. She tucks it in a pocket within a zipped pocket, discreetly out of view so it doesn't peek out when she opens her handbag at a checkout or at the ATM machine. She won't wear it until the exact time comes. Later that afternoon, she places the armband around her wrist, mindful that the sleeve of her jumper comes down to meet it, not cover it. This lets her co-workers know that she is "on". She is having her period and in her country women on a period work less and employers need to know this so they can account for their lack of productivity.

Lidija is one of the lucky ones. Her cycle is accurate. Not affected by stress or overwork like those women she hears about during lunch or canteen breaks. She doesn't need the help of a calendar. She will only be "on" for three days tops and despite a dull pain in her lower back on day one, it will be a run of course event as run of course as a period can be. By Wednesday or Thursday, she can remove the armband until the next month, the next period.

Florence is on the tube and can't believe it has arrived. It's early, she says to herself. She worries that her period will stain through her light grey pants. She thinks of her Pilates classes and tightens her pelvic floor muscles. She pulls them up, up tight inside her, hoping that right now in this moment, these muscles will contract and keep inside her what desperately needs to come out. She wonders how long she has until she can get to the nearest bathroom.

Her whole body oozes relief as she stands in the bathroom cubicle looking over a pristine pair of knickers. It hasn't stained through. She's so blissfully happy at this thought that she's tempted to do a jig in the cubicle. She doesn't. She discreetly places her pad down hard on the panties folding the wings around to keep it place. Board meeting at 10am and she's early.

He so didn't want to go but Ellen, his girlfriend of six months insists it would be educational. Harry isn't one for exhibitions and PeriodPositive would never have been on his list if he was one for going to galleries. He'd googled it beforehand despite Ellen asking him not to. He didn't want to be that man who gasped at women's periods. Better to be prepared for a date like this. Warning: graphic images said the notice sellotaped to the entrance door. Blood was running down the inside of the legs of one woman, in thin strips like cobwebs, the next used her own blood to draw lines on her face, the next was walking down a street in London without a period pad. Madness, he thought, this is fucking crazy. Who would want to leave a trail of their blood on Oxford Street? Do the rest of us not get a say in this? Stunning insights, simply stunning Ellen said as they walk around. He notices he wasn't the only man there smiling out one side of his mouth. 'Fancy a cigarette' one asks but he daren't budge. He isn't going to be the token man who couldn't handle it.

They walk down the steps and out onto the street, Ellen talking incessantly of the bravery of the women, to put themselves out there like that, free from the norm. Outside, a table with three women, two standing, one sitting shout randomly 'Leak Chic'. This, Ellen informs him was in response to the exhibition, making periods less taboo. For two pounds, she buys a badge, a red one and becomes in an instant a Stains Ambassador. She looks at Harry. He knew this was one of those moments where he must do something but what he didn't know. Instructions would have been nice or at least considerate at this point, he thought. The awkward silence abates. She pulls him close and takes a selfie and posts it online saying 'Me and my man supporting #periodpositive'

She takes his arm and as they walk home, he worries for his own pad, his off cream couch. When is her period?

Louise Kennedy

The Gown

'I BEG YOUR PARDON,' SAID JAMESIE FINAN. THE YOUNG DOCTOR HAD PAUSED BESIDE him. She turned on her mobile phone and he watched it gradually brighten to show a photograph of a smiling man holding a child of about two. Her thumb scurried around the screen then she held it to her ear.

'I'm back in this place at midnight,' she told her phone. 'You fucking do it.' She looked at Jamesie for a moment then made her way along the corridor.

The double doors opened and a porter passed him, pushing an empty wheelchair. The young man's thick hair was short and brushed to the side, his beard a full coppery frill. When he came back Jamesie would ask him if he'd be waiting much longer.

A greying man in his forties came towards him dragging a pallet of laundry. When he had almost reached him Jamesie opened his mouth to speak, but the double doors opened. The man stood aside and extended his arm in a broad sweep to let two nurses pass. A tattoo snaked from inside his wrist, the tail of a serpent with sinews and scales, and disappeared under the sleeve of his polo shirt. His load knocked against Jamesie's trolley as he went back through the double doors.

It was a small knock, an accident, Jamesie knew, only now the trolley had been shunted from its position in the corner, just inside the door. With nothing to lean against he could no longer sit up comfortably. When he had fallen Jamesie had landed on his left side. His hip was stiff and he could not turn. The turquoise paper gown hung like a lampshade over his spindly frame. A nurse had begun to pull the stiff sleeves along his arms but had been called away before she had fastened it at the back. A disposable incontinence sheet covered him from his waist to his knees.

Every few minutes the double doors opened and every few minutes Jamesie twisted

back and fumbled at the strings to cover himself from the eyes of strangers. Jamesie's watch was at home on the bathroom windowsill and he wasn't sure of the time. There was a dampness in the draught that gasped into the corridor through the swinging doors and he guessed it was after dusk. He had fallen before he had lit the flame under the egg he had been about to boil for breakfast. He imagined it bobbing in the small aluminium pot beside the willow pattern egg cup with the smile shaped chip and the blue-rimmed enamel mug.

Jamesie tried to move his leg. The pins and needles of earlier in the day had gone. Now he couldn't feel anything. The gown had slid off his shoulder and draped across him like a toga from a cheap fancy dress costume. He was no longer able to reach backwards to hold it together. He was thirsty. He would ask the next person who came along for a cup of tea.

The doors swung open. It was the ginger haired porter again. *Excuse me*, Jamesie mouthed, but his throat crackled drily. Jamesie touched his hip. It felt cold and spongey. He was ashamed of his feet. The nails were thick, the skin pale and buttery, like the feet of an old cock. He slid along the length of the trolley on his good side and lay awkwardly, his face turned outwards. Now the incontinence pad was partly trapped beneath him and no longer fully covered his thighs. He closed his eyes and waited. The double doors swung and the draught rushed and Jamesie waited.

At 11.56 pm the young doctor paused beside Jamesie's trolley to switch her mobile phone off. She reached a hand towards the double doors then paused. Later she said it was the stillness that made her turn. Beyond the double doors was movement and noise, coughing and beeping and weeping, the shouts of the first of the drunks. In the corridor all was quiet. She turned to the trolley, to the slight figure, arms folded about himself in modesty. She tugged the incontinence sheet from under him, tucked it from his waist to his calves. The purplish shadow of a bruise had bloomed beneath the skin on his left side. She leaned across him. Against her neck Jamesie Finan's fine nose was cold and without breath. She lifted the strings on the back of the gown, and tied them in a neat bow. *I beg your pardon, she whispered. I beg your pardon.*

Dearbhaile Houston

Women's Fiction

THE WAY MY MOTHER TELLS THE STORY IS LIKE THIS:

"I was at a dinner-dance. A man came up to me and asked if I'd like to dance. I said yes. And then a year later you showed up"

I sound like an interloper. An unaccounted-for dinner guest. Which, I suppose, is what I was. I like this version. I like how I am the end-point of it. I like how, in her telling it to me, I already know the ending.

My father has never told me this story. Maybe he tells it every day. Maybe he sits at bus shelters and tells it to girls he thinks are me.
"I was at a dinner-dance. I saw a woman across the room. I asked her to dance with me. And then a year later you (she) (a baby) showed up."

James says men don't tell stories like that. I think he has never told our story to anyone. It's always been me.

I wonder did my mother notice my father before he asked her to dance. Did she spot him from across the room and hope that he'd come over. Did she arrange her face just so (chin tilted, the soft s-s-s of her wavy hair over one eye) as she saw him walking the breadth of the room to her. Steph says she probably didn't notice him. It doesn't happen like that; like in a film. I think that Steph has never looked at a boy from across the room with such expectation and watched him walk to another girl. One sitting just to the left of you, maybe.

I can't ask my mother these things. She has her one version and it is four sentences long. She will not be goaded or flattered into embellishing it further. No epilogues. So I have to imagine. I have to write my own version:

My mother thinks of her friends in Kilburn, Camden, and Cricklewood, getting roughed up by lovely boys in donkey jackets and brought on day trips to Brighton to while away the time until some red-faced builder from home wants to get married. They send her postcards, cigarettes, a tube of Yardley's lipstick in Pink-A-Dolly. My mother puts it on to look out her window. She doesn't get out much. She feels too big. The baby presses down on her from the inside so she is stuck in one place. She has been married for two months, and pregnant for six. She is lucky. She has married a nice man. A Dublin man. All the other girls from the convent have moved to England or stayed at home. The nice Dublin man is necessary otherwise she would be in the Laundries by now. She does not want a life of wincing at the smell of carbolic. She wants a nice life and a nice baby and a nice Dublin man. And she will get these things even if it means having to lie. My mother does not believe that lying is bad. Not bad per se. She knows that it is a sin but she also knows of those poor naïve girls who confessed everything: every unpure thought and action. Like idiots. So she came up with a code with God. Not a lie. Telling the priest that she had a fight with her mother was actually code for "I had sex with a boy from the dancehall". It was all the same really. You still got your four Our Fathers and that was that. She had talked to God and he knew what she was really atoning for so she had nothing to worry about.

Maybe my mother wasn't that canny at nineteen. How am I to know? But it suits me to think of her this way. It suits me to think of her as knowing, as wise, because I like to think of myself as that way too. If she was ignorant and scared, then all the stories fall apart.

Patrick Holloway

What we do when we think nobody's watching

SHE PUSHED THE CAR INTO FIFTH GEAR. HER IPOD WAS CONNECTED TO THE CAR RADIO and it blasted out the same playlist she listened to when at the gym. The car drove through a hanging mist. The trees in the nearby park made music with the wind. It was dark. That time that exists only for a select few. She liked to be part of it. To hear the earth hum.

The road was straight for at least four kilometres; one of the only straight, flat pieces of land in her town. She saw no other headlights. Pushing harder on the accelerator, she closed her eyes and shouted out the words to the music. She opened her eyes slowly, while at the same time opening the window, and as it opened a flapping came, filling the car.

The trees squinted by. The steering wheel vibrated heavily beneath her manicured hands. As she squeezed tighter she could feel her wedding ring tighten at the joint. She stepped harder on the right pedal. The wind that folded in filled something like tears in her eyes. The straightness of the road would end soon and more curves and turns would replace it. Junctions and roundabouts. As she looked in the rear-view mirror she saw the silence of the empty baby seat. When the window zipped shut the music sounded again, egging her on, motivating her to just keep going.

*****

He had a break every day from two to three p.m. During this time he would sit at the table he had bought from Ikea. The table had already been set that morning: two water glasses; two knives; two forks; two large, circular white plates with gold rims; one wine glass. She didn't like to drink wine so early in the afternoon.

'Are you sure you won't have a glass,' he asked, looking straight ahead at the mirror that hung on the wall behind the table.

'You know I don't like to drink during the day,' he replied, pushing his voice into a wispy, falsetto.

'Well, I'll only have the one,' he said as he got up and walked towards the fridge and out of the mirror's reflection so all that looked back was an empty table set for two and two empty chairs.

He poured a glass of white wine and sipped. He poured two glasses of chilled water.

'I forgot lemon,' he said and looked down at his lap.

'Oh.'

'I can cut some now if you'd like?'

'No, no, it's quite alright.' The voice sharp and scratchy.

He drank at the wine and checked his watch.

'I decided to buy a Pinot Grigio, it's nice, maybe you can have a glass this evening.'

'That would be lovely, what time will you be back? You know I hate to stay at home alone.'

'I'll try to get away early,' he said and winked at himself in the mirror and squeezed his left

knee with his right hand. He then chuckled girlishly and looked away.

*****

Jason reads ‘What we talk about when we talk about love’ while waiting to see his psychiatrist. The room is small and square and consists of a little square table, squared by 12 chairs; 3 on each side.

In the room with him now sits four other people. One man is sitting next to his wife or girlfriend, they sometimes hold hands. The man is talking on the phone. He talks in a normal voice and uses so much slang that Jason cannot follow the trail of the conversation and instead sways between worlds. There is another woman, a little older, who is reading the daily paper. She is wearing teacher-glasses. On the other side, facing the woman, and the man and his girlfriend or wife, is a younger lady who sits up straight with her legs crossed.

Jason himself doesn’t know what to talk about when love is the subject; lately, he doesn’t even know what to think about when thinking about love. He is reading the story about the son visiting his father in an airport. He has read all of the stories many times; it is the only book he reads while waiting in that small, square room.

The room has a television, but it is always on mute, so sometimes Jason puts words into the people’s mouths, making silly dialogues. There are two news reporters sitting with tight faces, one male, one female.

The male says: ‘I’d prefer you didn’t say that, we’re live.’

The female says: ‘Oh come on now, John, everyone knows about your penis problems.’

Jason laughs a little, but feels bad. It must be terrible for your worst secret to be broadcast like that, to the world. Or worse yet is everyone knowing it before you. The image flashes to a fire that had killed a few people who had names and houses and pets and fridges.

The man is still talking on the phone and is getting on Jason's nerves. It's obvious that the man is uneducated and wears his best clothes out to see his psychiatrist. His wife or girlfriend doesn't make the same effort. She just looks down at the floor. Nobody talks to each other. While turning pages, Jason looks at the younger lady. She is wearing high-heels and her legs are crossed and her right foot is kicking to a rhythm only she can hear. Jason wonders if she knows about love. If she's had lots of sex with lots of different men.

Jason knows that the son will forget the bag of gifts at the airport. He's not there yet, but he knows that will happen. Now the father is telling the son about the affair. Jason holds the book with one hand and the other is in his pocket. He reads without reading. The bag will be left behind. Jason doesn't like the son very much. Every story he reads he imagines himself or someone he loves as one of the characters, so he can never really read a story for what it is.

I'd never do that to my dad, he thinks. If I could, I'd take the bag, even if I wouldn't give it to my wife or my child, even if I put it in an airport bin, I'd still take it, my dad would still see me taking the bag. The son doesn't know much about love.

'Jason, you can come through now.'

*****

Every Saturday morning her parents would go for a walk. Her older brother, who was 11, played tennis every Saturday morning, and only recently had her parents trusted her to stay

in the house alone. She was 8. She had curly ginger hair and a face full of freckles. Her eyes were the colour of chopped parsley.

As soon as her parents closed the door she'd look from the kitchen window as they made their way down the garden-path and walked hand in hand down the street. Then, without looking back, she'd run past the kitchen counter, out through the open door, down the corridor, grab at the banister and turn quickly to climb the stairs. Her little feet trying to skip steps.

On the upstairs corridor she'd stop outside her brother's room and hold her breath. She'd count all the way up to ten and then let her breath out slowly before turning the door-knob and stepping in. Once inside she'd marvel at the messy bed and the posters on the wall, and the smell of dirt and boy. She'd sit on the carpet and pretend to play his Xbox. She'd look for secrets under his bed. She smelled his socks.

Then she'd go to his wardrobe and start feeling the fabric of his t-shirts. She'd take his black cap that had the initials RF on the front. He never used it for training; only for matches. She'd put it on back to front and make sure that all her hair was hidden underneath. In the mirror she looked toughly back at herself. She bit at her bottom lip. She put on his old tracksuit pants and rolled them up at the bottom. She wore a sleeveless t-shirt.

Sometimes she'd just lie on his bed and try and make the sounds that she had heard him making. She practised coughing up phlegm; often, she opened the window and tried to spit as far as the neighbour's fence. Other times she'd rummage through his things, reading notes in his journal, and then later she'd practise her hand-writing so that it was all scribbly.

When she heard the key in the door she'd quickly make her way into her bedroom, hide the cap under her bed, and sit on the floor with her Bratz dolls until her mum or dad came in to see that she was ok.

*****

He was a large man with thick, ballooning shoulders and a chest as wide as a fridge. He had worked as a butcher, a bouncer, a bus-driver, as a janitor. He could lift one side of his sofa high above his head as he looked for fallen change. He was a hairy man; chunky, curly dark wads of hair all over his body. He had a gap between his two front teeth.

They used to call him Donkey Kong in school. For many reasons. He had played rugby; had won rugby titles. A career playing for his country awaited him, that is until something silly happened. Silly, yet life-changing. Most life-changing things are.

One day, not long before he graduated, he was walking through the car-park of his school. There were three steps down to a lower level where the front-door was open for the students to rush in. He had forgotten to tie his left shoe. Three little steps awaited him and all that was left to follow. Three concrete little steps and a white shoe-lace untied in his grey Converse.

He had been married. She had cheated. He had changed the locks while she was at work. That was over six weeks ago.

Now at night, he drank litre bottles of beer and thought about not doing what he knew he would do. Then after the second bottle he would make his way into the bedroom and open the wardrobe with all of his soon-to-be ex-wife's clothes. She was a tall, but slight woman.

First he would take off his clothes. Then he would find her panties, the bright coloured ones, the ones that got lost between his cheeks. And he'd take her high-heels and force his feet in. Then he would turn on his computer, and sitting at his desk he'd sign into Skype where countless others awaited.

review: Martelle McPartland

on The Last Fire

by Helen Harrison

HELEN HARRISON IS A POET WHO IS FINELY ATTUNED TO THE VIBRATION OF EVERYDAY life and the passing seasons in the land of little hills.

The Last Fire is her first poetry collection where she draws inspiration primarily from the characters and landscape of her townland: My eyes rest on Laurels - that wave their leaves; snow falls In its finest form - holding back spring; the in-between season of words

Ultimately, Helen has a gentle soulful voice, one that speaks from the edges: It is easier to be on the edge than to be in the middle of things.

Helen has always been a keen observer of people and the landscape and as a child she used to fall asleep making up fictional tales based on characters she knew. In 'Smell the Rain' she describes Alzheimer's, having had experience of this condition through her work. In this poem she expertly puts herself in their shoes: Now cold wind tears like sharp stones. When I stumble, I claw earth. Tears mingle with rain. This is not the first time I've tended to wander

People find it easy to talk to her, and she often falls into conversation with strangers. After one such conversation she wrote 'Seeds', about a woman grieving following her partner's tragic death; Smashed in spring – the last season you inhaled; Lying singing on the back seat. The front driver's side was saved, letting me drive to dreams that died.

Her more evocative poems, however, are based on characters she did know. The essences of a people, now gone, are conjured up through her memory: Life can scatter as quickly; become diluted by memory, we always Leave shadows behind. I walk backwards for a moment as if to recapture time.

This collection of poems takes us on a journey through vanishing places and a diminishing way of life, where the ordinariness and challenges of everyday life are expertly woven together. Such is the power of Helen's words that we feel like we know the characters she writes about, like Nellie, in the poem, Simple Ways: She picked bunches of yellow roses for homeward bound churchgoing bachelors; pitying their lonesome ways. Her spinster world was gay with giving; usually to old ladies stiffened by religion and age. Or in the poem, Ointment: The shallow sombreness of cold weather people – whose only joy is pain in daily papers and news at six and nine

Arguably one of the best poems in the collection, Rhythm of Wood, was written following a conversation with an old farmer: 'Hazel burns well – made for fire, ash splits and cuts easily. The thorn is the best. Elders are useless', he gestures through gaps. His hands are veined Like leaves, he touches his cap in thought. He is a character from this town land; Born of the substance of soil, his pride in woodpiles.

Enjoy the descriptive embrace of, The Last Fire, and celebrate the ordinary with Helen, a poet who focuses on the mundane with powerful clarity: You gathered sticks to bathe the night with fire, you, in your element smiling watery eyes; happy sighs - as you bent. The next day your soul gathered over your dead body to be buried under sticks and clay…

The Last Fire is published by Lapwing Publications.

poems

Glen Wilson

A Line of Hawthorns

(i) Peter John, Autumn 1998, New Forge College

I break the spine and each page is a turning
over of soil, new descriptions and terms
for movements of a second nature, relearning
ridge and furrow in black and white.
I measure pH balances, soil composition
then picture sods of grass that the tractor spins up
from my father's lower fallow field. I know
which earth crumbles, which holds its shape.

I see my father getting down from the tractor cab,
his eye his plumb line as he charts the angle,
adjusts the tread as if to say *We'll start here*.
Years have refined and exaggerated the process
But the action is still the ploughshare following
the coulter.

(ii) John Isaac, Spring 1980, Gortin

Listen to the Ewes singing February songs Son!
I hear him saying still as I insulate the barn
with tightly packed bales and twine.

They huddle together, their coats growing
back from being sheared three weeks ago.
I check for udder growth, a mother's swelling.

I see the first ewe ready to go, search for
the beginning of legs. I tie small cotton cords
to his feet to help pull the lamb out.

He must play his part and shake his head
to rupture the membrane. And he does,
pushing through virgin limbs slick and wet.

I wipe the mucus from his nose, slap the ribs
to start the lungs, glad when he breathes
in the slurry tinged air, wanting more.

I help him suckle with syringe, a 12-inch
rubber tube delivering colostrum milk directly
into his never to be empty again stomach.

The Ewe starts to nurse in the lambing jug,
I take painting irons, brand them with the family
colour, I hear the rising bleating of the next.

She watches me from the kitchen door
hand on the small of her back to ease
the pressure, spine arched with hope

after last year's loss.

(iii) Jacob, Winter 1951, McVeigh's Bar

He liked his drink, pressed glass to pursed lips
was his natural state and tonight I was going
to keep him there, never letting the whisky
grains settle long enough to burn. I owned
but an acre of land but made much of it, cadging
the best seeds, borrowing materials from the corners
of other fields, especially his. I have a few ewes
but he has plenty, *Father made sure of that*.

Blessed by what a piece of paper gave him
he really should pay attention to the shucks
and ditches of fine print. He signs his name,
I take it, slip it inside my windcheater and leave,
hear him order a hot pot from the girl who
would've been his wife but ended up being mine.

Susan Lindsay

2014 Requiem

The river Bann below
beyond the sloping bank,

I doubt you'd approve
a poem in your memory
the last leaf
fallen from the tree.

Yellow, it clung
on the twig
through storms
bombed out businesses
the frantic winds and rains
of your wife's last months.

*

She
who once had to tell
a five year old, me, that her mother
in Howth,
my grandmother, was gone
endure the screaming
silent afternoon.

At eight, I was your brides' maid
velvet -pink, in March.

You drove her, against the clock,
to prolonged treatments
as green turned
to autumn gold.

Her end
sudden peace

floating

soundlessly

to ground

your performance, then
and in ensuing weeks
sapping the last reserves
winter could draw upon.

*

It’s over now for both of you
your predeceased grandson
recalled, twelve years passed
in the same week

as your coffin is lowered
to rest on his grandmothers’
in a churchyard
under spreading boughs.

Colin Hassard

Potions and Elixirs

I

I was planted in Earth that rests in shadow of either harp or crown,
in the mouth of the sandbanks as the hour glass was turned.

In a room with dentist stickers half-peeled on white plastic cupboards
and a pylon portrait framed in a shammy sparkled window.

A seed sown in Barre & Lanyon crafted brick and stone,
where factory men in flat-caps are photographs of our foundations.

The tobacco sent lingers.
Linen-mill relics now drinking dens.

II

I grew in the heat of a coal-fire boiler replenished morning and night.
Where shirt oxters tell if days are wasted
or nights ignited by Golden-Mile taxi lights.

Wrapped in my father's stories of Saturday matinees at the Strand,
The Harp Bar, the Newcastle Ballroom
and the late night jazz clubs.

I grew with roots stretched in ribcages like revellers through the Entries,
to sprout beyond the lick of the latch
and barbed wire rainbows.

In a place where summer is caught in bee-trap jam-jars,
and scorched on the right arm of bus drivers
who scowl as you break a fiver
for three stops.

III

I was watered by rain that runs like Albert Clock-work.
Jeered from clouds coloured ash-tray grey to drum on roof-tops
out of time and always,
always in minor key.

I was watered by two shades of lemonade,
by froth and dregs of the pint glass,
by potions and elixirs of gin-palace pantheons.

Where water is siphoned from Silent Valley,
and the waters of the shipyard flow with history
to the raging sea
that swallowed her prize creation.

IV

I bloomed into a man who avoids both the heel of the loaf
and talk of 'us and them'.

In Botanic charity shop chic
between Cathedral and graffiti.
Higher than smoke from 11th night bonfires.

To see the universe beyond the lambs tails and the danders.

Beyond buildings who cried their windows in a burst of confetti.
Beyond the burdens and the flood plain.
Beyond the caves and rolling hills.
Over Morass, Obel, Napoleon's Nose.

A poet of the moonlight.
A soldier of the dawn who sees his reflection in shop windows
and offers resolutions to the bin men and gulls,
with the hour glass still counting.

And for so much what shall I repay?
For so much,
what shall I repay?

Belfast,
I am your son.

Fiona Smith

Paris 10.15

We follow a crisp white shirt down cobbled streets, one sharp-turned November.
Something tinkles in the distance, a maze rat's bell.
She sweeps a corner then, and disappears into the spiked night,
a game of I Spy with the icicle glitch of her silver heels.

Cameras whir and something coldcracks in the backstreets.
Sheets unfetter, torn parachutes to pavements – step-kick, cartwheel, champagne sip –
shoes undone, straps too tight for a full inhale.
That final backward glance.

On any side, windows blank us with our reflection, doors are open, bank notes scattered.
A real ribcage-batterer, the sounds hound us where we live.
Lights flicker and the amps fizz,
as a dark trickle leaves us and takes its passage to the very heart, right down to the core of it.

L'enfer and l'enfant, far too close.
Only coal-dust sparkles in the nightest sky.
There is nothing left to the aftermath, only aching, glittering silence.
I can strike an echo back to life, chasing the lost music of her footsteps.

Stephanie Conn

The Sweetest Thing

is what I thought you said –
those four uncomplicated syllables
brushed against my left pinna;
licked the folds of skin and cartilage
no less tenderly than if you'd kissed them.

I collected each sound greedily –
sent them hurtling along the ear canal
to strike the drum's membrane, a missed
heartbeat. The smallest bone in my body
cranks up, helps make the signal clearer still.

Tiny hairs stand on end and warm liquid
inside the snail-shaped chamber, trembles,
knocks me off balance. Interpretation is everything.
Perhaps it was the crashing waves or the jealous gulls
that distorted sound – caused the hammer to fall.

Brian Gourley

Imagined after Gauguin's Le Christ Jaune

Who are they?
These women of clay and earth who encircle,
prostrate, praying like mothering hens;

this circle in their white coifs.
How they come together, knit in prayer,
these Holy Marys, these daughters of my cross;

they have made of me a true peasant,
a Breton son, humble seed
sown in the soiled earth. My cross

will rise in the evening heavens as the yellow hills
descend into the dark night. What fruit
will now hang from trees with leaves

as crimson as blood? My fellow brigands
have fled to the hills,
have left me here to do what penance

is to be done;
I will sin not for myself; I'll sin for my compatriots,
for what will never be atoned:

this world's accomplished shame.
There is no Trinity of the Beard
to keep me company; if I am of women born,

I am ordained to be some fleshly being,
uprooted, exiled, tossed upon storm-wracked seas,
a voyageur across the unknown waters,

the ocean-dark depths.
If prayers can pass along telephone cables
from Pont-Aven to Concarneau to Hiva Oa,

Then let me usurp these inferior gods
and I will be reborn in the warm amniotic sac
of coral atolls. After the Equator,

October is more mother than April;
I will be planted in dark soil like cassava,
suckled at the warm breast of the dark sun,

my body becoming and unbecoming,
the act of perpetual resurrection,
this shifting from dust into mystery.

Gary Hunter

Dreaming of Cossacks

For Michael James Hendershot USMC

Dead-eyed needle teases, hovers
over the pitted warzone.
A napalmed, agent-orange DMZ
devoid of cover, nowhere now
to go, here at river's end, where

soft skin puckers into hills.
Blue-black, a sclerotic vein
stretched taut; tubing channels
poison from bag to piercing tip.
Red flowers bloom as

behind closed eyes stars flare bright,
fade out, are born again.
Each cell a life destroyed
in a long war of attrition where
there is no quarter sought or given
here, along this blasted highway.

Serpent hours slither round
and round the white clock face.
Flesh burns hot then cold
then hot – No! Don't move –
the machine won't like it one bit.
Why me God? Fool! Why not you?

Nurses step softly, heads bowed
like penitents, careful to observe
protocol in such a sacred place.
Outside, cars hiss soft through rain.
Lullaby, I drift away and dream
of Cossacks streaming over steppes.

Not for long though, not long at all.
The steady beep and blip of a green eye
sly over this prone captive. A moth
pinned and too weary to fight. One last
wriggle or squirm, one last gasp.

The child beside me is sleeping –
bird-boned and failed.
She smiles in her sleep.

Chimera Lay

Collaborations

I'm doing that strong
intoxicating rub, when I discover
I can't tell if it's become pain
or I'm just still in the world.

Either way it's a reminder
of a kind innocence before
the discovery of hot
knives and spiked drinks.
.
I'm on the train, hot from work
or standing somewhere public;
staring at you while a hand
moves beneath my folded coat.

Once you've felt my best hard
stare, you collaborate, even with
legs crossed and eyes booked ten
feet away, you still give me assistance.

Last week I watched a man walk
his legs through the park; pause
to tie a lace, his collar rode back;
twirling downy hairs sprang up.

Yesterday, a skater boy's hands
twirled as he cut loose moves
and I in only heels and a long winter
coat, its pockets: damp warrens.

Caught in the afternoon rain,
I rush for the mall, the crush,
and dampness of suits, charcoal stubble –
my perfume, eyes, fingers, all stray.

Frederick Johnson

Weekends on Google Image Search

After the third season of Buffy the Vampire Slayer
we all of us couldn't talk much about spiritual homes
or even
about the spirit
but we can Google image search the Utah Badlands
whose plains I've cut open and laid out
in grids –
I like the colours, reds at noon and
night, saturation hiked to really tell us about
density and endings and how

one hue is so much data
that pops and snaps

but that's transparent,
code to dig for with you on Friday evenings
with stars halberdine
and daffodils
rehearsing romcoms out front –

Those inevitable reds spell something terrible
with every swollen photon that leaks
screenside,
stitching threads
between one picture and the next
in evanescent colour.

contributors

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

Sandra Coffey has been published in Crannog, Honest Ulsterman, Incubator Journal, Silver Apples, Galway Review, and ROPES. In 2015, one of her stories, which was published last year in the Incubator Journal was longlisted for the writing.ie Bord Gais Energy Short Story of the Year competition. She is a journalist with the Galway Independent. @SandraCoffey

Stephanie Conn is a graduate of the MA programme at the Seamus Heaney Centre and a recipient of an Arts Council Career Enhancement Award. Stephanie recently won the Yeovil Poetry Prize, Funeral Service NI prize and the inaugural Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing. Her first collection is forthcoming from Doire Press.

Paul Anthony Corbett is an emerging writer based in Dublin. He was short-listed for the 2015 Over the Edge New Writer of the Year award and specially commended for the Carried in Waves short story competition. Follow him on Twitter @pacorbett.

Kelly Creighton's (Editor) debut novel *The Bones of It* (Liberties Press) was nominated for the Kate O'Brien Award, and was the San Diego Review's 2015 novel of the year. She has been runner up and shortlisted for numerous short story and poetry prizes in the UK and Ireland. @KellyCreighton

Gareth Fox was born in County Armagh. His fiction has been published in The Incubator (issue 6), Liberties Flash Fiction Ireland and Les Eclairs (French Translation). His debut stage play was produced in France.

Brian Gourley's poems have appeared widely in several journals including Acumen, The Eildon Tree, Northwords Now, The Irish Literary Review and The Honest Ulsterman. He is currently working on a novel and debut collection of poetry, and holds a PhD on Reformation playwright John Bale, having published critical articles on early Renaissance writing.

Colin Hassard is Belfast-born poet and former Ulster Poetry Slam Champion. In 2015, he toured his one-man poetry and music show 'Breaking Bard' and was the NI Human Rights Festival Artist-in-Residence. Colin's work has been performed on national radio and published in Honest Ulsterman, Ulla's Nib, and two CAP anthologies.

Patrick Holloway's poetry and fiction has been published by Poetry Ireland Review, Overland Literary Journal, The Lonely Crowd, among others. He has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and the Manchester Fiction Prize. He was a runner-up for the Irish Times travel writer award.

Dearbhaile Houston has won prizes for her poetry and fiction including the Duais Sheáin Uí Riordáin, a Smedia award, and most recently, first place in the 2015 Hot Press Write Here, Write Now competition (3rd Level Category). She is currently studying for an M.Phil in Gender Studies at Trinity College Dublin.

Gary Hunter lives in Comber and worked in the media before medically retiring in 2011. He read English and History at university and is studying creative writing with the Open University. Gary volunteers with cancer charities Macmillan and Marie Curie, writing and speaking on cancer issues.

Frederick Johnson lives in Liverpool, and was, until recently, a graduate student studying American literature at Trinity College Dublin. He's had poetry published in Belleville Park Pages and E&GJ Little Press' Zetetic, and you can follow him on Twitter @FredBobJohn or visit his blog at The Interesting Tap.

Louise Kennedy grew up in Holywood. She writes short stories, flash fiction and memoir. In 2014 she won first place in both Ambit Fiction Prize and Wasifiri New Writing Prize (Life Writing) and was highly commended in Inktears Flash Fiction Contest. She has been published in Ambit, The Incubator and Silver Apples. She lives in Sligo.

Susan Lindsay's poetry collections are published by Doire Press: Whispering the Secrets (2011) and Fear Knot (2013). She was a founding co-editor of Skylight 47, and read for the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series in 2011. Her facilitated Conversations, mediated by poetry, were included on the Cuirt International Festival of Literature programme, 2015. www.susanlindsayauthor.blogspot.com.

Niamh MacCabe's stories have been longlisted for the Fish Prize, shortlisted for the Carried in Waves Award and the Allingham Festival Award, 2nd prize in The People's College Award, Special Mention in the Galley Beggar Press Award, Highly Commended in the Books Ireland Magazine Award and published in Aesthetica's Anthology 2016.

Martelle McPartland is a poet, playwright, editor, script writer, arts facilitator and creative writing tutor based in Lurgan, Co. Armagh. She has won many awards for her short stories, notably as a finalist in the Bridport. She is a founding member and facilitator of Lough Neagh Writers.

Eoin Murphy has been writing for as long as he can remember and one day he hopes to be good at it. He is married to a wonderful wife and has a Star Wars obsessed four year old. He is currently working on his first novel and tweets as @rage_monki.

Mary O'Donnell has published four novels and two collections of short stories. Her fiction has been widely published in anthologies such as 'Fiddlehead Review' (Canada), Scéalta (Telegram Books UK), The London Magazine, 'Irish Short stories' (Brandon, 1998), 'Phoenix Irish Short Stories,' (ed. David Marcus), also in 'The Mail on Sunday' and 'The Irish Times'.

Donal Ryan is the author of *The Spinning Heart, The Thing About December* and *A Slanting of the Sun*, and is the winner of numerous awards, including the Guardian First Book Award and the Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards.

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

Fiona Smith is a Dublin poet, music journalist (Hot Press, craic-it.com), screenwriter (winner WildSound Festival, Toronto, for Rolling, 2014, shortlisted Galway Short Screen Commission 2015, Fiddler's Green), and blog editor for firstfortnight.ie, the annual festival of mental health awareness through the arts. @fifilebon

Susanne Stich was born in Nürnberg and lives in the Northwest of Ireland. Her stories have been published by The Stinging Fly, Ambit and others. She is currently the Literary Guide for the Reading Rooms project at Verbal Arts Centre, Derry and writes regularly for online magazine The Honest Ulsterman.

Glen Wilson has been widely published having work in The Honest Ulsterman and The Interpreters House amongst others. In 2014 he won the Poetry Space competition and was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize. He was runner up in the Glebe House Harmony Trust poetry competition in 2015. glenhswilson@facebook.com

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review: Martelle McPartland on *The Last Fire*, by Helen Harrison

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