

The background image is a full-page photograph of a seascape. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, with bright light breaking through in several places, creating a dramatic, high-contrast effect. The ocean below is dark and turbulent, with white foam from breaking waves visible in the foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, greys, and whites, with a hint of yellow from the light breaking through the clouds.

# the incubator

issue 9 | fiction | memoir



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

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## *call for submissions*

*Our reading period is now open*

*(June 2016)*

*for new Irish writing.*

*For Issue 10*

*(due to be published in September 2016)*

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories**  
and **one scene plays** (10 pages max.)*

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



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## *editorial*

ISSUE 9 BRINGS MEMOIRS FROM IRISH WRITERS. THESE RANGE IN TONE, APTLY CONVEYING the shifting experiences of our writers who have grown up here; from Phil Young's beautifully told, and rurally set, *Memories*, to James O'Leary's heart-wrenching and unflinchingly honest *Admitted*, to Liz O'Neill's richly poignant recount in *My Sister's Things*.

Features editor Claire Savage has interviewed novelist, playwright and short story writer, Lucy Caldwell, about recent and upcoming projects, as well as her wonderful new story collection, *Multitudes*, which was published last month by Faber.

Short stories come from established and new writers alike; flash fiction is as refreshing as ever. There is something for every reader who appreciates great, succinct storytelling.

As for reviews, we have Jan Carson's short story collection *Children's Children*, and two poetry collections: Stephanie Conn's *The Woman on the Other Side* and *Evidence of Freewheeling* by Trevor Conway. All three books published by thriving, risk-taking Irish publishers: Liberties Press, Doire and Salmon. We have our first play review, of Paula Matthews' *Echoes*, which leads me nicely to remind you that for the next issue we are seeking one scene plays, still aiming to showcase not just the Irish short story, but forms that at times can find it hard to locate a readership.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

*Kelly Creighton*

Editor

*in interview: Lucy Caldwell*

*author of Multitudes*

**SHORT STORIES ARE A STRANGE BEAST ACCORDING TO LUCY CALDWELL WHO, WITH three novels and a variety of radio and stage plays to her name, has just released her debut collection. *Multitudes*, published by Faber & Faber in May, is a book of 11 short stories and for Caldwell, comes after years of working to perfect her craft. Indeed, she feels that her experience up until this point has been crucial in helping her produce the collection, which nevertheless, challenged even this accomplished writer to create...**

“I love short stories,” says Caldwell. “I made that rookie error though in thinking that because they’re short stories, they would be easier to write. I actually think they’re the hardest. I’ve worked on so many different forms of writing, but I think they’re definitely the most difficult to create. It’s taken me 11 or 12 years of writing to have the confidence to pull it off.”

Set largely in East Belfast, but with tales linking Belfast and London, *Multitudes* is narrated by all female characters – the voices of those living in her own lifetime, says Caldwell. “That sort of unifies them,” she says.

Told predominantly in the first or second person, *Multitudes* is very much a contemporary collection, looking at life in Belfast for today’s generation and containing more than a few ‘coming-of-age’ stories. It is not, then, a book dwelling on the Troubles, but rather, looks at what Belfast has become instead of what it has been.

Having lived in London for more than a decade now, Caldwell says that in England, many still see the sole Northern Ireland narrative as that of the Troubles. People assume they know



the story of the province, she says, not realising the country has moved on, and it is this 'new Northern Ireland' which is reflected in her collection.

"For years I've always seen my collection as having a theme, and all of the stories in *Multitudes* are 'other stories'," she says. "There's a story of a failed suicide attempt by a young girl; a story of two teenage girls who fall in love; a story of a young transgender girl; a story of people who are Belfast-Indian and mixed race. I'm trying to focus on the multiplicity of things."

Born in Belfast, Caldwell was first published at the age of 22, and has enjoyed a rich and varied literary career to date. Having written everything from radio and stage plays, to novels, short stories and memoir, she's also collected more than a few accolades along the way. These include the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the Dylan Thomas Prize and the George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright.

Caldwell further won the BBC Stewart Parker Award, and received a Major Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, her novel, *All the Beggars Riding*, was chosen for Belfast's One City One Book campaign back in 2013 and was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year. Shortlisted for the 2012 BBC International Short Story Award, Caldwell also previously won the Commonwealth Writers' Award (Canada & Europe) in 2014.

Having grown up close to her sisters, Caldwell attended all-girls schools as a child, so has always been surrounded by female role models. It is perhaps why she feels drawn to represent them in her work, adding that representation of women in plays is still somewhat lacking, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"I'm always conscious there are few parts for women in plays," she says. "Actresses say this to me as well. So I tend to write a lot of women characters – sisters and mothers.

"I've also been working with Sinead Gleeson recently, who anthologised *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* last year. Women just aren't anthologised, or they're ignored. When I think back to my own childhood, I think of the male politicians and leaders and then I think – where are the women's stories from that time?"

In *Multitudes*, Caldwell has included some previously published short stories along with newer work. One of the older pieces is *Cypress Avenue*, which was broadcast on BBC Radio 4

on April 1 this year, accompanied by Van Morrison's Cypress Avenue music – with his permission of course.

"That was a really hard story to do because it's written in the future perfect tense – for example, 'You will have done this,'" says Caldwell. "That was really hard to pull off."

With *Multitudes* still to be launched at the time of interview, Caldwell adds that feedback from early readers had been positive, particularly with regards the authenticity of the stories. Indeed, for her collection, she admits the stories are perhaps more personal than usual, as she's drawn more closely on her own experiences for inspiration than ever before.

"One thing I've really found about short stories is that they demand a greater degree of truthfulness," she says. "They demand to be written closer to the bone, though there's obviously a degree of truth in everything you write."

"The title of the collection – *Multitudes* – is about my son being ill when he was born. It felt liberating to write about something that was so personal to me. I felt I could use my craft to contain everything that had happened. I had been able to wrench something back. I think the fiction is better for that – for using my experiences. I've given more of myself and early readers have really responded to that."

Having written short stories over the years but focused her work more on writing plays and novels, Caldwell admits she always wanted to write a short story collection. Despite her literary success however, even *she* found it a challenge to fulfil her ambition – in more ways than one.

"Even though short stories do seem to be having a moment, it's hard to convince publishers to get a collection out," she says. "And they do a much smaller print run – maybe a quarter of that of a novel. They don't expect short story collections to sell very well..."

Despite this, Caldwell says there's "something really addictive about the quest to write the perfect short story," which presents the whole world of a novel, but in a much tighter space. Today, many short story competitions and journals request story submissions of up to 2,000 words, but Caldwell's tales are a little more liberal in length, mostly ranging from between 2,000 and 8,000 words.

"There are a couple of longer ones, but I'm always paring them back to the minimum they can be, so they do get shorter and shorter," she says. "The trickiest thing is that a short story

needs to work on a symbolic level as well. You're not just writing it for the narrative – there must be something on the metaphorical level. That's the magic of a short story."

As an experienced playwright, Caldwell adds that just like a play, short stories are best digested in one sitting, though a full collection is made for savouring.

"Readers should dip in and out of a collection," she says. "I was very much thinking of it like an album when I was structuring *Multitudes*. I think the stories get more loving and tender and more complex as the collection goes on."

Citing some of her favourite short story writers as Lucia Berlin, Chekhov, Katherine Anne Porter, Lorrie Moore, Claire Keegan, Sarah Hall, Samuel Beckett and Kevin Barry, Caldwell is also a fan of Junot Diaz. Indeed, she supports his mantra that growing up without stories and novels to see yourself in, is like not having a mirror.

"He says we need art to reflect ourselves back on ourselves," she says. "I think art is a mirror that shows not just how we *are*, but how we can *be*. I like the idea that maybe some girls who are questioning their sexuality or gender might read my stories and see the possibility for themselves in there."

Meanwhile, now that *Multitudes* is finished, Caldwell is busy working on other projects, though she says she prefers to tackle these one by one, rather than juggling work simultaneously. One project recently completed is her version of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, which is set in 1990s Belfast. The play will subsequently enjoy its world premiere at Belfast's Lyric Theatre in October 2016 as part of their Vivid Faces season.

Caldwell is also working on a new short story – "all about faith healing and other worlds in suburban East Belfast" – for an anthology, and has just finished a radio play. This will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour the week beginning June 20 and, in a marked change for Caldwell, who usually writes female leads, it centres on a male character.

"It's about male infertility – written from the point of view of the man," she says. "It's an inner monologue and is called *Dear Baby Mine*. A few years ago I was contacted by someone who said they had a story for me. He wrote a heartfelt email describing his own struggles with his infertility and his relationship with his wife. They eventually adopted a little girl, but he found that there was a real stigma around male infertility."

“It’s taken several years because I felt I had to honour the subject. I’m working with the producer Heather Larmour from the BBC for that.”

Certainly a writer who likes to keep herself busy, Caldwell is also working on a couple more short stories, which will be published later in the year. One of these is for Sinead Gleeson’s new anthology of women writers in Northern Ireland, which will be published in the autumn. She also has a new short story in the April 2016 edition of *Granta*.

“I find what interests me comes from working with different forms,” she says. “There are things I can do with radio that I couldn’t do with theatre, and with prose that I couldn’t do with drama. I think what I learn from working in different forms enriches the words I write.”

Like all writers, Caldwell has adapted her writing process in a way that works for her, though it might surprise some to hear that she retypes every word of her prose during editing. It might have given her repetitive strain injury not so long ago, but she is adamant that it’s the best method for her.

“I write really freely and tumble into it, then I have to go back,” she explains. “When I keep words on screen it’s hard to change them, but when I retype, it’s really hard to keep those clunky lines. And, if your characters start talking to each other, then you can also just go with that. For me, it’s the only way of editing it. I got the idea from Joan Didion and I think she got it from Hemingway.”

As for those short stories, they may be concise in length, but Caldwell’s final word on the subject is not to disregard them for it, and not to suppose that they are stories to be skimmed.

“I think it’s a fallacy that people should read short stories if they don’t have time,” she says. “I think a good short story is actually really demanding of you as a reader. They’re just so intense...”

**Interview by Claire Savage.**

***Multitudes* was published by Faber & Faber in May 2016.**

*short story*

## *Jennifer Kerr*

### *Aberration*

JAMES CLEARY'S BEDROOM IS CAST IN AN ARTIFICIAL SHADE. THERE IS ONE DOUBLE BED that is neatly made up. There are two bedside tables. The left one is more cluttered than the other. Strangers could guess which side of the bed he sleeps on. The right one is scarce. Dust can only cling to the surface because not one item spoils it. This annoys him. He thinks about placing a book there later, or taking a lamp from downstairs. He knows he won't.

There is a bookcase opposite his bed, stretching to the ceiling, full of other people's confessions. Next to it stands a chest of drawers. Three photographs sit, framed, on top. The first is a photograph of two children and their parents, the background is a beach scene and in the foreground the four people are squinting towards the camera, one of the children, the boy, is in the mother's arms and the other child, the girl, is standing next to the father, holding his hand. There is nothing remarkable about the photograph or the family it captures.

James stares at the familiar and static figures trapped inside that scene of seemingly familial bliss. He remembers the holiday. He was only six. His sister, four years older, tried to teach him how to swim by repeatedly pushing him down into the shallow water that lapped at the sand, before the dunes dipped unexpectedly and dangerously. He remembers, that feeling of being pushed down, over and over again. His small body being overpowered by his older sister and the shallow water, overwhelming as he was gasping for breath and physically exhausted.

He stares at the photograph. He looks at his small face, blinded by the sun, and his saturated hair, falling over his eyes. His mother looks radiant in the white sunshine. His

father's smiling face is a splinter in the middle of the scene. He notes how much his father looks like him. How much he looks like his father. His eyes and his stoic features. A roman nose. Blue eyes that don't romance, they engage. His gaze cannot help but feel drawn towards his handsome father and how he's holding his sister's hand with such care. She smiles easily in her red sundress.

He didn't learn to swim properly until he was in his twenties, when a building project took him to Morocco, to its largest city. The only one he really knew about when he was growing up with a father who loved to be the one to educate him in The Greats. He remembers having all of those romanticised notions and expectations and not once did he ever think that he would step onto Moroccan soil, never mind that he would be digging up that soil and creating homes for people who desperately needed them. Needed him. He stayed in Casablanca for three weeks until it was time for the project to commence and the entire group packed up and moved to El Borj. He missed Casablanca with an incredible ache; an ache that settled in him and was dispersed throughout those months. He adored those two months, using that ache to inspire him to do more.

He remembers, days before they joined up with the rest of the group, his Peter conspiring to take him to Ain Diab Corniche, to a private beach. He promised that the tide wasn't as rough there and that the breeze would be a welcome bonus in the searing heat. He was promised. The sea was rougher than Donegal. Peter laughed at this, he remembers. Because of course it was. He remembers feeling so cold, as the anxiety spread throughout his entire body and as he and Peter walked to the shore his heartbeat had taken on a jackhammer quality and was sure to be heard over the crashing waves.

It wasn't until Peter turned to him and smiled that he felt any semblance of calm in his body. Peter gave him simple instructions.

"Walk out until you can dip your shoulders under and when the water gets to your chest, stop and then remember to breathe," he said.

James did those things and he remembers that weightless feeling when Peter put out his arms and told him to lie across them. He was floating. He remembers feeling like he was flying, in that moment supported by Peter's strong arms.

He didn't learn to swim on this occasion, but he did gain an almost confidence. He and Peter spent the remaining few days in their resort pool practicing, each time adding some new technique, until it was time to leave Casablanca and join the rest of the group, back to reality and holding onto that feeling of flying for as long as was possible.

The second photograph is of a man in his late twenties, kneeling on a mud track. He's not looking at the camera. He's staring at his hands, full of earth. He's beaming, unaware of the moment being captured. He remembers the evening after that photograph was taken, but the rest of the day has been eaten up in the recesses of his mind. James sees tanned and wet bodies and showers that flowed, seemingly forever, into reservoirs. He distinctly remembers the mud being washed off Peter's face and his familiar features being exposed slowly and carefully by the water. An excavation. Their faces and bodies became more exposed and much more vulnerable the longer they stood beneath the heavy stream of water.

After Casablanca James was finished running away. Finished with sewing whatever he had left to sew after finishing his BA. He thought he was finished with Peter, but that was never the case. He didn't ever finish with Peter in his head. After Casablanca he was ready to return home and finish what he started, before his impromptu mission to Morocco. Four years in the seminary.

The third is a photograph of two men in their early twenties, easily guessed by the graduation gowns they wear. Their arms are around each other's shoulders and they smile at the camera. He reaches out and touches the photograph. He thinks of how young he was when that photograph was taken. He's older now. He feels older now. He stares at how they cling to each other. Peter's strong hand clutches to his shoulder. Their wide-eyed gazes cause a flowering of warmth to spread throughout his body. He remembers that day vividly. His parents were so proud. The most proud he had ever seen them. The image of his father shaking Peter's hand is burned into his memory.

He finds that image difficult to shake, Peter's easy smile and his father's calm distance. Peter once asked him, quite a bit later, why his father was a bit of a dickhead. He asked it with that same easy smile and all James could do was laugh awkwardly and have no real explanation, other than Father wasn't a dickhead, he was quiet and it was that silence



that fascinated and captivated James. Peter laughed, too and hit his shoulder, the touch lingering and his skin prickling.

James' eyes snap to the window-side wall and he notes the time. It's twenty minutes to eleven.

"It'll be grand." He hears Peter say.

Everything he needs is laid out neatly on his bed. Black everything, shirt, trousers, waistcoat, socks and underwear. Black shoes sit on the floor, polished and ready. Boxers and socks are up first. He then picks up his trousers and steps into them. He tucks his shirt into his trousers and grabs his belt off the bed. He thinks that everything looks and feels more expensive than they are. The belt is one of those reversible ones. Black for dressier occasions and the opposite side is brown, for more casual clothes. Like later this afternoon, when he'll pull on old jeans and breathe a long sigh of relief.

He slips on his shoes and then presses a palm across his mop of hair. He has always preferred his hair a little longer and unruly. His mother used to say he suited it. His father was never too keen.

"That aul mop head of yours, would ya get yer hair cut?" He hears his father chide, almost laughing.

His father still has the paternal power to cause a ripple of nerves to flow through him. Those natural nerves that he knows won't ever really go away. He longs for the same stoic silence. To be heard as intently as his father. He's jealous of the command his father has, and he's in awe of it.

Peter loved his hair longer. He said it made him look impossible to be ignored. He stares at his blank reflection and those words from the past produce an incomparable light to cascade through him and he knows how to hold onto that feeling. He knows how to keep Peter close in these moments.

"What time do we leave tomorrow?" He hears the words said in one breath against his skin.

He looks about the bedroom and notices his covered windows and quietly walks over to pull open his curtains and step back into the land of the living. He can see Lynette

Anderson in her garden, across the road and wonders whether she's already been to the shops and is returning home for a relaxing and uneventful Sunday morning and afternoon.

He grabs the necessities from his bedside table: phone, watch, checks the time as he closes it around his wrist, keys and then looks about the room again, before making his way onto the landing and downstairs, setting his things on the hall table. He walks down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the house and opens the fridge. He couldn't possibly eat, because when he eats something small in the morning and then goes to mass he can only hear his stomach talking, relentlessly, in the quiet of the chapel.

Regardless, he lifts a punnet of grapes from one of the shelves and closes the fridge. He carries it with him, down the hall, to the table. He pockets his phone, grabs his keys and opens the front door. The punnet of grapes, steady, under his arm.

James steps outside, into the brightness that could only belong to a morning in July and takes a deep breath, before turning and locking the door behind him. The chapel is close enough to walk to, but also far away enough to drive. He pauses on the step outside to have an internal debate with himself.

His parents would be driving and his sister and her husband and the children will arrive in their own car, too.

"Three cars to the one place," his father's voice reasons. "Then three cars back to the child's house for dinner."

He shakes his head and starts to walk towards the wall and gate. His car shines brightly and blinding behind him. Mrs Anderson is carrying bags into her house and notices him and she smiles in greeting, her eyes dart to her bags. He smiles back in return, and a small wave sneaks in, joining it.

He looks to the bright sky and knows that he's taking a self-sacrificing chance walking to the chapel, but he keeps his head slightly lower than usual and eats the grapes, not really looking at anything, but knowing the route intimately, staring at his shoes as he walks.

Mrs Craig says good morning. Jim Fegan nods at him. The McNulty boys, running ahead of their father and older sister, wave at him. All the while he gives curt smiles and eats his grapes. Walking. Another grape. Walking. Another grape. He can see the chapel.

Another grape. The sun shines behind it, as it sits intimidatingly and beautifully on a hill. Steps, more than most will bother counting, lead up to the front doors. He can see people walking up them. Early.

The morning mass never starts on time, he thinks. Another grape.

He continues walking and all the familiar faces pass him in a blur of familiar nods and smiles and nods. Another grape. Another nod. Walking. Walking. Hello. Nod.

His eyes are fixed on the pavement. Cars are passing. People are passing. He thinks that his parents have probably passed already, and his sister with her husband and the children, noting him, but not stopping.

“Awk sure he’s almost there. We’d only be holding up the traffic. Tell him later we meant to stop, sure. Just keep driving and leave him be.”

He reaches the gates and stops for a moment to let two cars drive into the chapel’s car park. The people inside the cars wave at him. He waves back, unable to recognise the faces that seem so pleased to see him.

He walks through the gates and across the car park, briskly, and he checks his watch. He reaches the steps and begins to climb them. He thinks, almost half way up, that he should have counted them this time. Tomorrow, he thinks, reaching the top and turning on his heel to see cascades of people and cars below. Instead of going through the main front doors he goes to the side entrance, to the left. He slips in, almost unnoticed, nodding to the Masons as they hold the door open for him and who then make their way to their usual seats, about five rows from the back on the left hand side.

Stage right.

He smiles at the people who say good morning and touches one man on the shoulder. He continues smiling and saying hello to the congregation, to the top of the aisle and then makes his way through a door.

Backstage.

He thinks about needing to find somewhere to throw the now-empty punnet of grapes. A punnet of air. It’s just a container. It was a vessel for grapes and now it’s an empty

plastic carton that he will throw away.

He throws it into a waste paper bin that sits, usually unnoticed by him, through the double doors. He wonders if that bin has always been there. He thinks that things just have a way of turning up, exactly at the right moment, when you need them most.

He closes his eyes and allows himself one moment. He allows himself one, tiny, fraction of reassurance and comfort.

Peter blinks back at him, indifferently, his eyes heavy with sleep.

He opens his eyes and looks down at the discarded plastic container inside its larger plastic prison. He checks his watch.

When he returns, through the double doors again, the chapel is almost full. One hundred pairs of blinking and familiar eyes stare up at him.

He slips down the right side aisle and makes his way to the back of the chapel, most of the eyes follow him, some eyes are staring blankly ahead of them and the rest are looking down to their feet or hands, purposely not looking at anything.

He stands at the back of the chapel and the Kennedys fumble past, smiling at him, he says good morning. They make their way to the front, where their usual seats, four rows from the front on the right hand side are free, untouched by all those around who knew that they would arrive eventually. Excluding the two weeks that overlap the end of July and the beginning of August, when they're usually on holiday.

He closes his eyes and listens to the footsteps and murmurs above his head, where the choir sit. He used to love this choir. When he first arrived at this parish and was welcomed like no other, according to his mother, he loved this part. The moment before the curtain goes up. When the congregation are a symphony of hushed whispers and shuffling feet. Then that first note would silence the crowd, the note that begins the entire spectacle. His heart rate would increase and his palms would be a little sweatier and the music would envelope him, and it presented him with that gift, with confidence.

The first few notes fall from a viola in training.

'How Great Thou Art' is the processional hymn this morning.

It has been the alternating Sunday processional and recessional hymn for two months because Siobhan, the viola playing granddaughter of the lead singer in the choir, has her orchestra exams in September. He refrains from rolling his eyes and instead opens them slowly, as he follows the procession of four alter-children, to the top of the chapel, and sits and waits for the music to cease.

A screech that could only come from Siobhan's viola alerts him that the procession has finished and he stands and walks slowly to the pulpit.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," he begins.

An Amen thunders throughout the chapel, a congregation in complete unison.

He stares out at the eyes that are fixed on him, and catches one of the Duffys tapping his fingers on top of the pew, completely distant. Lifetimes away. So distant. Gone to another world for forty-five minutes. That's how easy it is to be completely lost in your thoughts, and giving in to a greater and more desirable power. Leaving your body and following your mind down all the roads you have travelled, or could travel. Remembering and longing for some semblance or feeling of happiness that you can only just recollect.

He smiles in understanding. He cannot help but smile.

Then, completely clear and unwavering,

"I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault..."

It's eleven minutes past eleven.

The morning mass never starts on time, he thinks, lapsing in concentration.

## *Peter Hollywood*

### *The Welcome Centre*

THE WELCOME INFORMATION CENTRE WAS NOT THE SORT OF PLACE TO HAVE REGULARS; but it did.

Normally it was tourists. Visitors: poured off coaches, having just disembarked from teetering cruise ships tethered now to the docks at the waterfront. Or emerging, rumpled, from taxis. Or intrepidly appearing, humping back packs and rucksacks, hunched under glistening ponchos. All bundling through the smoothly automated, shining doors.

These visitors would glean some local information, which Lisa and her colleagues readily dispensed from behind the smooth and shining counter, while issuing the free maps of the city. Then the tourists would be on their way, venturing out into the city and its environs, and rarely return, unless it was to purchase tickets for a sightseeing tour or the Opera House.

But, although not the sort of place you'd think of having them, there were the regulars. The elderly man, for example, who appeared on an intermittent but regular basis, and whom they quickly got to spot from behind their chrome counter. He would shuffle up to them and leaning forward enquire in a loud, cracked voice:

– Parades! There any parades today?

Lisa, if the one approached, knew by now how to handle this enquiry. She would turn simply to a colleague and play-act in the fashion that had become customary to them now:

– Ruari; you rang the Parades Commission this morning, didn't you?

– Yes, Ruari would reply. And they said there were no parades planned for today.

- No parades? The old man would double-check.
- No. Not today, Lisa would confirm.

And this tended to be enough to accommodate him and he would turn slowly and leave.

Lisa preferred being a tour guide and escaping from behind the counter to take tours around the city sites or into the brisk sea air of the north coast.

- But here is the place of the first beheading, a German tourist excitedly realised, in the spitting rain, standing slant-wise on the slope of a wide, wind-swept glen-side. This is where they filmed the first decapitation!

All had looked round in awe.

Shooting of the American fantasy series took part in such surroundings and these locations were quickly establishing themselves as tourist magnets on a par with and of a strength equal to the urban murals and monuments that had, in previous years, drawn crowds, dubbed: 'Troubles tourists'. It was some sign of progress, Lisa thought.

The TV show overshadowed even the tour of the famed ship yards. She remembered vividly the afternoon when, in a moment of idle ad-libbing, she veered from her rigorously researched and well-rehearsed historical script and pointed to the square buildings across the dry dock, which had once housed the drawing offices. These, she impulsively informed her audience, were now the studios in which interiors and computer generated images for the series were conjured. A voltage of interest surged through the group. The visitors wheeled around with their cameras, iPhones and iPads, away from the two yellow, towering Krupp cranes and the modern, state-of-the-art museum dedicated to the city's very famous stricken ship; itself popularised by a movie.

The production was into its fifth series but now burly security men became an additional feature of the tours. They would appear suddenly to harry any gathering of tourists who tarried overlong, taking selfies and photos and otherwise disturbing the filming that had, with fame, become increasingly secretive and gnomish; in need of protection from their prying eyes. Afraid of spoilers. Once or twice the legal department of the production company had registered serious complaints about the guided tours and officials from the

offices of the First and Deputy First Ministers had scampered to intervene promptly for fear the Americans would suddenly decamp to Scotland to continue filming there.

After that last north coast tour, Lisa was back in the Welcome Centre; and so was the old man.

- Are there any parades today? he shouted at her; she could see bits of spit goose-bump the shiny surface of the counter.
- I spoke myself to the parades commission earlier and they say no: no parades today.
- Not anywhere? he persevered.
- Nowhere, she insisted.

As he turned away, she tried to read the gaunt, emaciated face. The word 'parade' had an unpleasant, flinty sound to it here; not the way it was with Mardi Gras or the Champs Elysses on Bastille Day or a Gay Pride Parade or even the St Patrick's ones in Boston or Sydney; and Lisa wondered if her announcement disappointed him; if it somehow spoilt his day.

One tour featured the employees of a North American travel agency who, for their productivity bonuses, had elected to visit the city and Lisa could only marvel at the limits to their knowledge and wherewithal.

- Remind me: is this a euro zone or a sterling zone?
- You mean we are going to have to change currency when we cross the border?
- Is there border control? How long is that going to take?

Lisa regarded the bus load, having exchanged looks with the driver beside her.

- Let me get this straight, she addressed them. You do all work for a travel agency in the States? Don't you?
- Yes, ma'm, they happily confirmed for her.
- This is part of England isn't it? One of their number asked next.



Shaking his head, the driver started the engine and the coach lurched into the city centre traffic.

- Not England, Lisa corrected patiently and politely. Part of the United Kingdom. Like Wales and Scotland.
- I thought we were in Scotland, another interrupted her.
- But is it a euro zone or a sterling zone?

Another of the Welcome Centre's regulars was a quite well-dressed, middle aged lady who would come in to ask about bank rates. There was the whiff of alcohol about her and the cuffs of her check jacket were frayed.

- Bank rates? Lisa had had to say the first time because she thought she had misheard the enquiry.
- Yes. What is the best bank rate at the moment, please?
- But this is not a bank. This is a tourist information centre.
- Well, the lady had countered. Am I not looking for information?

Lisa nodded and thinking that she couldn't argue with this logic, proceeded to direct the lady to a building society just down from the Centre.

The third time this happened, she was ready.

- Bank rates? she suggested before the lady could ask.
- Well. Yes, she said, looking a little crossly at Lisa.

Lisa directed her to what was a classic example of early 1970s brutalist architecture facing the City Hall. What she could also have added, for she had rigorously researched the location, but decided not to, was that this bank was described by the Department of the Environment as: 'a bold exercise in mid-20th Century modernism with a pronounced vertical emphasis...' She further omitted the fact that it had also been the scene of one of the biggest cash robberies in British criminal history. The haul included £10m of uncirculated Northern Bank sterling banknotes, £5.5m of used Northern Bank sterling notes, £4.5m of circulated sterling notes issued by other banks, and small amounts of other currencies,

largely euros and US dollars. The heist also nearly toppled the then fledgling peace process with rumours of paramilitary involvement.

None of this information she gave to the lady.

- Just out the door and to the right, you say? the lady confirmed.
- You can't miss it, Lisa assured her. It is six stories high.

Then, away again from the counter, there was the Chilean millionaire for whom the city's harbour police turned out in force to watch his dazzling, 60 foot yacht moor at the city centre waterfront. With her degree in Hispanic studies, Lisa was given the gig: to act as guide along with a designated driver, Eamon.

In the event, Lisa and Eamon had the car to themselves, as a black lacquered SUV rolled into the harbour estate to transport the millionaire, a fragile man, in his nineties, wrapped up in overcoat and scarf, and his entourage.

- I bet you that's bullet-proof, Eamon said, eyeing the vehicle in his rear-view mirror. We better not brake too suddenly. I wouldn't want that ramming into us.

That first day, Lisa only got to show them the ship yard; then the tour was cut short.

- Senor Carlos is cold, the English man who was obviously the Chilean's PA informed Lisa.
- But I've so much more lined up to show him, Lisa insisted.

And she had, having spent hours translating her notes into Spanish and learning them off.

- Don't worry, you will be paid for the full tour, the PA assured her. Senor Carlos is a generous man. We will see you again tomorrow?

That night, the yacht left the city and sailed up the north coast so that, the next day, Eamon had to drive the two of them up there to meet the party again.

- I googled him, you know, he informed Lisa. Last night. We're not playing games here. He's practically a South American version of Rupert Murdoch.

- I dread to think how he made his money, Lisa shuddered.

As they waited for the party to arrive down the gang-plank, one of the yacht's crew members approached Lisa.

- Can I ask you something? he said in a South African accent.
- Of course.
- When is it summer here? he enquired.
- This is our summer, Lisa replied, laughing.
- No. I'm serious, the crew-man said, shivering on the dock-side.
- So am I, Lisa assured him, patting him sympathetically on the shoulder.

The SUV rolled after them along the winding coastal route to the Causeway Centre. Here there was a delay getting tickets and the English PA was suddenly bearing down on Lisa.

- Senor Carlos does not wait, he told her.

Lisa tried to explain it was a difficulty with the computers.

- For anything, the man assured her.

In any event, by the time they got permission for the SUV to gain private access to the basalt stones, the cold was again too much. An off-shore north easterly was buffeting them. Also a message arrived into the Englishman's earpiece and that day's tour was also truncated with the order to immediately return to the yacht.

- But the tour's hardly yet begun, Lisa protested.
- It can't be helped, the PA declared. I've been instructed that we must leave now on the tide.

Back at the harbour, she spied the South African saw her and shouted from on board:

- We're wintering in the Maldives!

The PA thanked her on Senor Carlos' behalf and he handed her a £80 tip. This she split, 60/40 with Eamon, as agreed.

– Money's money, he shrugged.

The last time the old man paid the Centre a visit, Lisa was on counter duty and he approached her with his usual query.

– No, she firmly informed him. None today.

Only, on this occasion, the old man did not take the fake information for granted and exit. He stood his ground. He remained at the counter, regarding her so intently that she looked up again, a little startled, from the computer screen to which she had returned her attention having dealt, as she thought, with his enquiry.

– Why? he asked her. Why are there no parades anymore?

And though she did not in actuality know if there were any parades that day or not, and despite there still existing the marching season, and flag-protests, interfaces and flashpoints, peace-walls and bonfires; anniversaries, graveside orations and commemorations; that all these things were still occurring, she nevertheless said to the old man:

– Progress. It's progress.

Still the old man did not budge; he continued to stare at her across the polished counter, as if weighing up her assertion and she wondered suddenly if she had compromised herself: her job being to offer information not opinion.

Then he nodded and smiled and, turning, said:

– Thank you.

To which Lisa, looking after him, from her side, replied:

– You're welcome.

## *Noel King*

### *Riffing Through the Riff*

JEFF

Jack will have to cop himself on. I mean I am a man of responsibility now, I've got a partner, and a child coming. The Witnesses are my new band. I've let Jack and his new line-up keep the name The Brightness. He came up with it originally. He's clutching at straws, stones he wants to hit me with, with these legal proceedings.

It's sad. But I just can't talk with him. He won't get it into his head that people move on, get new lives, habits. It's like a gun in his hand when he plays. I don't like the fellas he has in The Brightness now, a talentless bunch. We're a direct Rock 'n Roll band, The Witnesses; play gigs like weddings and 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties. I joined 'em two months ago. I ate first of course; humble pie that is.

My attitude is – I gave it a go. Other fellas never did. I'm respected for trying to 'make it' with The Brightness. My mom says, 'God loves a trier'. I play five nights a week with the new crowd. It could be seven but we have our families. In the daytime I teach music. I write songs too, send them out to places for people to think about recording. I have the track record – excusing the pun – you see, songs I wrote with Jack have been recorded, some good artists too. That's what the fuckin' fight is about.

I don't know where the gulf of this shadow goes, back to his teenage years, I suppose; or maybe London. It just goes on and on and he's still got that mad ambition – he's going nowhere, should stick to writin' for other artists. I know though, he's scared to try writin' on his own without me.

There is a ruined statue of a horse in town. We hung out there as teenagers when it was newly constructed. Some sculptor got a shit load of dish off the county council to carve it, or chip it out, or whatever the fuck artists say. It's desecrated now: first the horses' balls,

then his tail, then his ears got chopped off and I don't have to tell you he's covered in graffiti. But the worst indignity has come: it must have taken great effort to chop his head off. Bastards. They managed it nonetheless.

I spotted Jack's stride in town today. Longed to approach him. We could take a beer, even go and hang out at the statue, for a laugh. If he'd used the gift of me properly, respected me, there wouldn't be so much pain now, for both of us. My future wife thinks this is very silly. She has a resentment of Jack. But *she* wasn't there in the early days. The victor will appear in public I know – press attention at last! – local though it will be. But I don't want a fight, a court. Yet however much I give; leeway, he will find more to charge against me.

More than half our journey – in life – lies before us. Perhaps older we will get back together. I admit I am bored by non-ambition gigging, without Jack's riffs. Especially the angry ones, the attitude ones.

JACK

We'd met when we were fifteen. Our parents were strict. No gigs. No pubs. No money anyway. Just practice, till we were old enough. T'was the best favour they could have given us. When we did get to play real places we were well rehearsed. Confident. A head start over other young bands who went out too quick.

There was supposed to be NO WOMEN. That was a pact. NO WOMEN, well 'serious' women, relationships like, until we 'made it'. April was the woman I met. But I didn't let *her* interfere. Came to the gigs, she did but never near a rehearsal. Now when I see Jeff with that Sandie I am sorry for myself.

Jeff turned his back, the bastard. Ambitious Jeff. Jeff who wanted to make it. Big. Other fellas in the band came and went. That wasn't too bad. It was me and Jeff were the talent, the songwriters too. He was the vocalist. I can't sing for shit.

We went to London the morning after my eighteenth birthday. After a few weeks my Dad came over to visit, stayed in the flat with us. He spoiled us for a week with good meals and stuff. Dad was fierce worried about drugs, but I laughed at him. Where would we get the money to do drugs? I mean fuck it, we could hardly afford the equipment. Nothing much happened for us in London, but the rain was delicious in London. If it was raining outside

after a hot gig, we went out in it. The sweat rose off into the rain from our backs. Cool. Delicious.

The seagulls cried at us and for us on the ferry home. 'Told ye lads, told ye,' they seemed to wail, the ugly fucks. So, on a whim we didn't go back to our own town, but got the bus from Rosslare to Dublin. My sister put us up. She was training in law. Had a tiny flat. We started rehearsing there during the day. But the fucking neighbours complained, didn't they.

We left. Went home. Got jobs. Me in a paint shop. Jeff in a pub. We spun a story: that we came home to write new material; a record company were into us, but we had to have all this material written, for the album, we said. Then that cunt, Sandie had to come and follow him over from England. Our drummer split too. Too much pressure off his parents, he said, they'd arranged another nine-to-fuckin'-five for him; apprenticeship to a carpenter this time. A dwarf came all the way down from Belfast to audition for drumming. He was some player, something about the size of him, like he was part of the drum kit almost. And he was gay too. I didn't mind that, but Jeff thought it might hurt our image, but he'd 'do for the mo.' And maybe a label would do our dirty work later and dump him. I was stunned. 'Well, fuck it, look what happened Pete Best,' Jeff said. That was a thing about Jeff. His fuckin' ruthlessness. It knew no bounds.

I started to read up stuff too while I was at home in Mam's house. All about the make up of barks of trees. It was that girlfriend, April in London, who got me onto it first. Real philosophical like. And I wrote some neat stuff. Songs. Hits? Jeff said: 'really neat stuff, but keep it for your solo album, will you'. That hurt me. I knew the material was good but I gave up on trees, got back to what I usually wrote about: women, unemployment, sex, small-town life. Heroes, politics and sex again. The whole time my guitar riffs fought harder, I waited to take it out on the world.

We got back to London the following year. Jeff found contacts over there and we got one recording session and a couple of good gigs. We had to lose the dwarf then too. Got another mean drummer who was originally from Galway. Jeff tried to blame me, said t'was my big idea to book the dwarf in the first place.

I had to catch a late night plane back to Ireland after a gig one Saturday night because my Dad had died. And then we missed out on a big show later that week. Jeff never held it against me, fair play to him.

Me father was a good old sort though, left five 'grand', yeah 5k, five thousand fuckin' pounds, to The Brightness. Dad's money got us a whole new set of gear. It's my gear now that Jeff has fucked off with that bird. We gave us one big treat with the money: hired a limousine to a gig in West Ham. The stunt backfired. The place took the piss out of us. Fellas like us in a Limo! Who did we fuckin' think we were?

Then we fought about a song, Jeff and I, about who wrote what bit etc. etc., that was unheard of before. Duhallow, was the name of the song, all about that place in Ireland. Then the stupid turd got that woman pregnant. Then more fights and shit, and we split.

Now we've a band each. There's a dispute in the courts about the rights to the songs. Rod Stewart recorded a few you see! And two other artists on the same label. They never liked *us* enough, but they liked our fucking songs, man. Picked 'em up for other artists from our demos.

I haven't spoken to Jeff for eight months. My riffs are faster now, I think I don't think of what I play, or want to play. I just play. I have a new line-up. We still call ourselves The Brightness, of course. I'll take 'em to London again, if they get it together, really together. We still need a good vocalist, the fella we have is crap, well he's okay, but there's no star quality in him. I have anger, aggression, attitude I suppose the press would call it, if they ever heard us.



## *Disharee Bose*

### *Remember to take your belongings with you*

THERE IT IS, HER VOICE AGAIN. IF HE WERE A DOG HIS EARS WOULD VISIBLY PRICK UP. Sticking a ticket for a 2012 Art exhibition between the pages, he allows the book to spring back shut. His eyes need to be shut, to really savour the moment. *"The next stop is Carey Road"*.

Her voice slides through him and lingers in his soul somewhere. He hears her every day, twice a day, fourteen times in all. She is predictable, no surprises. He knows what she will say, and when she will say it. *North Bridge*, just past the house with the blue door and before the advertisement for Caribbean cruises. *ElderBrooks*, when the train takes a sharp left and the stench of the city's drainage collectively rises and spreads towards the sea. At *Lawrence Hill* she remembers to warn anybody who is listening of the dangerously wide gap between the train doors and the platform. For *Boulder*, he has to time it from the last station while the train remains underground.

He knows her. Auburn curls crown her head on a pillow in the morning. She pins them away from her face in a neat bun for the day. She has long nails, not very long. They're usually painted red and at night he can hear her biting them. Her legs are long too, she keeps them hidden behind modest skirts but he sees them bare when she's alone with him. She doesn't ask for much, in fact she rarely speaks to him. When she does he knows what she will say.

His eyes are still shut and they've passed the last three stops before his. *"Fern Row. Please remember to take your belongings with you."* He knows he must force himself to get off. A few weeks ago, he stayed on for five more stops to hear her say something new. When he got off he waited for the next train and heard her repeat the stops backwards. It made his body shake and he nearly cried. He reserves those stops as a special treat now, the ones whose chronology he doesn't know by heart. Perhaps the next time

Philip Larsen sends him an email with red lines under all the adjectives he should lose from the report, he'll stay on for two extra stops. Just to feel that electricity of her voice buzz out new words.

In his flat he rips open a small sachet of porridge and pours boiling water over it in a ceramic bowl. He has recently moved the furniture around, so that the small square table, his dining table, fits neatly underneath the window sill. He can see a black kitten sitting on the low red-brick wall and he thinks about getting a cat. Perhaps he can lure this one inside, but he feels too tired to do it. Besides, he's not quite sure what he will feed it. He digs his free hand into the large pocket of his jacket for the diary and thumb-sized pencil he stores there. In the diary he writes under 12th January, *Buy cat food*. He realises that he hasn't taken off his jacket and it has been dripping rainwater on the floor.

The ticket sticks out from his book on the table and it reminds him of her. How her voice was especially warm and confident today. She's sitting on the opposite end of the table, staring at the kitten out of the window. She has just taken a spoonful of porridge out of his bowl and he can see her gulping it down, it doesn't scathe her throat.

In his room he balances the book on top of a stack of others on the floor. It is nearly eight now and he sits on the edge of his bed, staring at the crack on the wall for a few minutes. He has been measuring the crack and he gets up eventually to mark its increased length. *8 inches*, he writes with the pencil now transferred to the pocket of his trousers.

In bed he hears her voice as he drifts in and out of sleep. He can't see her clearly tonight. She is a faded mess of auburn curls, red nails and long legs. *Carey Road, North Bridge*. She hooks her upturned forefinger and motions him to follow her. He chases her hazy shadow through a meadow in the dark. He can see fireflies skipping from one blade of grass to another, but she doesn't turn her head to look at him. His feet collide with a red brick wall and he looks up to see a black kitten glaring down at him, his face is squashed against the bricks. He hears her voice beyond it, fading as she continues to run away. *Boulder. Beware of pickpockets*. He can't reach her.

It's raining again on 12th January. He has been listening to her voice, the book lies unflipped on his lap. He remembers how she ran away from him the previous night, refusing to show him her face. At Fern Row he mouths the words she says and then grudgingly gets up from his seat. On the platform he zips up his jacket and walks in the rain to the store. He notices

some people turn to look at him when he enters through the glass doors. His hair is soaking wet and his clothes drip rainwater. He never owned an umbrella. The pet-food aisle is easy to find and he stands in front of rows of canned cat food. The choices are endless. He picks out two of the tuna variety, only because the labels have a black cat posing with a near-smile.

He queues up at the till with the two cans in his hand, regretting having written the task in his diary and thus set it in stone. Then he hears her behind him. He freezes for a few seconds as her voice overpowers him. She is on the phone giving directions, that's how he knows it's her.

*"You'll see the carpark when you come out of Fern Row station. No, it's just across the road. You can't miss it."* Then the sound of a beep, a call ending and silence again. He has to turn around.

She has dyed her hair blonde today and straightened it too. She is also a little shorter than he remembered but that voice is unmistakable.

*"Remember to take your belongings with you,"* he says with a short laugh but she's not in the mood for a joke. She is being stubborn again, looking away from him. He tries to calm himself, there's a time and place for everything. He smiles, his body half turned towards her. She busies herself on her phone again and he is very close to knocking it out of her hands.

*"Sir?"* he hears the unpleasant voice of the cashier. He places the cans on the counter and pulls out his wallet. He purposely counts the change even though he knows exactly how much he has in the small flap. She's still behind him and he wants her to speak again, but she's in a sour mood. She remains silent.

*"Thank you,"* the cashier says and he drops the cans into one of the pockets of his jacket and steps away from the queue. He can look at her directly now as she steps forward and places a blue basket full of groceries next to the cashier. He wants to give her a hand, to pay for her shopping, but not when she's in this mood. He remains standing and ignores the glances that some of the people in the queue throw at him. She refuses to look at him.

*"Thank you,"* he hears her say to the cashier as she reaches out for the two plastic bags of groceries. Her voice calms him down, he forgives her.

She is walking much faster than he expected her to, but he manages to keep up. She turns to look at him finally, but she is not motioning him to follow. He smiles to himself. *That little elf, always keeps me on my toes.*

She bursts through the doors of the store, the bags in her hands are straining her down but she maintains a quickened pace. He hops behind her, only inches away. He knows he should say something, urge her to speak but he is at a loss of words. She runs towards the carpark and he knows what he must do before she gets away this time.

But a man is waving at them, smiling at her. She drops the bags on the road and runs to him.

She was an imposter anyway.

# *flash fiction*

## *Doreen Duffy*

### *Skip*

THIS IS THE THIRD DAY I'VE WALKED ALONG THIS ROAD, WELL, CUL-DE-SAC REALLY, THAT'S why you'd need a reason to enter. The first day I walked quickly to the end and threw my arms up when I reached the wall as if I didn't see it coming. I shook my head, turned on my heel. On my way back, I stole a look into number fifteen with its closed blinds, unseeing eyes outside and in.

A skip piled high with life stood squarely covering the door but I didn't need to see those discoloured digits. Four mattresses slanted at different angles to keep what's inside in, three belonged to the children, we've long left home, haven't spoken since. The double stood weighty at the top, tilted over everything.

I shivered, the sun went behind the clouds, the shadow drenched the contents, took the glare off dressing table mirror, stained with her make-up it looked beaten up and old leaning against the yellowed headboard, his side with its impression of someone who lay for years relaxed in repose. The matching bedside lockers fell together, drawers gaped open, mouths with nothing left to say. The pile has grown; the smaller pieces thrown in as well. The monopoly board on top, I can hear the tap tap tap of the top hat as I land for a moment on expensive streets, but all the time my eye is fixed on 'go' feeling the papery memory of two hundred euros hush money in my hand.

## *Tanya Farrelly*

### *Carnival Ride*

‘TELL ME SOMETHING YOU’VE NEVER TOLD ANYONE BEFORE.’

We were at the top of the big wheel, legs dangling – cacophony of shrieks and tinny music rising up from below. Daniel leaned forward in the narrow seat causing it to rock dangerously and I grabbed for the metal bar.

‘I hit someone once.’

‘You mean like a punch?’ he laughed.

‘No. Driving.’

When I turned away from the bay Daniel was no longer smiling.

‘Jesus. What happened?’ he said.

I shrugged. ‘I was overtaking a bus – going fairly slow – and next thing I felt a bump. The windscreen had cracked – he must have gone right up on the bonnet – but I didn’t see. I didn’t know what had happened till this dark shape got up from the ground in front of me.’

‘Christ. Was he all right?’

‘He’d got off the bus and run straight out without looking. His girlfriend was waiting for him at the other side. She was there helping him up off the ground by the time I got out of the car.’

‘And what happened?’

‘I asked him was he okay, if I could take him somewhere. He said he was fine. They were young. Fourteen maybe. I drove off – but I kept thinking, I should’ve taken them somewhere. What if something had happened to him after, if he collapsed? Next day I called my insurance company to fix the windscreen. I told them some kids had broken it. It was that kind of neighbourhood; they didn’t ask any questions.’

The wheel slowed to a stop and the attendant released the safety bar. We got out and walked through the crowd thick with kids eating candyfloss. A chill breeze crept through my thin leather jacket. ‘That’s some story,’ Daniel said. He’d forgotten to take my hand.

## *Bernard O'Rourke*

### *Househunt*

AMONG THE TERMS I'VE WRITTEN INTO MY NOTEBOOK LIST AS A PRIORITY (<250 DEPOSIT, street & park adjacent, bright red front door), I catch a frag of lingering doubt that's been captured by the camera and pasted right there to the listings website. I'm stretching out with the laptop resting on me (near my face) and the rooms of the home come up colourful on the screen in front of me in a shade that looks like it's been burnt into the walls. And out beyond the back window swing a loop of almost-subterranean gravestones kicking their way out of the old earth. In the next image in the gallery a colourful arrangement of flat furniture overlooking the corner of what could only be a cemetery, and try though the photographer did there was no way to avoid capturing that. In the middle distance these gravestones look like little doors. Nothing barer than a field of doors spattered across the windy sweep of this brown empty cemetery. An old depository and already probably filled up. No new deposits, just long ago meats now converted into the soil, shut away behind weathered stone doors. And out beyond that a stained day of colouring leaves and the tops of what can have been umbrellas populating a distant street, rendered artistically abstract by the pixilation of the image. The view maybe seventy per cent ideal (street, river, trees – check, check, check), would be near one hundred if it wasn't surprised by the apparition of a cemetery. The rain and park and water and afternoon sun coming in though the other windowpanes in the rest of the images in the gallery are a variety of lie, denying the existence of a cemetery. This one hints at its edges (the field of little doors) but only if you knew what was there already, knew that there was more to the backdrop depicted in the photos than the dripping of a receding red sky. If you knew where to look these photos are littered with clues to the presence of the cemetery just outside the window of the back room. Like the photographer couldn't quite bring themselves (him? her? them?) to abandon its existence. Like it (the cemetery, the field of little doors) kept twisting its way into the



rooms being snapped for this sample preview. I decide not to pursue this potential new home any further.

# *Anne Griffin*

## *The Gift*

THE BANG OF THE BIG BRASS HANDLED DOOR AGAINST THE WALL RESONATED AROUND the room, threatening the security of the sacred heart hanging above the blackboard.

‘I’m here for the learnin’,’ Patrick Connors announced, standing in the doorway of third class, on his first day at St Hilda’s National School.

We were never certain he had told the truth when he said he was eight like the rest of us. Standing there, he seemed huge. I was convinced he could pull a truck with a rope tied around his waist just like I’d seen Geoff Capes do, the previous Saturday on the telly.

‘Honestly Missus, I am eight. Cross me heart, ask me mother,’ he assured Miss Brady, coming to stand beside her, to see what she had been up to.

‘And where *is* your mother?’ she asked of the boy at her shoulder, lowering the duster, its job still unfinished.

‘Out the road Missus. She tault me to come up here. Well I tault her I was comin’. I wanted to see where all these ones was goin’,’ he said inclining his head in our direction.

‘I see, and have you seen Mother Bernard yet?’

‘Mother who missus?’ he asked, drawing on the board with the chalk he had found in his investigations.

‘Right so Patrick let’s go sort this out.’ Miss Brady returned both of their utensils to the ledge below. ‘Class, continue with your work, quietly. I’ll be back in a moment.’

On leaving, Patrick turned to us and smiled the smile of an emperor looking upon his subjects approvingly, assuring us he would return.

Unattended, the classroom buzzed with anticipation and intrigue.

‘My Daddy says his Daddy should get a job.’

‘He smokes. He does, he does. I’m telling you, I saw him.’

‘Mammy hides when his mammy calls at the door begging.’

I added nothing to their declarations but gathered their words, storing them for careful consideration. Our work remained abandoned until a few rushed attempts when Daniel Masterson called out that he could hear footsteps approaching.

Patrick took his seat at the front. It was always to be his, even when empty no one dared so much as touch it. He was away, quite a lot as it turned out. On each return I listened to him, mesmerised by his stories of the lands he had travelled, the great sights he had seen and the other classrooms he had attended – Kilorglin and Kiltimagh, exotic sounding places that I was sure must have been in Asia, not that I had any idea where that was either. Knock, however, I knew from the plastic holy nary water bottle my mother doused me with every morning was somewhere in Ireland.

There was no game in the yard that Patrick could not win. The most sought after title was that of 'Sticks' champion, our version of the long jump. At first the boys took their defeat on the chin. But as the weeks and months went by their resentment grew until they decided the time had come to confront this interloper, this other and his triumph.

\*

That day my mother had given me a purple snack as a treat. I loved those bars, especially the challenge of figuring out which end held the thickest bit of chocolate. I had looked forward to it all morning, forgoing its temptation at little break, deciding to leave it as a reward for after my soggy tomato sandwiches at big lunch. But by then everything had changed.

'You're nothing but a smelly, rotten tinker,' Daniel Masterson shouted, advancing on Patrick in the yard, with the rest of them behind. They cornered him between the wall and the games shed. He eyed each one, calmly and slowly.

'Five buffers, is that it? Five of ye and one of me?'

'Surprised you can count, Connors.'

'Fuck you and your speckie four eyes, Masterson.'

And then he had climbed like a superhero scaling the wall of the shed until he stood at its summit.

'Come on then, I'll knock ten bells out of yez. What, scared are yez?'

I wanted to shout up to him, to cheer him on, to let loose my pride at his courage.

But I didn't. I could not even lift my head. Instead, I scratched my palm raw in embarrassment and shame. The throng pressed forward and the jeers rose louder, until Mother Bernard stamped her authority, ordering us back to class, away from the fray, from him, from his ferocity.

'Yeh, yez better run, yez chicken shits.'

Our classroom window looked out onto the main road and therefore could not tell me what was happening beyond the cloakroom door. The threats being called to force him down and the punishments still to be administered. I scratched and scratched again.

Eventually, Patrick burst through the door. Red in the face, he stared down his tormentors. As he reached to take his jumper from the chair, I knew what I must do. Rising from my seat I made my way to him, to offer him my gift. I pushed it toward his hand.

'Agnes Reilly, sit down right now,' Mother Bernard roared at me.

But I did not and stood blocking his path, refusing to release him. His eyes met mine for the briefest time before he looked below at my purple snack. And when his grazed, bruised hand took it, I stood aside to let my emperor pass, to face his inevitable eviction.

*Rachel Barber*

*Paper Anniversary*

NOT TODAY, MARTIN THOUGHT.

The day was undoubtedly coming – and soon – but he knew this wasn't it. It wasn't a self-serving desire to postpone it, but there were days for matters like that. Momentous days. The kind where you either stepped up, embracing the inevitable truth, or crumbled under its shattering weight. No, today was a day for celebration. Not to dig one's head in the sand – just to appreciate life as it was, before everything changed.

It was their first wedding anniversary. Paper. Everyone warned him the first year of marriage would be the hardest. Living together for the first time, adjusting to each other's rhythms and quirks, hashing out their differences in a crescendo of arguments and affection. In reality, it had been far harder than he could have ever anticipated.

He stopped in at the florist first to collect his order – a luminous cloud of pink foil balloons and roses. It was rather large and delicately assembled, so he allowed the staff to transport it to the car whilst he paid. He recalled the last time he had stood in this particular shop, almost a year before. The day after the wedding, they had strolled past en-route to their new house. Him laden down with shopping essentials, her holding their fresh marriage certificate safely encased in a manila envelope. She had remarked on the quirkiness of the handmade displays in the window – the vivid medley of colours and ornately – tied arrangements. In fact her reaction had been so animated; her features seemed to shimmer with eagerness. They were both still riding the wave of elation from the wedding, and her delight was infectious. As he watched her, he could feel a grin rising on his own features, seeping into the grooves of his face. He made a mental note to return to this shop on some future occasion to surprise her. By that time he would have no doubt racked up an extensive tab of domestic sins and relationship wrongdoings, which would be instantly forgiven by this one attentive gesture. It was a favourite memory of his and one that he was content to replay for the remainder of short car journey.

The familiar turquoise and white entrance sign lurched into view, the hospital name partially obscured by illegible navy graffiti. He'd learnt through experience, that arriving twenty minutes ahead of visiting time avoided the thankless queues and irate tussles for a decent parking space. His usual route took him through the revolving doors and up in the lift to level 3, where he followed the signs for the maternity unit. Martin hated this part, forcing his way through the throng of ardent new fathers, weighed down with their own assortment of floral arrangements, teddies and balloons.

He forced himself to look away, pretending instead to study the signs for ICU. He had no need to of course. He had traversed these muted, grey corridors day and night over the last few months. He rounded the final corner and the single room came into view, his wife's name printed neatly on the sign outside. The door was slightly ajar, a chink of daylight slicing shadows onto the glossy floors. He entered her room purposefully; eager to finally deposit the huge bouquet. He spent a moment or two fussing over where exactly to put it. Anything to delay the moment when he actually had to confront her sallow, inert form in the bed. A nervous throat clear behind him alerted him to his wife's consultant timidly propped against the doorframe – a hesitant expression on his face.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jamison I have the forms we discussed," he said, gingerly proffering a paper sheath of documents. Ironically they were a similar creamy pink hue to the floral arrangement now adorning his wife's bedside locker. Martin offered a tremulous smile, before taking the bundle from the consultant's extended hand. The forms weren't a surprise. There had already been many days given over to discussions. Lengthy, varied, littered with medical jargon, CT scans, and assessment scores. There had been days of arguments, pleading and denial – more time, a different treatment, another opinion. It had been futile. He could drag it out, but Martin knew within himself that the answer was and would always be his signing those pink forms.

The consultant nodded quietly in response before exiting the room – more compassion in his silence than any words he could have offered. "Not quite the paper gift I would have hoped for today." Martin chuckled under his breath, still half-expecting her to react with an irritated sigh. But his cringe-worthy jokes were for him and him alone now. Her whole spirit, even her annoyance, was lost to him forever. That had been one of those momentous, pivotal days, where he had been blindsided with the awful news of her accident. A precise combination of poor weather conditions, bad timing and one inexperienced young driver.

Simple, yet finite. And here lay his wife, now as blank and vacant as the unsigned forms which would seal her fate.

Blank forms soon to be written upon, in turn writing the new chapters of a life he did not want to live. A life without his often infuriating but precious wife – devoid of all the trivial arguments and warm affection that constituted their shared life. Without the drive home from work looking forward to a cup of tea, a fierce hug and the support of someone eternally in his corner. But for now, he wanted to just linger on the last page of this life, the world in which they both existed, where their unfulfilled hopes and dreams hovered silently in anticipation, not yet dispersed.

He stroked the cool, pale face of the only person he would ever truly love; her rigid form as pale and crushable as the pink pages in his taut, white fist. Soon, he would sign the forms that would permit her to slip away forever. But not today.

## *Caroline Kieran*

### *Vigil*

I AM LYING ON THE FLOOR UNDER NANA'S BED. IT IS AFTER MIDNIGHT, THE HOUSE IS STILL and everyone is asleep except for me and Nana who is dead. I couldn't get over to sleep when they made me go to bed. How could I with all the racket: the rumbling chat and laughter from below, the tramping up and downstairs all evening? Now that it's quiet, I still can't get to sleep what with worrying about someone breaking into the house and trying to steal Nana.

I remember Dad reading me a story last year about body snatchers. Mum gave out stink to him because I had nightmares for weeks afterwards and kept coming into their bed in the middle of the night. Tonight I'm taking no chances. Besides, what if spiders start crawling all over her – she won't be able to squish them, not with the rosary beads strapped around her fingers.

She's lying in a big black iron bed that she brought with her after Granda died when I was about five or six. Mum said it was a monstrosity, that it didn't go with the spare room's neutral colour scheme and pale birch fitted wardrobes, but Nana said that she had been married in that bed and she was going to die in that bed, so that was the end of it. I spent days puzzling over her getting married in that bed. Big and all as it was, how could she, Granda, the priest and all the guests have piled on to that bed without it collapsing under the weight of them? When I plucked up the courage to ask her, she burst out laughing, "Och, God love you, you innocent wee craythur. Sure that's only a figure of speech – we didn't actually get married in the bed. We bought it after we got married!", and continued to chuckle to herself as she got on with her knitting.



That was the only bad thing about Nana living with us. She knitted non-stop – jumpers, cardigans, scarves, hats, gloves – I think she'd have knitted shoes for us if she could have figured out a way to make them waterproof. The problem was that she was a very bad knitter. Nothing fitted properly; she dropped every second stitch and used cheap, scratchy wool in day-glo colours. The finished products looked like something you'd find at the bottom of a recycling bin. They were horrible and no matter how much we railed against wearing Nana's creations, we were made to wear them, at least until we left the house and then stuffed them into the back of the car, our bags or in the garden shed.

There will be no more ugly, ill-fitting knitwear. She will never again be sitting in her comfy chair by the patio door in the kitchen watching out for us as we make our way round the side of the house and through the back door. I will never again hear her say, "How was school today, Michael, did you get all that Maths homework I helped you with right?" Never again, will she slip me a fiver when Mum isn't looking and whisper, "Go and buy yourself a few sweets with that, son," knowing that a fatwa on confectionery has just been declared.

She will never again tell me the story about when she and her sister, Annie, crept out late one summer's evening to visit the fairy tree in her daddy's meadow and Annie, who was as awkward as bedamned, tripped and fell into a nettle patch on the way and had to be carried home roaring and crying because they couldn't find any docking leaves in the dark.

And who will give me a smart answer to put Josh Smith in his place when he calls me "gay boy" just because I do Speech and Drama and didn't get picked for the Year 7 football team?

Not Nana, not anymore. I am winded as if someone has punched me in the stomach with a boxing glove stuffed with ball bearings. I am conscious of her directly above me. I know that she is lying on a white lace bedspread, looking quite unlike herself, skin ash-white and waxy, eyes cemented together, jet-black rosary beads twisted around alabaster-smooth hands. I want to be up there beside her, stroking her hair, whispering secrets in her ear, squishing any spider cheeky enough to come near her. I was alone with her for a couple of minutes before I heard a door open and footsteps on the landing heading for her room, so now I am lying on the floor underneath my Nana's bed.

Dad has no idea I'm under the bed and I'll be killed if I show my face now especially since

he's been in here for quite a while. He is making a funny noise, the kind of noise you make in school when you have a bad cough but you know it's driving the teacher and everyone else mad, so you try to keep it in but you end up making this gulpy sound even more annoying than if you had coughed your guts up to begin with.

It's not so bad down here with Dad and Nana up there. I will wait until he goes and then I'll roll out and clamber up on to that big bed and we'll have a good old chat. Nobody is going to snatch Nana while I'm around.

## *Colin Dardis*

### *Letter to a Fellow Poet*

HAS ANYONE TOLD YOU THAT YOU LOOK LIKE RICHARD BRAUTIGAN? WITHOUT THE moustache, of course. Take away the facial hair and he's you, or you him, whichever you prefer. I have a copy of *Trout Fishing in America* with his photo on it. I'm looking at it now, and I see you, hairless. You need to take away the woman in the photo, and the statue of Benjamin Franklin, and the poplar trees, but that assured pose is still you.

I saw you read in the Black Box last week. I don't know if you knew I was there, I'm sure you would have said hi if you did. You read two poems from your new collection which I have a copy of, but I couldn't recall either poem. I only read the collection once, quickly, so I could tell you I had read it. Between the covers, I lost my recollection for words and they fell out of my head so carelessly, after you took such precision placing them there with your pen; like a surgeon reattaching nerves to a spinal column. The blankness of the bone echoed what whiteness I saw on your pages. My eyes didn't seem to properly register the little black squiggles. No, my eyes *did* register them, I just can't remember, but I'm sure I enjoyed their noise at the time.

I smiled at your words and they smiled back at me, grateful for a reader. But if they knew that this reader was so forgetful, their eyes would have been averted, like a young woman in the streets catching you trying to make contact. Some days I felt blind, or maybe the world was blind, or just this city. You might understand, but I'm looking at Richard and his eyes are in shadow.

It's my birthday next week, Richard. You could write me a birthday poem. Nothing too epic: you might be Homer but I am no Odysseus. Just something to remind me of my existence, to let me know that I matter to some degree. A modicum of validation would be nice. But I would balk at it and sneer, asking what does your opinion matter. I can live without your nod. Sorry to be so ungrateful, but I've learnt to live without many things.

Do you care for prose, Richard? You've done journalism, so I suppose you might. You were good enough to show me in your television feature, but perhaps I was just there at the time and the camera had an appetite that didn't pause to discriminate. I have been on camera before, have been given more validation and ridicule than you could muster. My image ambushes me; it is not that I am an ugly man, but the contexts I find myself in don't compliment me as a man. Does that make sense to you, Richard? You are an academic, so I hope it will.

I should leave you alone now; perhaps I shouldn't have bothered you in the first place, but thank you for taking the time to read this. Maybe these words will remain unread, unseen, and it's not for want of sight, Richard. Pages can easily be ignored and dismissed. Maybe I should seek you out and shout at you instead, but this world can cultivate deafness until everyone seems senseless.

## *Margaret Cahill*

### *Meanies*

"SERIAL KILLER, PAEDO OR MENTALLER?"

"Wha'?"

"Yer man over there. He's what? Fifty? Fifty-five? And eating a bag of Meanies?"

I peer through the insect-spattered windscreen of the van at the lunchtime crowd leaving the petrol station shop. The scurrying hoards are laden down with hot chicken rolls, packets of Tayto, Dairy Milk bars and tabloid newspapers. I spot the man with the greying hair who has provoked Kevin's latest rant.

"What's wrong with eating crisps?" I ask.

"Not just any crisps. Meanies."

"And?"

"It's like my Nanna used to say, 'Never trust a man wearing a duffel coat on a sunny day'."

"What are you on about? He's wearing a hoodie, not a duffel coat."

"Inappropriateness. That's what I'm talking about. You've got to watch out for it. They all show signs, little ones no one notices at first. Then one day something goes off inside their heads and next thing you know they're stealing babas from the school gate or tying you up in your kitchen, pulling out your fingernails for kicks. A man eating age-inappropriate crisps is one of those signs."

"Maybe he just likes them."

"Synthetically produced pickled onion flavour? At his age? I doubt it. I'd say it's the sign of a mentally scarred childhood he can't help hankering after. Yer man there probably spent years at his Daddy's knee, sucking on acidic pickled onions from a jar instead of the gobstoppers no one would buy him. That sort of perceived neglect festers malevolence in a person. Believe me."

"Ah, would you go 'way out of that. You've been watching too much Dr. Phil again, that's your problem."

“Well, everything happens for a reason and the more you understand your fellow man’s motives, the better your chance of surviving in this world.”

Kevin briefly pauses his theorising to take a bite of his sandwich but promptly resumes, obviously spewing tiny particles of semi-masticated food in my direction as he speaks.

“Or,” he continues, stabbing the air with his sandwich. “He grew up in a staunchly Republican family out in The Glen and his predilection for this most British of flavours has filled him with the kind of pervasive self-loathing that will eventually lead to death, his own or someone else’s.”

“And what about you?” I ask, looking at the three-sugared tea, cheese sandwich, Milkybar and packet of Rich Tea biscuits that are threatening to overthrow the four-inch plastic Mary from her perch on the dashboard.

“What about me?”

“Serial killer, paedo or mentaller?”

## *Tony O'Connell*

### *The Stroke*

MICK DONOVAN PARKED THE NEW MERCEDES AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE, AND PULLED HIS hat down to hide his face a little from the passers-by.

O'Connell Street was busy as usual. He was nervous. He stretched to the glove compartment and took out a newspaper and pretended to read it. His brow was moist. It had been difficult to get O'Hagan out of the Mater Hospital so soon after his stroke, but he had succeeded. He needed eleven votes and had them lined up when O'Hagan suffered the stroke. Ten wouldn't do.

Now, he had to wait. Later, he would bring O'Hagan back. If all went well, he would be €5 million richer.

Some of the councillors favoured the rezoning of the agricultural land to residential, and would vote for it in any event. A few needed the brown envelope. O'Hagan was one such.

After what seemed like an eternity, he recognised some of the Councillors leaving the council offices. He watched, heart pounding. O'Hagan came out slowly, and walked with difficulty towards the car leaning on his cane. His face was white.

Donovan opened the back door, and O'Hagan slumped into the leather seat.

'Well?'

'It passed.'

'Great! By much?'

'By one vote.'

'God, O'Hagan, you are a star. A bloody star.'

He passed an envelope back to O'Hagan, whose hand was shaking.

'A little extra for your trouble.'

O'Hagan said nothing.

He started the car, and drove down O'Connell Street towards the Mater Hospital. The traffic was heavy, and every red light seemed to be against him.

At Parnell Square he heard a thump. He looked in the mirror. There was no sign of O'Hagan. He pulled over to the footpath.

O'Hagan was on the floor of the car, still clutching the envelope. He knew immediately that he was dead.

He panicked. He opened the back door and removed the envelope, stuffing it in his pocket.

A passer-by stopped.

'My God, is that man dead?'

Others gathered. Soon a small crowd. Questions. Advice. Some shocked. Some gawking. He didn't know what to do.

'I've dialled 999,' someone said.

'Was he going to the Mater?'

'Did you say an act of contrition in his ear?'

'Was he a relation?'

And then, 'I know him. He is – was – Councillor O'Hagan. An awfully nice man.'

The last speaker was full of self-importance. He pushed forward, continuing to talk,

'He helped me out with getting rid of joy riders who made my life hell. Gave their names to the Guards, so he did. A great man. How did you know him?'

Then the sound of an approaching ambulance, siren blaring.

'Yeah, he did me a favour too,' said a white-faced Donovan. 'A big one'.





*review: Brian Gourley*

*on The Woman on the Other Side*

*by Stephanie Conn*

STEPHANIE CONN'S DEBUT POETRY COLLECTION *THE WOMAN ON THE OTHER SIDE* IS marked – as the reviews on the back cover have already noted – by a stunning sense of the visual, a striking contrast between interiors and exteriors and a trinity of inspiration drawn from the seventeenth century Dutch Golden Age, the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire and modern Australia. The loci of Conn's wide-ranging imagination are to be found in Vermeer's paintings, Tsvetaeva's poetry and Tasmania, Australia's only island state, but that is not to say that she is unafraid to explore other territories and periods, and is it to her credit that her poetic realm traverses the globe from the snowy Canadian midwinter to the Tyrone Guthrie centre.

The first reading of this collection is one that is heavily imbued with the contrast between light and dark – a contrast strikingly reinforced by Conn's immersion in the artistic tradition of the Netherlands. Anchoring herself in the paintings of Johannes Vermeer, Conn can hence move between 'Painting Light' and 'Blinking in the Dark' with relative verbal deftness. In between, the poems seem to lay great initial stress on the simultaneously centricity and marginalisation of women within art history. The eponymous and opening poem of *The Woman on the Other Side* conveys the idea of a woman ill at ease in a foreign land overwhelmed by the strangeness of new circumstances and a new language.

This sense of epiphany and the revelatory surfaces in Conn's poetic reinterpretation of Vermeer's 'Woman Holding a Balance' and 'Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window'. Vermeer's subjects are transmuted into an obsession with the textures of light and dark and the exposition of inner lives, and above all, a seeming desire to repaint the (female) subject outside the gaze of the (male) artist:

She removes her pearls  
    sets them on the counter  
 with her golden chains  
    to cool and collect dust ('Painting Light')

There is a cool and calculated ambition in this: both in the aforementioned desire and in the careful and methodical use of language. Conn is sparing and at times brutally so in her use of language, applying a great deal of pressure on her choice of words. Her fascination for translating the visual language of painting into the verbal idiom of verse in turn leads her to 'rewrite' works by Hopper, Chagall and Naumov. Like Mandelstam, her deft acuity of vision delights in the vivid contrast of colour and shade:

Tell me of the green fields mapped in your mind/  
 And the winding paths that always lead you back/  
 How your father held a scythe in his dark hands

Conn's verse is also one of artful and surprising deception in which language conveys fruitful and unexpected shades of meaning for a collection so obsessed with the visual and the spatial, this is a collection that can quickly and without warning delve into the ambiguities and hidden depths of language itself – an aspect that lends Conn's verse a sense of the treacherous and the destructive. This varies from a piercing and pain-filled exploration of uxorial jealousy in 'I Hear Their Laughter from Another Room' to a subtle questioning of the ostensible benefits of space exploration in 'August Moons' – a poem that displays a clever ability to work on several levels:

The lunacy of man steps out from the cycle of hours, cuts through space at speed/  
 to soar above a ball of blue and white and walk on silver dust to speak measured words from his helmeted mouth.

It is hard to know which facet of the poem is the greater accomplishment: its own 'lunacy' or the linguistic richness of its title. In Gaelic August is 'Lunasa' – the month of the moon – when the summer reaches its full maturity and where the idea of the harvest moon inaugurates more favourable auspices. Conn is apt to cast a sceptical eye on the folly and

vanity of human endeavour in all its forms, whilst simultaneously believing in her own ability to construct art from it. Nonetheless, she displays the sort of comfort in engaging with scientific and mathematical discourses reminiscent of Lavinia Greenlaw and Mario Petrucci. There are poems about the elements ('Sulphur Mining' and 'Mercury'), a preoccupation with all matters astronomical and celestial and their relationship to the material world:

Here, the stars' position in the sky is fixed – clear Perspex,/stainless steel and cobalt glass  
cement a constellation ('Travelling the Distance')

It is imagery like this that demonstrates her easy mastery of the basic tenets of poetic artifice and her great skill in building a picture from seemingly dissonant elements. It is almost as if writing verse for Conn is akin to putting together a jigsaw puzzle, then standing back and watching the completed artifice transform itself into a self-sustaining animation. Remarkably for an Irish or British poet, Conn shows a great affinity for technical experimentation and for the transformation of form: 'Absconders Beware' is arranged in the form of a concave arc. This playing around with versification and visual layout is often a risky gamble, precisely because it can lead to accusations of shallow gimmickry at the expense of narrative and linguistic substance in the poem itself, and rarely has this reader found contemporary poets brave enough to travel down the Carlos Williams or Hollander route, and turn form into the primary axis of meaning. That Conn takes that risk shows both courage and adventurousness, and marks her out as one of the most uniquely distinctive voices to have emerged in Irish poetry in recent years.

In conclusion, the sheer precision and economy of some of the poems in the collection and their stark artifice gives the collection the feeling of an algorithm, or an algebraic formulation. Above all else, this debut collection is marked out by a powerful imagination that explores poetry's potential to use the visual and spatial to make the reading experience into one that is truly transfigurative in nature. It is only really when the reader reaches the end of the collection that they realise that Conn has really all along sought to bring them to the other side(s) of themselves.

***The Woman on the Other Side* is available from Doire Press.**

*review: Sandra Coffey*

*on Evidence of Freewheeling*

*by Trevor Conway*

IN A TIME WHEN THE TREND IS TO FIT INTO A CERTAIN TYPE OF WRITER, IRISH POET, Trevor Conway's debut poetry collection blasts opens the windows of variety and lets it flood in.

And while this is certainly a welcome diversion from poetry collections that deal with a certain timeframe, a personal event in the author's life or a theme, this collection is refreshing in its variety yet doesn't exude a 'look at me I'm trying to be different' vibe.

This is undoubtedly an age when Instagram is pioneering a new way of enjoying poetry. Short snapshots are the rage. But for anyone who wants to get lost in a collection that takes you on a journey, then having a poetry book in your hand that has been crafted, that has a personality, then you should take the trip "Evidence of Freewheeling" is offering.

Faces and in particular their structure and meaning, crop up throughout the collection. Two that strike this home initially are "April" which is a tragic snapshot of when a young boy loses his life as he chases a ball onto the road. You can picture this nine-year-old's face imagining himself as the next Pele. The young boy died in 1967. "Pearse would be a man now/ too old for games/ his curls withered, chin stubbled." A notable standout image in this poem was "Flat balls still litter the edge/ orange bladders like open wounds."

Move to a pub setting and a son is noticing features of his father's face "I stare at the white strands framing his face." It is an interesting setting to place this interaction as the son

watches his father's face react to the other men in the pub as the drinks continue to pour. In particular, and sticking to this theme, are the poems "Second Glance" and "Similarity" both of which zone in on facial structure but with a twist. The latter especially makes a unique observation and asks us if we take on characteristics of our other half's face as we grow old together...

It is poems like these that offer a unique personable insight and more of this would have been welcome in this collection. This is what drew me in personally as opposed to "Enlightenment", where its brevity works against it in what is an interesting idea but ends with the ordinary line "And he knows it is good". Or "Winterlude" which has some notable nature images but doesn't have a story-like quality.

A collection where you have a poem about a liver fluke trying to find its host "Fasciola Hepatica" sitting alongside a foetus that talks to you from its host – the womb, "Trimester" is something that alone is a standout moment in this poetry collection. Both of these are trying to find their own place, however different their journey. Both journeys are worth discovering both for their ingenuity and refreshing outlook.

Take Fasciola Hepatica, "You are born into faeces/ on dew-laden grass/ emerge from your egg at ten degrees/... the humped back of a snail/ your spine penetrates its soft flesh/ you feed as it feeds/ live though its life." Whether intentional or not it is echoed somewhat in Trimester "All I know is darkness/ starved of any sight. I take the blood of another/ though uninclined to fight. Suspended in this liquid/ the silence between the beats/ reveals the world outside."

Part of me wondered if "Abandoned" should have made the final cut in this book. It harks back to an old style of poetry, the Aisling (Irish for vision) style, which is an Irish language form of poetry. And while that older feel is present in the poem itself it is made all the more obvious as it comes straight after "Trimester". But, it is a surprisingly good fit. It displays canny positioning on behalf of the poet, having these two different styles sit so close together. In "Abandoned", it opens with the lines "A pale face emerges from the night/ like snow-melt at the edge of a log." Throughout this poem, I felt that the appearance of this

vision was like an offering, inviting the reader to think about a time they would like to have back, a time when they would have done things differently.

“Timofte Against Bonner” is testament to the confidence portrayed by the poet in the variety in the collection. This is a worthy moment in Irish life, when Ireland got through to the quarter finals of the World Cup Italia 90. It is not easy to capture such a moment in a poem and there aren’t many who would attempt it. But here it is done without fuss, avoiding obvious fanfare. “The hunched man in grey/ Follows the trail of his eyes/ The turn of his hips/ Green and golden tides. Await. Timofte strikes – his posture/ Betrays./ Bonner saves.” It is hard not to smile as one thinks of how happy we were after Bonner sent the nation into a celebratory mood, that hasn’t been seen on such a scale since.

It’s worth taking a look at this book even just for the title alone as anyone who is daring enough to put the word ‘freewheeling’ into their debut collection title you’d hope will display the same sassiness inside the covers. This is a journey that is worth going on in what is an impressive varied collection from this debut author.

*Wilma Kenny*

*on Children's Children*

*by Jan Carson*

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE HEART OF JAN CARSON'S LATEST WORK, A COLLECTION of short stories, where we meet a diverse set of characters. Here Jan Carson makes the implausible seem realistic. A woman whose daughter floats in the air, voyeuristic children who spend their time watching their parents argue in a greenhouse, a child who feels invisible after the death of her sibling. The later story opens with the child, unknown to the adults, hiding under her sibling's bed when she was dying. This story pulls the reader in with the simple opening sentence, "I was under the bed when Emily died". Most of the readers surely have found themselves hiding under a bed but not in such a dire situation. The final story and book title, *Children's Children* cleverly addresses the age old problem of territory set on a fictional island which resonates with the result of the conflict in Northern Ireland on many families.

Jan Carson has the ability to delight, amuse and touch our emotions. We are all someone's child which is what makes *Children's Children* so accessible. A unique storyteller who gets to the heart of the situation, Jan Carson takes the most unusual of twists in her story telling. She leads the reader down a path of intrigue allowing their imagination to become engrossed in the most common of situations with a bizarre twist. Here we find families at odds. There is jealousy and tension resulting in stomach knots as the reader resonates with the familiarity of the relationships. This may reduce the reader to tears which soon turn to chuckles and laughter which becomes tears again. Frank O'Connor said of the short story, "there is an intense awareness of human loneliness". Jan Carson takes the ordinary and combines it with the painful and turns the story into the spellbindingly weird.



Flannery O'Connor said when she started writing *Good Country People*, she did not know there was going to be a PhD with a wooden leg. I had a chat with Jan about how she comes up with her enchanting stories. She told me, "I observe people a lot, which is a nice way of saying I'm a really nosy person. I'm lucky enough to have a job which allows me to meet lots and lots of really interesting people every day and while I've never yet written an observed incident into a story verbatim, I'm always looking for scenarios which can inspire interesting ideas to be further developed."

When I asked her about how she got into serious writing she said, "I started seriously writing fiction in 2005 when I moved to live in the USA for a few years. I'd always felt like I had the ability to write stories and was full of ideas but lacked the confidence to get started. When I moved to Portland it was like a fresh start. No one knew me out there or knew that I'd never written anything before so I bought a lap top and started introducing myself as a writer. I guess I kind of scared myself into writing by doing this."

Can we look forward to more great writing from you, Jan? "I'm just finishing up a short novel which is set during parade season in East Belfast. It's a little more political than anything I've written before, but it's also magic realism. No matter what I write I usually end up defaulting to magic realism. It must have something to do with how I see the world." Carson is a writer and community arts development officer currently based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Her first novel, "Malcolm Orange Disappears", was published by Liberties Press, Dublin, in June 2014. Her short stories have appeared in journals such as Storm Cellar, Banshee and The Honest Ulsterman. In 2014 she was a recipient of the Arts Council NI Artist's Career Enhancement Bursary.

***Children's Children* was published by Liberties Press in February 2016.**

*Kelly Creighton*

*on Echoes (a rehearsed reading)*

*by Paula Matthews*

WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT IF WE WERE ALWAYS FREE TO SAY WHAT WE REALLY WANT?

Paula Matthews' new short play 'Echoes' focuses on this question. Set during the Victorian era, when many women were campaigning to be permitted to commit the act of riding a bicycle, causing scandals in high society, is Duchess Virginia, (read by Laura Hughes) a former debutante who is seeking a maid. Virginia has an immediate connection to one interviewee, Daisy (read by Catherine Rees): a young woman who has recently lost her husband and must find work.

The rehearsed reading of this play-in-development, helped by playwright and mentor Jo Egan, was recently showcased as part of the *Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts and Film Festival*, tying in perfectly with the festival's theme: challenging stigma.

The Duchess has been hearing a ringing bell and is afraid to tell anyone. She has also been hearing the song *Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)*; the song's lyrics, 'I'm half-crazy' is telling of mental health provision of the time. Perhaps most cleverly, the myth of *Echo and the Curse* is interwoven into the script. This is done with both an eerie strangeness and compelling strength. Virginia and Daisy find links to each other, and to Echo (also read by Catherine Rees), in the sense they cannot say what it is they want or mean, which is not to say that they don't hold these answers. They are simply not allowed to voice them.

Being female in their society they fear the stigma of being seen as 'mad'. And there are other issues that can have the by-product of being stigmatised too, such as having a child out of wedlock or being widowed. Even an act as simple as riding a bike is permitted. The use of *cycles* is also a motif for history repeating itself.

So how can the women cut lose? And what of poor Echo, under the spell of Narcissus, who has only a voice and no body? We are told that 'having a body makes you

lucky.’ It is lines like this one that stops the audience in their tracks, in the most subtle of ways. We witness women of the time simply echo other people’s words. In the Duchess’ room, away from the Duke and his company, Virginia is allowed the space to talk openly, and to encourage Daisy to do what makes her happy, and therefore free. We find out that being disallowed your own words and actions does not stop them from finding their way out.

The reading was a captivating watch, energetically played out by both Hughes and Rees, and the writing tempered with both humour and fair helping of emotion. It is not the done deal yet however, and has much potential and room for growth. Matthews is an upcoming playwright with an instinctive understanding of storytelling, keen to develop her own voice. I look forward to seeing where the play unfurls over the course of the coming months into a full length show.

**Echoes, a rehearsed reading, was performed in the Brian Friel Theatre in Queens’ Film Theatre, Belfast, 15 May 2016**



*memoir*

# *Phil Young*

## *Memories*

HARVEST TIME, AND THE CLATTER OF THE GIANT MACHINE SHUDDERING ITS WAY INTO THE farmyard was the first indication that threshing day had arrived. Jumping out of bed to peer through the curtains I could watch the arrival of the bright orange monster, its driver perched, like a king on his throne, high above the lesser mortals. Soon the sprinkling of men in the farmyard swelled to become a crowd. Muscular arms formed a chain to pitch the corn up on to the rumbling machine, where the grain was separated from the chaff, shuddering down along the chute, to be bagged and carried away, while the straw was bundled into golden gales, to be piled high in the galvanized shed.

All day long the threshing machine grumbled and sifted. The men, white with chaff, and with straw jutting from their clothes and hair, worked steadily, talking and laughing and shouting across to one another with a sense of comradeship exclusive to threshing day. The children scurried between their feet, diving in and out of the straw, pulling bags of chaff to the corner pit, holding the horse's head, as he effortlessly hauled the cart full of corn sacks back to the haggard.

At twelve thirty the first sitting for dinner was called. Half the workmen sat down to a substantial dinner, whilst the other half continued to work, and then at one thirty the numbers were reversed. When all the men were fed, we children would be brought into the big farm kitchen for lemonade, sandwiches and buns. We ate and we drank and we listened to the gossip of the women around the sink, as they washed and dried and cleaned up, and their light-hearted banter made the work seem like simplicity itself. After dinner there was no time for a snooze or a doss down in the sunshine – the threshing had to be completed. A few of the workers would sneak off for a smoke behind the shed, but apart from that they

worked steadily until the big urns of tea and the fat slabs of brown soda bread were dished out at four o'clock.

By seven or eight o'clock the last of the bags were stored away, and the last bale piled up in the now packed shed, and in the dim half-light between sunset and dusk the great machine throbbed its last, and with a final belch of black smoke, like some prehistoric animal, it headed back once more to base.

The men were quiet now, quiet with exhaustion and with a pride at a job well done.

The night of the threshing was a very special celebration. It marked the culmination of preparation, planting, nurturing and saving, and it was a happy, joyous occasion. Kegs of black, frothy porter were tapped into, slaking the thirsts of the men who had not spared themselves all day. For us children there was as much lemonade as we could drink, as well as sweets, biscuits and cakes. We sat on sacks at the back of the storeroom as accordions, fiddles, mouth organs, whistles, were called into action, and anyone who could sing, or thought they could, came forward, first shyly, and after a while with increasing confidence. Noise levels rose, the centre of the storeroom was cleared for dancing, and as the men far outnumbered the women, even us youngsters were expected to give a twirl. The evening gradually became wilder and more boisterous, until, at an hour way beyond our normal bedtime, we reluctantly allowed ourselves to be brought home to our beds.

When the threshings were over a melancholy sadness seemed to descend on the countryside. Nature's task had been completed, and now the morning mists and the drifting golden leaves were witness to the rapid approach of winter. Harvest time marked the end of the wonderful freedom of summer. Now the dreaded return to school loomed. School uniforms, outgrown and shabby, had to be replaced. New schoolbooks had to be shopped for. Feet that had known nothing more restrictive than sandals or 'rubber dollies' for months had to be measured for restrictive sturdy shoes. Once again it was time to establish a routine in our lives, but the wonderful memories of 'threshing day' would sustain us in the long months ahead.

# *James O'Leary*

## *Admitted*

I HAVE MY FIRST BEER. I HAVE A FEW MORE. EVERYTHING CHANGES. THE WORLD transforms from black and white to technicolour. I transform, immediately aware that I have found what has been missing, that *this* is how I should always feel. I'm comfortable in my own skin for the first time. Ingrained feelings of dread, worthlessness, and unrest are removed, root and branch, and replaced with absolute peace.

My father shakes me awake. I'm in my childhood bedroom, a setting of vodka bottles, empty medication packets, and a note written large and hurried across two sheets of paper: *if I don't wake up, call an ambulance*. The room is spinning. I meet my father's eyes, his expression unreadable. "I suppose we do the same as last time. I'll be in the car." He walks out the door. "He did it again," he says, and I hear my mother whimper. Another trip to the emergency room. Another crisis. This is familiar. Hospitals, jail cells, black despair—this has been happening for years. Drinking has led me here before, but inside I feel worse than I have ever felt. I drift in and out of lucidity, only vaguely aware of blood tests, sedatives, EKGs. The following day an addiction specialist introduces herself to me. She hands me several leaflets for addiction treatment centres around the country. I can't imagine surviving if I keep drinking and I can't imagine life without drinking. It doesn't occur to me to do anything but surrender. I can't do this anymore. I choose one at random and use the phone in her consulting room to make an appointment.

In the days and weeks waiting for a space to become available, I alternate between extreme highs and lows. I get bouts where my muscles are on fire and I need to run, jump, do anything to get the energy out. I pace and stomp, even in public, I talk for hours to anyone who will listen, my thoughts race but I'm focused, I am pure awareness and calm, the living



definition of clarity and purpose, every thought vital, every word profound. Then my mind slows to a grind. I can't put a thought together. I see methods for suicide everywhere I look. I can't move my head without feeling dizzy and ill. I don't know what effects are from alcohol withdrawal, the overdose, or the sudden lack of anti-depressants. The only constant is that the thought of alcohol makes me sick to my stomach and I desperately need a drink.

Every night I dream about drinking. I wake up afraid and I don't want to be awake or dreaming and I want to drink. The worst nightmares involve blackouts, the awareness of not remembering—I dream the anxiety of having forgotten. All day I resist the urge to drink and all night I dream the aftermath of having drank.

I'm three weeks sober, the longest period of sobriety I've had in years, when I enter the 28-day residential programme. After filling out initial paperwork and pissing into a cup, I'm brought to the dining area for lunch. I meet the other residents. I search for track marks or scars, physical signs of addiction, desperation, of having gone through hell. There are none. I could be anywhere. These people could be anyone. My roommate shows me around the building: the chapel where we meditate after breakfast, the lecture room where we learn about our illness, the group therapy room where we disclose our darkest thoughts. Every day is timetabled, regimented, our free time in the evening spent in the common room, the kitchen, or walking the nature paths (which we cannot do alone or after dark). We can't turn on the T.V before 9p.m or go upstairs before 10p.m. On the first night there is more paperwork to fill out. Medical history. Family history. Social history. I'm asked to give examples relating to powerlessness and unmanageability in my life, how I've hurt people, why I'm here. I answer all but one question on the last questionnaire: *Why do you think you need to change?* I read the question over and over, my thoughts swimming in circles.

In those first days I fight the urge to leave every time I pass the front door. I resent my case manager within ten minutes of meeting him. He asks me if I'm manipulative. What kind of a question is that? I say no. He follows up by asking if I've ever lied. I can't remember the last day I didn't.

We have group therapy every morning. Halfway through the first session I'm convinced that nobody likes me. When it comes to my turn to give feedback I imagine everyone thinking *oh this boring fucker again*. Not only do I know that they're thinking about me, but I somehow

know their specific and negative thoughts about me. I've been doing this for so long, in every area of my life, that it happens automatically. Deciding to feel judged and alone comes as naturally as taking my next breath. At our evening group meeting, unsupervised by staff, it comes time to tell my story. I'm shaking with fear, but I make myself start—I tell them my name. I talk about how alcohol had been the answer, even when drinking alone and in secret, but that somewhere along the way I crossed an invisible line and lost the ability to choose whether or not I would drink, or when I would stop once alcohol entered my system. I talk about stockpiling beer and vodka in my wardrobe, peeing into empty beer cans and vomiting into plastic bags on the days I was too afraid to leave my bedroom. I talk about the consequences that have been piling up behind me. It's the first time I've said more than a few words since arriving—I speak for twenty minutes straight even though the vulnerability and attention feels like sandpaper against my skin. Louise, a woman I become close with in my time here, stays behind afterwards. We talk about suicide attempts and self-harm. She identifies with what I feel, what I've done, how I think. This happens again and again, especially in group therapy where people talk about thinking things and doing things that I was sure I was alone in. They share so much of themselves, and I start to share more of myself, knowing they understand and relate to the same feelings of shame, remorse, and loneliness.

Over the weeks people are admitted and discharged. I hear that the large majority of us will drink or use again once we're out. A few people here have been in treatment several times. On each person's last day we sit in a circle and say our goodbyes. As they leave we sing "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers, an idea we lifted from the Sandra Bullock movie "28 Days", one of several mediocre rehab films we watched to pass the evenings. One person leaves before finishing the programme. She disappears on a Sunday evening, six days short of completing treatment. Once you leave like that you can't come back, even if you wanted to. She and I had taken a lot of walks together in the days previous. She spoke to me about how much she needed this, how the life she had been living was no life at all, but an existence. Someone gets a phone-call an hour later and we hear that she was seen entering a pub in the nearest town. I think about all the times I told myself I wasn't going to drink, and the next thing I know, having a beer in my hand. Because it's a weekend evening, we're allowed to make phone-calls to friends and family. I call the same person every time I get the chance, but they never answer. Tonight I give up after the third attempt, and find Deirdre's

cigarettes on the floor by the pay-phone. Deirdre is always animated and high. It's part of what draws me to her, even though I know it's a mask. She's a compulsive overeater and I'm a self-harmer, so we each have an addiction nobody else here has. There's one cigarette left in the pack; she tells me to keep it. I make a cup of tea and go outside. There's no-one around, the silence unusual. I light the cigarette and wonder if the runaway is alone. I try to imagine what she might be feeling. Moths crawl on the ground around me, gathering towards the pool of light cast by the shelter's single bulb. It's dark inside where the others are watching a rom-com. It had been visitor's day, and for the first time in years I wore a t-shirt in front of my parents, fading scars exposed from wrist to elbow.

Elliott arrives two weeks after me. I'm working on a poem in the common room, during the free hour before dinner, when he stands over me and demands to know what the fuck I'm writing about him in my notebook. We become fast friends. I still have a picture he drew of a mermaid playing guitar, a drawing challenge I gave him when he came downstairs one night with paper and colouring pencils.

Because it's usually empty, I go to the chapel to cry. I reflexively stop when I hear what might be someone approaching from outside. I could never cry in front of anyone unless I was drunk. One evening, instead of going to the chapel alone, I ask Elliott if we can go there for a chat. I don't remember what either of us said, but I remember the support. Asking for help is a new experience for me, but one I know I need to practice—numbing out and avoiding pain stopped working a long time ago. If I hadn't opened up to Deirdre and Elliott, I would have been lost. I can't imagine not having met the unique collection of people who happened to be at that particular place in their lives at the same time as me. I remember the moments of insanity, the everyday normality, the anger, the love, all the crying and laughing. Within a few weeks I'm talking to people without the constant veil of preoccupation. I'm starting to feel human. Slowly, I'm learning how to be a person.

The closer I come to the end of my time here, the more desperately I wish I could stay. I occasionally long for the feeling I had following the first time I overdosed on psych meds, hours after my first attempt to quit drinking. I was eighteen, and having been prescribed new anti-depressants that day, I had those as well as a month supply of the previous prescription. I went to the off-license—I was going to start fresh in the morning, quit drinking, give the new meds a chance to work. I woke up in the hospital, too late to do anything about the fistfuls of pills I had taken in a blackout. Totally out of my mind, I came

to the conclusion that I was going to die. This didn't frighten me. I surrendered to my assumed death and experienced a perfect serenity. As an impartial observer I watched spiders jump out from under my skin and stick figures dance on the flowing walls of the ER. The visual hallucinations died down by late evening; an auditory hallucination took up the next day in the form of a rhythmic beeping. I searched for it as it flickered around the room, the sound refusing to stay in one place. I looked for it in the hospital equipment. I tried to find it under my bed. When I gave up and settled back under the sheets, the beeping lodged itself inside my chest, in the centre of my heart, and stayed there. I spaced out for hours, content, patiently waiting to die. I was discharged the following day. My health, ostensibly, had been restored so soon, and as I left the hospital I was overwhelmed by the knowledge that I was returning to reality. Drinking was a way to smooth the edges of real life, to capture the feeling of safety and comfort that came after the first few drinks. The thoughts and compulsions for it still call to me, quieter than before, but I am still drawn to the false promise of peace, or failing peace, oblivion.

On my final day in treatment I have that same feeling that I'm being taken from a place of security and protection, and thrown back into an unpredictable world. My father arrives to drive me home. The other residents come out to sing me away (we have moved on from Bill Withers—I get a rendition of "The Drugs Don't Work" by The Verve). My heart is hammering. I cry for the entire trip home, my first time crying in front of anyone in sobriety. Nothing is said. I don't know whether or not I will drink again. I don't know what happens next.

*Liz O'Neill*

*My Sister's Things*

THE BRA WAS DEEP PINK. IT HAD LACE AROUND THE EDGE AND A WHITE BEAD AT THE centre of the bow that sat between the cups. It was expensive. Debbie told me that it was the first bra she bought from a shop other than Pennys. And she'd been measured for it, so it fitted snug and firm. It brought her happiness knowing that she'd paid money for something that made her feel good. I knew what the bra looked like four days before I saw it, draped across the heap of dirty washing in her laundry basket, two pink satin mounds pointing skywards.

I reckon the landlord was about six foot two or three, and he was broad with it. His frame towered over us as the battered blue door screeched open. He looked at my brother first and when he saw me, he stared as if unable to speak. Then he blurted that looking at me was like looking at her. His accent was eastern European. He had soft eyes and his kind face contorted with the awkwardness of being with us. He led us up four flights of worn stairs, past an assortment of buggies, toys and clothes horses full of other people's washing. The smell of washing power gave the place a homely feel. This made me happy and sad at the same time. She lived in the attic flat at the top of the house. I followed in silence, conscious of the cylindrical roll of black plastic bags in my pocket.

The flat was about twelve foot square and on two levels, the high ceiling allowing for the mezzanine where she'd slept. The hall door had barely enough space to open and her bathroom was the first thing we saw. The towel she stood on after her last shower was on the floor, her toothbrush in a puddle on the side of the sink was still damp. Our eyes, hungry for evidence, scoured the place. Furtive, not wanting the others to see. The guards had said it was not suspicious.

To the left as you went in was the main living area. Her kitchen, if you could call it that, was really just a fridge, a cooker and a couple of presses. We opened these to see what she ate.

The fridge was sparse, with just a little bowl of spaghetti hoops, a couple of yogurts and butter. The bag of potatoes saggy and open in the press under the sink infused the already dusty air with an earthy musk. I went to the window, and with the intention of widening the space opened it out as far as it would go. The landlord half sat, half stood with his bum resting on the edge of the kitchen unit. He told us what he'd found.

A black, faux-leather, two seater faced a wide-screen TV and filled the remaining living space. I imagined her here, her feet up, a cigarette in her hand, perhaps. I could see her shiny hair and her soft skin. I could almost hear her laugh, loud and fulsome, her chuckle catching in the back of her throat. The art works and photos on the grubby white walls held her memories. My fingers traced the contours of her art and etched a final connection. Then I looked upon the faces of my children and my own. I unhooked them all and gently laid them down.

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I sigh and close my eyes and suddenly I am in my own kitchen. Full of people and food. It is the 14<sup>th</sup> of May and the sun has come out for Helen's communion. Debbie is sitting on a chair beside the window. She's looking so beautiful and bright, in white trousers and a blue top that brings out the startlingly deep sapphire of her eyes.

'Look at my new phone,' she says and thrusts it under my nose.

'God, it looks great,' I answer.

I smile but I am distracted. A pressure is building in my head. My mother-in-law on the other side of the room is chatting to my aunt and there are kids running about the place. The pot on my stove is being scraped of its remaining contents. I notice people are almost finished eating and it is time for dessert. Some of the plates need to be washed and the forks too. I'll do them in a minute.

'The camera's brilliant on it.'

I smile again and rub my temple.

'I could do with a new one myself,' I say showing my old Nokia to her.

'Jasus, that's ancient.'

She laughs, her big laugh and takes a picture of me.

'Don't,' I say and cover my face.

'Do you remember that fella who I met in Thorenfield?'

I think back.

Sunday was family day in Thorenfield. The day when relatives of the 'clients' visited for a lush yet healthy dinner and the group therapy sessions. Each week I made my way down the winding gravel drive with Mam in the passenger seat beside me. I would be thinking of my kids and all of my Sunday jobs not getting done. But a part of me liked it. It was my new routine and I had made friends with the other families. I had looked forward to listening to all the stories.

I shake my head.

'Which one?'

'The fella who was played with Thin Lizzy.'

A handsome man comes to my mind, dark and sexy.

'What about him?'

'He wants me to record a song with him, his friend in UCD is doing it for us.'

'That's great.'

There is less enthusiasm in my voice than she needs. I know this and she tells me about how she will be going to college in September. I soften and look her in the eye, this time the smile is real.

'I'm proud of you.'

I touch her arm and she grabs me for an awkward hug. For a moment I forget about the dirty plates and the bellies waiting for sweets. It is just me and her in an embrace, she is warm and soft and I love her.

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I remembered how she'd slipped in and out of our grasp over the years. Of all of the times when I'd given her a dig out. Like when I moved her in and out of flats. Or when she had no telly and I brought her to D.I.D at the corner of Sundrive Road and bought her one. After I sat in my car and cried for her, in her dingy flat, going off delighted with her new telly.

We had expected allsorts, but found nothing. The thing that killed her wasn't there. She had succeeded in sorting herself out, but it was for such a short time. Just a year, that's all. We had her back and the future held all sorts of possibilities. The troubles of the past would be worked through. All the hurt would be healed. Sure life was long, I had said this to her at Christmas. The last one, the only good one I can remember, well since we were kids anyway. We were sitting together at dinner. She'd said how our trip to Cork had made her feel connected to us and she wanted to make things right. I did too. I told her that we had our whole lives to make it better.

I picked up a photo of the four of us in Cork, me, Sue, Debbie and Mam. That holiday had been a high spot. The craic was fantastic and real. We'd stayed at the Imperial Hotel. Debbie had taken the room with my mam. Myself and my other sister, Sue, were in the adjoining room. We'd had such fun. One of the evenings, when we were dolling ourselves up, Sue smothered herself in bronzer, tossed her hair and caked her lips with shocking pink lipstick. And like a sparkling member of the cast of Benidorm, brown and shiny, she knocked on their door pretending to be ready to go out. Debbie opened the door and I'll never forget her, she laughed so hard. Sue just said, 'come on are yis right,' real serious and I don't know how she kept a straight face. It was the funniest thing I've ever seen and we couldn't breathe for laughter looking at her.

There was a narrow spiral staircase that wound its way to the upper floor. I remembered her description of this, she'd loved it. I had pictured it larger. The bedroom was carpeted and smelled like it needed a run of the hoover that sat, almost brand new, looking up at us. There were three beds, one double two single. They were all bare except for one. Her clothes were ironed and hanging, or folded neat, in the wardrobe that stood in the middle of the room. We quickly removed them and dropped them into our black sacks. To be discarded as if they were worthless.

I walked to the side of her bed. My eyes fell to the pillow and the final dent of her head. It was stripped quickly. The bedclothes, rolled into a ball, went into a separate bag, the one



for the bin. There was a suitcase full of her other precious things, we emptied that too. Under the bed was a pair of boots I had bought her for her birthday. They were still almost new and they lingered in my hands, reluctant to make the journey to the bottom of the bag.

Under the weight of our burdens we struggled down the stairs, the spiral like a coiled serpent refusing to let us go. In the end we threw the stuff down first and followed empty handed. The landlord had explained about the ambulance and fire brigade and how her friend had called them. My heart broke for that poor chap, waking to find her stiff and cold. Sharp and clear, a pathetic picture took form. A picture of her robust proportions and the image of the firemen manoeuvring her dead weight down that spiral staircase. It took up residence in my head.

Her effects were piled on the worktop beside the sink. A neat pile. Bank statements, post office book, medical card, and stuff for the social welfare. I picked them up. I looked at her weekly savings, built up in small instalments. Then her bank balance, a more substantial sum and the weight of its new purpose landed with a thump in my stomach. A little red purse, frayed at the edges and with a gold clasp, sat on top of the pile. It contained fifteen euros and change. Her passport was missing, and her rent book.

Judgement, large and looming scanned the place. Each dust particle scrutinised. If she'd known I'd have been there she'd have cleaned up, given the place a thorough going over. I felt her discomfort and wanted to say it was nice, that her home was nice. I imagined it polished and ready for a visit. The feel of her in it. Her warmth and nature floor to ceiling and in every corner. Her home didn't welcome us now. It wanted us to leave. But before we left I ran back upstairs, to gaze one last time at her resting place. Beside her bed she'd left a book, about people like her. A scrap of paper marked the page she was at when she left. I lifted it and slowly put it into my bag.

It was like coming out of a pub in the middle of the day, we were dazzled and bewildered. The sun, cheerful and bright, assaulted my eyes with its glare. I took my sunglasses out of my handbag and hid behind them. We loaded her belongings into the back of my brother's van and got in. I looked back, as we drove away, at the row of battered blue doors and I wondered if I would be able to remember which one was hers.

## *contributors*

**Rachel Barber** began her writing career as a blogger for a fashion website and now is a features writer for community magazines: Newtownabbey and Lisburn *In-Touch*. She lives in Newtownards with her husband Andy, and is a Speech and language therapist by day.

**Disharee Bose** was born and raised in India. She worked for a Tech company for three years, thanks to which she had the opportunity to travel around the world. She recently quit her job and now lives in Dublin and is pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at UCD.

**Margaret Cahill's** short stories and flash fiction have featured in *Crannog*, *Galway Review* and *Wordlegs*. Her competition listings include Over the Edge New Writer of the Year (last 4 years), Allingham Arts Flash Fiction (2015), Headstuff's Lacomie Cup (2015) and UCC's Carried in Waves (2016). She lives in Limerick.

**Lucy Caldwell** is the author of three novels and several stage plays & radio dramas. Awards include the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and the Dylan Thomas Prize. She is currently working on a version of Chekhov's Three Sisters set in 1990s Belfast. She won the Commonwealth Writers' Award (Canada & Europe) in 2014.

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

**Sandra Coffey** is a writer from Galway. In 2015, one of her stories was longlisted for the writing.ie Bord Gais Energy Irish Short Story of the Year competition. She has been published in *Crannog*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *The Incubator*, *Silver Apples*, *Galway Review*, and *ROPES 2015*. Follow her on @SandraCoffey

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

**Colin Dardis** is a poet, editor and writing tutor. He is one of Eyewear Publishing's Best New British and Irish Poets 2016, a current ACES recipient from Arts Council Northern Ireland. His work has appeared in numerous places throughout Ireland, the UK and USA. Colin is also the founder of Poetry NI, and online editor for Lagan Press. [www.colindardispoet.co.uk](http://www.colindardispoet.co.uk)

**Doreen Duffy** studied creative writing at Oxford online, UCD, NUIM. Her work has appeared in *Live Encounters*, *Irish Times*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction* among others. She won the Jonathan Swift Award and the Deirdre Purcell Cup at the Maria Edgeworth Literary Festival. Doreen is a member of Platform One Writers. <http://doreenduffy.blogspot.ie/>

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

**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.

**Anne Griffin** is currently undertaking an MA in Creative Writing in UCD, and working on her novel: *All that I have been*. In 2016 she has been shortlisted in the Cork County Library's 'From the Well' competition and for the Hennessy New Irish Writing Award. Anne lives in Co. Westmeath.

**Peter Hollywood** was born in Newry, Co. Down, in 1959, and currently lives in Belfast. He has worked in bookselling and teaching. He has previously published short-story collections including *Hawks* (2013), *Jane Alley* (1987), *Lead City & Other Stories* (2008) and novels, *Luggage* (2010) and *Drowning the Gowns* (2016).

**Wilma Kenny** is a published poet and works as a freelance journalist. Wilma enjoys all aspects of the arts. She has read her poetry on RTE and UCB radio and has been a part of an event at the Edinburgh festival. Wilma is excited by the vibrancy of the arts scene in Northern Ireland.

**Jennifer Kerr** is a twenty-three year old Linguistics graduate from Saintfield, Co. Down. She is currently studying for a MA in Creative Writing at QUB. This is her first publication.

**Caroline Kieran** works as a public relations consultant and adult education tutor albeit not at the same time. Very much a fledgling writer and a world-class procrastinator, she has only recently begun to try to publish her work spurred on by attending an Arvon writing course last year and taking creative writing classes at the Crescent Arts Centre.

**Noel King's** poetry collections are published by Salmon: *Prophesying the Past*, (2010), *The Stern Wave* (2013) and *Sons* (2015). He has edited more than fifty books and was poetry editor of *Revival Literary Journal* (Limerick Writers' Centre) in 2012/13. A short story collection, *The Key Signature & Other Stories* will be published by Liberties Press in 2017.

**Tony O'Connell** is from Dunmanway, Co Cork, but living in Enniskerry, Co Wicklow. At the age of 77, he is new to short stories and flash fiction. He has work published in *The Incubator* and *Cork County Council Library Service*.

**James O'Leary's** poems have appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Southword*, *Bare Hands Poetry*, *The Incubator*, *Wordlegs*, and *The Burning Bush 2*. He is a contributor at [sabotagereviews.com](http://sabotagereviews.com) and his poetry-films have screened at festivals in Ireland, Scotland and Canada. Find more at [vimeo.com/larico](http://vimeo.com/larico) and @laric0 on Twitter.

**Liz O'Neill** graduated from Trinity College Dublin School of Mathematics in 1991 and works as an inspector in the Department of Education and Skills. She has written two novels one of which was shortlisted for the Irish writers' Centre Novel Fair competition 2015.

**Bernard O'Rourke** is a writer and journalist from Dundalk, Ireland. His poems and short fictions have been appeared in *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *The Bogman's Canon*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *TheEEEL*, *The Bohemyth*, *The Irish Literary Review*, and *Wordlegs*. His Twitter account is @guyserious and he lives in Dublin.

**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.

**Phil Young**, a native of Dunmanway in West Cork, now lives in Dublin and, graduated from Trinity College with an MPhil in Anglo-Irish Literature. She has published a biography of children's writer, Patricia Lynch, and also a novel entitled *IN A PLACE APART*. She won the Doolin Short Story Competition in 2013, and has been published in various magazines.

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*interview:* Lucy Caldwell

*reviews:* Wilma Kenny on Children's Children, by Jan Carson.

Brian Gourley on The Woman on the Other Side, by Stephanie Conn.

Sandra Coffey on Evidence of Freewheeling, by Trevor Conway.

Kelly Creighton on Echoes, a play by Paula Matthews.

*memoir:* Phil Young. James O'Leary. Liz O'Neill.

*fiction:* Jennifer Kerr. Peter Hollywood. Noel King. Disharee Bose.

Doreen Duffy. Tanya Farrelly. Bernard O'Rourke. Anne Griffin. Rachel

Barber. Caroline Kieran. Colin Dardis. Margaret Cahill. Tony O'Connell