

A black and white photograph of a grassy field with a dirt path leading towards a large, dramatic cloud in the sky. The path is made of dark, rutted tracks and leads from the bottom center towards the horizon. The field is covered in grass, and the sky is filled with a large, bright, puffy cloud that dominates the upper half of the frame. The overall mood is contemplative and expansive.

the incubator

issue 14 | fiction | plays



the incubator journal
home of the Irish short story

All rights reserved. Copyright belongs to the respective authors.
This journal may only be printed for personal use.

theincubatorjournal.com

The Incubator Selects...

We are shaking things up at *The Incubator*.

Going forward, we will publish one piece of short fiction per month, beginning in July. Our reading period will open at the start of April 2018 and close at the end of June.

We are looking for standout stories between 2,000 and 10,000 words.

There will be no geographical restrictions.

Guidelines are at **theincubatorjournal.com**

contents

	page
editorial	7
in interview	
Jan Carson , author of <i>Postcard Stories</i>	9
short stories	
Up Hills, Sometimes Buried, by S.P. Hannaway	16
Lions, by Rose Keating	22
The Policeman, by Peter Hollywood	30
Doors, by Réaltán Ní Leannáin	41
review	
RB Kelly on <i>Waters and the Wild</i> , by Jo Zebedee	46

plays

Shelf Life, by **Freda Donoghue** 50

I Love You Because..., by **Ann-Marie Foster** 62

flash fiction

The Girl with the Headscarf, by **Pauline Rooney** 70

Not a Hand, by **Rachel Sneyd** 72

Museum Piece, by **Reggie Chamberlain-King** 75

Drawing Pictures, by **Jenny Darmody** 77

The First Time, by **Jenny Darmody** 79

From this Day Forward, by **Linda Hutchinson** 82

Appleville, by **Martin Malone** 84

Into the Midst of Things, by **Theresa Ryder** 87

contributors 91

editorial

IN ISSUE 14, the last edition of the journal as we know it, features editor Claire Savage chats with Belfast-based writer Jan Carson about her work, which I'm particularly delighted about because one of Jan's short stories featured in our very first issue. We also take a closer look at the genre writing that is happening in Northern Ireland, with local sci-fi writer RB Kelly reviewing the recently published fantasy novel *Waters and the Wild* written by Jo Zebedee.

We have superb short stories and flash fiction that you will love, and are delighted to showcase plays too. Perfect winter reading!

As you will see on our website, we are taking a brief hiatus for a few months and then The Incubator will return in a different phase. We still love the contemporary short story but will no longer be solely seeking *new Irish writing*. We will be broadening our search by removing geographical restrictions, and from July onward we will showcase just one piece per month. Submissions will open in April for *The Incubator Selects...*

I want to say a huge thank you to my fellow editors Anne Caughey and Claire Savage, and to all our contributors and supporters; thank you for the last four wonderful years!

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Jan Carson

author of Postcard Stories

PASSIONATE ABOUT REALISM in all types of art, and with a talent for portraying the nuances of everyday life in her own work, Jan Carson is a multi-talented writer who enjoys a challenge. Indeed, both a novelist and short story writer, she's also ventured into the arena of micro fiction and radio drama, and has had the pleasure of Hollywood actor Liam Neeson reading her work on air. The Ballymena actor rather aptly gave voice to the Ballymena writer's monologue, *UnRaveling*, on BBC Radio 3 earlier this year.

Also invested in working with older people – particularly those with dementia – Jan juggles this with her writing and her eclectic range of work within Northern Ireland's arts sector. She may have gone freelance in 2016, but with a novel due in 2019 and plenty more projects ongoing and in the pipeline, this is a writer who certainly likes to keep herself busy ...

Just back from a whirlwind few weeks in Norway and New Zealand, where she delivered writing workshops and talks to around 750 children, Jan went straight into curating this year's CS Lewis Festival.

"I'm meant to be doing more writing with being freelance, but I've got three part-time jobs – the CS Lewis Festival, and CAP's (Community Art Partnership NI) Poetry in Motion project, which puts poets into schools," she says. "I'm also working with the BFI (British Film Institute) and NI Screen, delivering dementia-friendly screenings for people with dementia, and I'm

involved with the QFT's (Queen's Film Theatre) 50th anniversary stuff for next year. I teach a lot of community writing workshops too."

As someone who prefers to write for a couple of hours in the morning, before doing anything else, Jan admits to finding it difficult to say no to projects. On the other hand, however, she loves her work and likes to keep active, while all that community engagement surely fuels her inner writer ...

"Generally if I'm at home I get about 1,000 words written in those two hours," she says. "I can't write at home though – I have to go out. I like the bustle and the idea that you've removed yourself from home to a place of work."

"But when I travel it's just really hard. I've spent a third of this year not at home. You have to be quite disciplined when you're away – it's not a holiday."

Having travelled to California, supported by Arts Council NI funding, Jan also recently spent some time in Norway through Creative Europe. The organisation is helping to increase literacy and reading in its schools and Jan was invited to read at a literary festival, as well as working with eight school groups.

"They let the kids have a coffee and some reading time now before school and they're also inviting writers in," she says. "There's a split school system there – academic and vocational. I was doing a lot of work with more of the vocational kids and I worked with about 750 kids in two weeks."

"In New Zealand I was over for *Lit Crawl* and worked with five primary schools there. I'm now talking about maybe doing it in Belfast next year – perhaps as part of the Belfast Book Festival..."

Jan launched another of her own books earlier in 2017, with her collection of micro fiction – *Postcard Stories* – published by The Emma Press Ltd in May. Having written a micro story every day for a year in 2016 – on the back of postcards which she posted to friends around the world – Jan created a vivid portrait of her home, Belfast.

Previous to this, she also had a short story collection, *Children's Children*, published by Liberties Press in 2016, with her debut novel, *Malcolm Orange Disappears*, also published by theincubatorjournal.com

Liberties in 2014. Her short stories have further appeared in journals including *Storm Cellar*, *Banshee*, *Harper's Bazaar* (she also won the *Harper's Bazaar Short Story Competition* in 2016) and *The Honest Ulsterman*. Other stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and 4, and published in *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland* (New Island, 2016).

"I think short stories are easier to write," she says. "A lot of people will say they're not, but they're just shorter. I'm a completer so if I start something I have to finish it and there's a big difference between finishing a short story and finishing a novel.

"I'm also really easily distracted, so I don't think I could write a novel with a simple plotline, with very few characters. I like a messy plot with lots of cameos..."

Perhaps best associated with writing magical realism, Jan doesn't actually enjoy reading the genre herself, having "more of a bent towards realistic writers."

"I think you get known for doing a thing," she says, "but ironically, I don't really read magical realism. I'm drawn to the absurd and the strange. A lot of the things I'm writing at the minute aren't particularly fantastical or paranormal – they're just strange.

"I think that's probably where I'm going next with my writing. Sometimes you can feel a bit forced to have to keep writing in the style people know you for. I also really love the parable, if you write parables in a way that doesn't feel preachy."

Her next novel will, however, be magical realism, but then, it's already been written and is awaiting publication. There will be more news on that imminently, says Jan, but not just yet. In the meantime, she says the story is set in East Belfast on the Eleventh Night and is "a bit intense," so it's sure to pique readers' interests.

Writing novels and short stories and now also micro fiction, Jan has a breadth of experience and skill which she can – and does – share with other writers. It really boils down to the details, she says, adding that she prefers to read work by authors who "are pernicky on the details of things."

"I'll always love Raymond Carver because of that. People who write realistic dialogue and descriptions. I always say when I'm trying to teach magical realism that if you can't write

realism, then you can't write believable magical realism. It's the attention to detail of the ordinary that matters."

When it comes to good writing, 'believability' is another crucial element for Jan, who admits to having a "terrible problem with the suspension of disbelief in art." Indeed, once she gets a sense of something feeling phony, her attention and interest in the work is lost.

"Then I can sense where it's made up," she says. "It's very hard to say how you do that, but you just know it when you see it.

"We're part of a culture that's extremely adept at storytelling. My grandfather told these stories that were probably made up, but seemed really believable because of how he told them. I think some of us have lost that art of storytelling."

To help inspire communities to write, Jan is heavily involved in the creative writing workshop scene, and enjoys seeing people gain confidence and pleasure from these.

"I think there's a lot of worth in creative writing courses in terms of learning – not 'the rules – but the tricks and techniques to help shape your work," she says. "I don't think you can make a good writer out of somebody who doesn't have any ideas or imagination, but I've seen writers with bad grammar and spelling with good ideas, and I think you can do more with that.

"There's a fantastic Flannery O'Connor quote I always use at workshops, which says that a writer coming to teach you how to write is like a giraffe coming to teach you how to be an animal one week, and a baboon coming the next... They're both animals but will teach you different ways of being an animal. I think there's a real danger, particularly if you're doing a long-form course, of shaping attendees into being a certain type of writer. But a good tutor will try not to do that."

With a vibrant and growing writing scene in Northern Ireland, she says that despite travelling far and wide, there's just nowhere like home when it comes to literary communities. There are a range of very different voices here right now, she adds, and she's happy to be part of a community which will give truthful feedback on her work.

“I think a literary community isn’t just about having people who are cheerleaders for you, but one where you can be told, actually, that’s not a very good short story,” she says.

“The diversity and range of different voices coming out now is great. There are people writing in all sorts of genres, experimentally and traditionally, and from all sorts of backgrounds. And it’s quite rare that those people would form a sort of community, but I think that in Belfast, there’s something about the smallness of it and coming out of difficult times – people are coming together. I love it here and I think we’re incredibly lucky.”

Also involved with the John Hewitt Society and its work over the last few years, Jan has seen first-hand how audiences and writers have changed in just a few years. Northern Ireland has, she says, come incredibly far in a short space of time.

With lots more to come from this writer, Jan has more imminently got a spot of writing and recording of radio dramas with older people upcoming in January. The project is part of an Arts Council NI initiative with Eastside Arts in Belfast and will see the creation of two short radio dramas focussed on people’s experiences of being carers. A user pack, including CDs and downloadable material, will also be produced, so other carers can use the resources as “a conversation-starter,” ensuring longevity for the project.

There’s also that next novel coming early in 2019 and Jan just might perhaps have a few more of those up her sleeve for later ...

Interview by: Claire Savage

Postcard Stories was published by The Emma Press Ltd in May 2017.

short story

S. P. Hannaway

Up Hills, Sometimes Buried

ARTHUR'S STUMPED. He butts his shiny head against the living room door.

—There are bones, Mr. Gall? So ... don't choke!

He could murder Mr. Gall; kill him for an answer. It's easier talking to the door than Mr. Gall behind it, in his cobbled together nest. Arthur considers the flatness of his feet. He shuffles to the kitchen still in work clothes, flimsy slippers. He's back at once to try to coax him to the table.

—You love a herring. It's your favourite. I've drowned it in mustard, sprinkled it in oats: a lovely crunchy coat. Teddy! Sorry, I know, I should respect your wishes: Mr. Gall, it's time for supper.

The door doesn't budge. His brother doesn't appear. A quiet descends around Arthur in the dusk-lit hall as if all living things have ceased, come to a stop. The bulk of his little body rocks, in prayer. Faintly, through the wall, he hears knocking. He busies himself, banging pots and pans in the kitchen; returns, huffing, with a broken herring shoved together on Mr. Gall's ornamented tray. Begrudgingly, he plants it at the door, nudges the napkin and straightens the fork, so it's half-inviting. He loiters and listens in the kitchen. Then he's back in no time to remove it.

—If you don't come out, you starve.

Arthur screws his ear to the door: nothing stirs. Did Mr. Gall slip out for the evening, down through the garden in the fading light? Is he on the heath, on one of his meandering walks? He isn't well. He's old; enough to be Arthur's father. He can't do stairs any more, can't climb. And the heath is hill upon hill. No, he's got to be holding out in the living room.

—Mr. Gall, are you in there? It's Arthur, you know ... Arthur, the Inadequate.

A Mr. Gall brainwave: he bestowed the title. Apparently, Arthur's too dull to be Mr. Gall's brother: can't tell a yarn, doesn't have a life. Even the battered crows, Mr. Gall posits, posing and strutting on the heath, have a story. Arthur thumps the door, rocks it, exhausted by another endless week of days. Why can't Mr. Gall be himself again, the life and soul? It's been months and months.

—How about a story: The Crows' Tale? Go on ... it transforms you, carries you away.

Arthur's stuffed into the box room, his perch under the eaves: Mr. Gall's idea to keep him out of sight. The blind's open and the night mocks him: a grinning moon. He tries to drift off, to force Mr. Gall from his head, but he's stuck: living in Mr. Gall's shadow all these years, in his pocket. Tied. Arthur holds down a means-to-an-end job to pay for The Close. He cooks for his brother, consoles him. And Mr. Gall ignores him, is silent as a stone.

Arthur's flopped into his narrow bed for the night. He struggles with the days, the humdrum – the uphill. The unending rows of data dropping down; waiting to be processed. And deadlines: times shifting, drawing nearer in the sand. A routine he seems to live for and despise.

If he had hair left he'd pat it down, for comfort. Instead, he cradles his crumpled brow in his hands. He can hear tapping again; short bursts of hammering on a wall, someone breaking out, mid-escape. Or a signal: a plea. It's there in the background, next door, further down the terrace. Downstairs.

He can't get comfortable; hovers on the edge of sleep. In the early hours – Arthur's almost sure he's awake – he can hear the crows complain at the bottom of the garden. They wing in from the heath to a thicket, a tangled mass of bushes, broken branches, to pass the darker hours.

And the house stirs. There's a shift, like a change of air. Arthur feels it flutter in his tired bones. Blinking sleep away, he turns to the window. It's the same. The dusty pane rattles. But outside, he's not so sure. He hears the sound of feet. God! A break-in? He tumbles out. He can't believe his eyes: the rat-tail hair, the spindly frame wobbling like a

top. Mr. Gall.

—How did you get out? Arthur grumbles.

In a spurt of anger he raps the glass.

—Don't slip ... break your neck!

But Mr. Gall's in another world: the remains of a man, starved. He traipses through the uncut grass, underpants clinging to haunches, as if looking for an opening in the box hedge, the memory of a gate. He stops, stricken, seems transformed. He scurries down the garden, stares out at the blackened heath.

The crows are shaken up, excited. They flap and croak. Mr. Gall looks up, all ears; ready.

—Can you hear that, O'Grady?

—What? My hearing's not the best, Cyril. Am I missing something?

—It's the days: the eking out, the living.

—I hear panting, Cyril: some fucker. Is it the priest?

—Yeah, Cyril chortles, —it's him all right.

—I love the priest ... hasn't lived at all.

—He's booting it across the fields, like his little life depends on it, actually, like his father's life depends on it.

Cyril grins, pleased.

—And he's not alone, O'Grady. The doctor, he's coming too, gangling after, desperate to beat his brother, to win the race.

—Cause they've had news, Cyril?

Cyril, deadpan, clocks O'Grady's whitish eyes, adopts a reverential tone.

—Actually, it's kinda sad. Their father is on his deathbed, in despair.

Cyril and O'Grady take a moment on the scrapheap, to gaze across the heath, for the long view. But Cyril can't be serious for long. He's gagging to tell the tale.

—They've come to a hilly bit.

—It's full of fucking hills, Cyril, this heath.

Cyril gives him a death stare.

—And you're full of guff. But yeah, hill after hill.

Cyril finds hills funny: such a trial for humans. He often wonders what they're for.

—The doctor's catching up, O'Grady. Well, he's younger. The priest spies him. —Get back! he yells, —he's my father as much as yours. He doesn't need a stethoscope; he needs prayers! But the doctor doesn't heed him, he's determined to get ahead, to be their father's favourite, the son making something of himself, the achiever.

—Achiever? I love his sense of humour, Cyril, —so dry.

—So, they reach a downhill slope, a sharpish drop.

—Ooh, tricky.

—Yeah, this is where the race goes awry. It's uneven, you see, rough, all wild grass.

And the priest, in his youthful spirit, trips over a fuck-off clump, goes arse over tit.

—The muppet should've seen it. Maybe his God did.

—Maybe, cause the doctor brother can't get stopped — age slows the brain. He stumbles over the body of the priest, goes flying, his stethoscope whipping the air, drops on his noggin in a ditch.

—That's untidy, Cyril.

—That's what days are like.

Cyril and O'Grady take a little time on the scrapheap to ponder the days.

—There's more, Cyril?

—There's more, all right. The priest finds his feet — life in the little fella yet — he wonders what's happened to his brother, if he's raced ahead to hold their father's hand, listen to his dying words, persuade him that his love is greater than his brother the priest's.

—Love, Cyril? What's that about?

—They love their father you see, they're sprogs. But they love his money more and they both want all of it. The priest is contemplating the hoard when he spots his brother face down in the ditch. It's an ugly sight, could be a broken neck. His body's twisted, angled, weird. Now, O'Grady, what does the priest do?

—Is he in a what-d'you-call-it? A quandary?

—Yeah.

—I love them.

Cyril chuckles. He's excited now; carries on.

—The priest checks the lie of the land, the hills rising: no one about. To do the right thing, for his know-it-all brother, he'll root out stones. He'll make a grave. Just in case. He builds them round the body, makes a shield, a sort of coat. He digs out a slab for the head. It's a brute, O'Grady. It could topple him. He can't hold onto it, it's slipping. He goes to place it but it falls. Crunch. It knocks in his brother's skull.

—Fuck, Cyril! He's a goner. And the priest, how's he gonna live out his days?

••

In the morning: panic. Arthur peers out through the frost for a sign of life. The garden's empty, the light blushes: no Mr. Gall, no telltale footprints in the dew, just the trail of a meandering fox headed for the heath.

The Crows' Tale echoes in Arthur's head. Mr. Gall used to perform it in the living room for his friends round for supper: artists, poets, thinking types. Arthur was shoved out, told he had nothing to contribute; the door slammed. But he listened upstairs, through the floorboards: Mr. Gall in his element doing O'Grady, a rasping voice for the codger crow. Better than Cock o'the Walk or even Badger's Restraint, Arthur loved the drama of The Tale, the pin-drop quiet at the end. He felt for the priest. He knew he would miss his brother the instant the stone slipped. That it was destined: the stone to fall, the body to lie, undiscovered.

His head hurts. Where's Mr. Gall now? Already, the walkers are on the heath, wrapped up. The only thing is to keep moving. And there's always a hill. The body tilts, the legs dig in for the duration.

He's getting rid. Arthur's clearing out Mr. Gall's old room on the first floor; claiming it. It's brimful of trumpery. The first thing, the mouldy mattress, Arthur wrestles down the stairs, cajoling it round corners. He's almost as wide as it is, but he handles it, drags it down the garden; feels hot. He dismantles the bed frame, hammers joints apart. The sound clatters through the house. What do his neighbours make of the tap-tap-tap-tap? He wrenches blinds off the window. He lugs boxes of bulky hardbacks, almanacs – journals bulging with paper markers – out the back. The bookshelves are next, the wafer-thin rug, his telescope –

Mr. Gall kept an eye out for crows, always looked to the stars. Arthur tips them on the scrapheap. He builds a mountain of his brother's shoes, his junk, his leftovers. He strips the room to a shell. And it's a relief. He's Arthur, the Adequate.

On his last trip, for old times', he hovers by the living room door, inspired.

—Teddy! he yells. —Are you there?

A chill air brushes by.

—Should I call for a doctor? A priest?

It tickles.

—I haven't forgotten you. It's just; I'm tidying up ... clutter. Well-wishers, you know, people come to pay their respects.

He bows his head. He slopes off to the mound, douses it with petrol, stuffs twists of paper underneath, throws a match.

••

Arthur has the bedroom to himself, and the house. It's a blessing. He should've had a clear-out a long time ago, in the spring. Maybe the year before. It's just – these things take time.

He drops onto the floor amongst little clouds of dust. It's perfect to lie on: the wood's hard, unforgiving. But it accepts him. It's flat, perfect for a kip. He can smell Mr. Gall's shoes smouldering on the pyre. He hears flames creep up; fire discover its rage. The neighbours'll bang on his door: a blaze rampaging through The Close.

Downstairs, Mr. Gall's departed. Arthur released him. The living room door's ajar. Oddly, it creaks.

And the tap-tap, tap-tap-tap comes through the walls. At first it's faint: timorous. But it grows bolder, more insistent. Arthur always thought it was someone breaking out – Mr. Gall attempting an escape. Now he knows it can't be. And it echoes, it thrums in his head: a break-in, someone – likely Mr. Gall – chipping away, burrowing in. Arthur's heart flutters. And flags. The sound will endure as long as he does. It will never pass.

Rose Keating

Lions

THE HOUSE HAD BEEN HOLDING its breath ever since William died.

Adeline never used to mind silence. A certain sort of silence. The gentle kind. Legs curled up under a blanket, a hand in yours, a book in the other. Breathing. Communication in strokes and sighs. Him, snore. Scoff silly goose her goose. Feather light.

Not this kind of silence though. The piercing sort. The one so high pitched it makes your stomach turn. The one that makes your skin cells rings louder than a scream. It sits on your chest and makes you want to tear out your lungs. Void tight. That's the silence that hung over the house now.

At first she thought the house was too empty. Only visitor Mr. Hannigan, landlord, all oiled looks and creeping hands. Come to check in on her, she must be so lonesome since William's departure, and he was the bread earner wasn't he, don't forget about rent. All concern, greasy platitudes. She could feel his grease stains slick on her skin long after he had left.

It wasn't that the house was too empty. It was just the opposite, if anything. Too full. Too damn full, every huff of air in the house full to the brim with him. With them. All the days of them. Sunday afternoons spent under blankets, tongues tasting like coffee. The way someone else's skin melts into another's when it's too hot. Gold ore hot world gloop and shine and too thick to resist. Bed sheets glorious prison for them. Sticky and sleepy and liquid seeping good morning let's not with the world today let's just us here stay. Stay. Hide. World of them.

They don't tell you about the after the happily ever after. It's not a lie, exactly. But it was so much more than just happily and done. It was the everything. The millions of seconds and touches and birthdays. Never so simple as just a happy. It was an endless. It was a too much. It was a her becoming a them. Her me melting to a we. Letting someone else sew themselves in to your skin. Cell fusion. Mutation; two creatures leaking in to one whole. Science of the most miraculous kind— the holy two in one amen amen. Happy. Happy is far too small a word. This was an ineffable.

Wasn't always golden. Couldn't be. Real life doesn't work that way. There were days of bills and William fired and Jesus rent is next week nausea living off stale bread and Tesco Value cans of shitty whatever. Kisses now tasting like tinned baked beans. The times of he's late he keeps coming home late. The secretary at his new job all tits and big blue eyes soft and sweet and he always loved blondes. Her own hair, mousey brown, littered with grey.

Maybe he'd chosen Adeline for the comfort of her. Stable and sturdy, always there always going to be there for him never never go yours I promise. Like a big worn armchair; she was furniture. You don't really think of how beautiful your armchair is when you sink in to it, do you? He loved the comfort of her but who doesn't go for the big lashes batting yes sir coy gleam. Glam. Screaming at him when his mouth stank of her. Of her thing. He could have at least brushed his teeth and he would try to kiss her with that mouth don't touch me you don't *deserve* to touch me I hate you you *disgust* me. She really did hate him. Sour and knife sharp at the back of her throat. She wanted to rip his tongue out. But he's sorry. He's sorry. It will never happen again he's so sorry those eyes looking at her, her him, those eyes too much. And he always came back. She learned to stop hating him, eventually. Wounds do heal, albeit slowly.

Now, the rooms were so thick with particles of them that she could hardly move. Like walking through glue.

So, she got a cat. Cats. Well, it started with one.

Cliché, yes. She was painfully aware of this. It hadn't been her idea originally. It was the parades of well-wishers and good Samaritans, distant relations and more distant friends, suddenly pouring in to help. If help means point out the obvious but it's so big in here

Adeline too big this lofty old house too much for one little you lonely old you aren't you just going to be so lonely Adeline? Some said it in a more diplomatic fashion but she could hear the real vibrations of the words as they sank it to her skin. Heavy and dirty and full of shame. The insistence continued with their you could get a helper or a nurse or a live in something someone at your age sad old lonely Adeline you'll need it at your age all by yourself won't you? Adeline, feeling more small by the second as she let their vibrations sink further and further down in to her skull.

A cat was the compromise. Not quite as much of a kick as the helper. Still, another presence in the house. Something to split apart the too thick particles and dust.

She resented it, at first. Sitting there, staring her out. Big green eyes looming. It made her uneasy. It looked knowing, the black furred head that watched her from a pillow on the couch. Not an animal, but a thing. A thing that knew things. Not earthly, this thing. It didn't look like it belonged in this world, all sharp grace and contemptuous dismissal. It knew it was above mere mortals, this dark being of air and claws and quiet contemplation. It didn't belong in the world of mere physics. Too sleek, too quick, racing past oxygen and matter in quick pounces. Alien creature; it didn't belong on earth. She named it Ripley.

It didn't remain otherworldly for long. Preternatural elegance vanishing within the first few weeks. Ripley hopping on to the fridge and too frightened to hop down; yowling in panic for a half an hour until rescued. Adeline finding him on the kitchen floor, chewing on a now half eaten block of cheese. He'd vomited all over the carpet later that night. Indeed, all supposed chic aloofness disappeared with certainty when Adeline witnessed Ripley attempting to eat aforementioned vomit, forcing her to remove the disgraced creature from the scene.

And he was soft. Cloud warmth purr on her lap. Pawing at her stomach, persistent cotton indignance. Insistent silk head demanding hands. A beautiful, small thing. She grew to love the pouncing plod of its paws and pitter patter of claw on skin when she got lost in her own space. That black tar sink and slide of him and him and not able to get away from thoughts of him interrupted in a manner entirely without grace. God made cats to remind us that humans aren't the most important beings in the world, Adeline thought. Tragedies

can happen, but the litter box still needs to be emptied. Life goes on. It refuses to pause for pain. Maybe that's for the best.

Economic demands seemed to also refuse to pause in the face of tragedy, apparently, as became increasingly clear upon Mr Hannigan's next visit. Syrup sticky platitudes hardened to more metal toned aggression. He was right, of course. She should have the rent. But not the hands stroking and the eyes lingering and the well pretty thing like you still looking very well for your age we'll see if we can sort that out another time. Hand patting too low on her back. William would have punched him square in the jaw. She should have done it herself, but then he spotted Ripley. Rat sharp, he was. Warning of animals and health and safety and not allowed but be a good girl and he might just let you keep him. He left, but the feeling of filth did not leave Adeline for many hours after.

Be a good girl. The idea hurt her head to think about. Vinegar at the back of her eye sockets. She needed a distraction. So, she got another. And another. And another. She littered the rooms with them, these serious eyed clusters of fluff scattered across her halls. She loved them. Silly creatures. She loved the way they split the air. Hard for particles to remain treacle memory thick with zip zap paws racing and yowls splattering claw marks all over her couch. Blasted things. Playful things. Things that just knew the now. They did not know of things of sadness. Sadness was not real. They smashed through mindscape and brought their own world.

Naturally, they were not overly fond of Mr. Hannigan.

Mr. Hannigan arrived on her doorsteps a few days later. Adeline knew it was coming. She didn't have a plan for when it did, but she knew it was coming. Mr. Hannigan was right, William had handled the finances. At the time, it had seemed sweet. Old fashioned, stuffy man, refused to have his pride wounded by his woman slaving in an office. Less romantic now, and rather a bit more foolish. Full grown woman didn't know how to get money, let alone how to handle it. The bit left over in the bank had been going on groceries. Pathetic. Made her want to claw out her veins when she thought of it. The stupidity. Stupid old fool. That was her now.

Mr. Hannigan, greasing his way up to her porch. The cats hissed when she opened the door to him. He asked for the rent, smug and sure. She had no choice but to tell him the truth; she didn't have it. The smug look expanded, filling up her vision. Oh dear oh dear Adeline. His breath a warm huff huff huff quick and stinking of soured meat on her face. On her neck. Oh dear well I'm sure we can sort something out, his hand squeezing her shoulder then fingers sliding up from neck to jaw line. Leaning in. Adeline closed her eyes and tried not to breathe. Do not. Do not. Do not breathe in this dirt this grease it's clogging up pores he is everywhere do not. Skin trying to reverse shuddering ripple her everything trying to get away. Him, removing hand I'll be back soon Adeline we'll sort out a special little something a different kind of payment just for you dear. Oh and I expect full co-operation, already letting so much pass with the rent and now these cats these creatures terribly against the rules, best be a very good girl for me when I visit next or who knows if I can overlook such a breach in rules again. They'd probably put down a nasty litter like that if they were kicked out on the street. Teeth bared in a manner that warned more than warmed. Adeline slammed the door.

The next morning, she tried to air out the worry of him from the house. The smell of his meat breath lingered on her skin. She had showered twice already, skin rubbed raw.

In the kitchen. Baking. Smell of bread and sun filling the room, Ripley stretched across a counter. A moment caught in amber, golden and glistening. She wished she could make it stay. She wished she knew how to make a moment stretch into an always. But she didn't. And she knew he'd be back. With hands and looks and too much touch lingering. His oil slick hands on her. No William here now to warn off leers. Just her. Just her from now on.

Mud dark sink of thoughts interrupted by Ripley's sudden head jerk, leaping off the counter and padding to the back door. Adeline wouldn't have thought much of it, if it hadn't been for the other cats all suddenly following his lead, plodding along out the door to her back garden. She expected noises; hisses and yowls and screeches, a fight with a neighbouring cat or a chase of a wounded bird. But silence. Adeline followed them to the back door to investigate.

A lion sat calmly on the grass of her garden. Her cats sat in a loose semi-circle around it, watching it with lazy interest.

Adeline froze, naturally. Heart gone past throat and sitting on tongue, throbbing. The way blood sticks in arteries, refusing to move, when faced with predator. Primal freeze. Body knows how to react to these things before head does.

Past body danger, Adeline's head hadn't quite caught up yet. Clogs and bolts clanking with cognitive dissonance, clashing chords of all the wrong notes. High pitched unease of nope nope definitely nope this isn't quite right does not make sense. The calculator halt of numbers not adding up. Lion and cats by the patio. Lazy tail swishes of them, watching her.

Brain might burst at any moment from miscalculated reality malfunction, so it does the only thing it can to for preservation in this moment. It accepts. Dream state of hey just go with the flow. Lion in the garden. Alright then.

Beautiful thing, as well. That otherness of her cats amplified by a thousand. This thing was royalty. Gold so bright it burned the air. Concentrated chaos feel. Uncontrollable. This thing was not yours to control. Could almost smell the energy off, hot humid jungle beat prowl its claw ripping apart things that are no more. Blood and nectar. The stink of its skin, blood and nectar. It was so very not human. So very other. Rules of mercy did not apply in the hot damp corners of tree and meat and sinew rip. Just the pounce chase air in lungs singing alive alive alive. More than alive. This thing, raw energy. It could tear her apart. But it didn't. It just watched her.

Then, it approached her. Adeline did not run. She knew there was no point.

The cats followed, rubbing up against her legs. Lion watching this, eyes flicking from them to her. Adeline, on a whim, stuck out her hand. The lion sniffed it, snuffle snuffle weary. He stuck his head under her hand. Ah. Ah. Adeline knew this move. She gently scratched his ears. Big kitty cat after all. Who knew. Even carnivores like a cuddle.

It retreated to the garden then, the cats following after. All stretching out in the sunlight of the lawn. Adeline moved back inside to the kitchen. She began preparing a roast for dinner. Later in the evening, she filled the cat bowls with food, and tossed out a leg of lamb

for the lion. It was meant for Tuesday evening, but she could get another, she supposed. After, she went to bed.

She woke to trill of doorbell the following morning. When she answered it, she was greeted with the unsettling, and very unwelcome, smile of Mr. Hannigan. Here to discuss this new arrangement of ours Adeline, we'll discuss it inside Adeline. He walked in without being invited, placing a hand on her lower back. Guiding her in to her own home. She tried to not to feel that hand sliding lower and lower, all greed and eagerness. Her stomach was squeezing in on itself don't think just try not to think. In the kitchen. Him, talking. She could barely hear the actual words. She knew what he really meant. His eyes dragging all over her body, slippery and possessive, from lips to chest and down. He leaned in, smirking, his breath on her neck. Lips on her neck. Teeth on her neck. Hands. Hands everywhere.

"Stop."

He didn't. She didn't think he would.

Adeline separated. Put mind to side and let body work. Him and tongue and grease put at distance. Shadowy and faint. Did the moan and roll and pant on automated mode. She was thinking ahead. She stopped the kissing for a moment, to Mr. Hannigan's slight indignance. She smiled at him, at his confusion. Turned the smile flirtatious. Less honey sweet, more cinnamon caramel hot chilli promise it'll burn in the best way possible. Took his hand. Led him outside to the back garden, him looking bewildered but who was he to judge, we all have our kinks. Bit of exhibitionism never hurt anybody. Hands stroking him everywhere, feverish trails of sugar melt please. Thought impossible for him right then. Then, he spotted it. She spotted him spotting it.

A lion in the garden.

She moved quicker than him. Jerked away. Made space. He gave out an automatic yelp of shock, turned to dash. He made it about three paces. And then. Pounce.

Air a shower of red. Poppy cream splatter all over the patio. Rip. Tear. No mercy in hot red melt. Just alive. Sing the great alive. Glorious beast. Royal magnificence. Massacre.

Magnificent massacre. Triumph. Prey in claws. Beat drum strongest it is the strongest. Its triumph will burn the air to a scar.

Adeline watched every moment of it. She watched it with a smile.

William had been a traditional man. Simplistic, in ways. Believed in survival of the fittest. The strong, the smart; they survive. The weak got what they deserved. Cruel, perhaps. A cruel man, at times. But he might have been right in this regard. Adeline knew he would have approved of this sort of ending for this sort of prey.

Adeline sat down with her lions. They were all lions now, the cats and herself included. All strong, singing the alive alive alive. She was prey no longer. Armchair comfort no longer. Fierce thing. Beyond human thing. That was her. She was one of them now. Her lions had done their job, splitting the air in specks of red. No more him. No more them. No more William. Just her and her alive. Alone and poppy bright. Prey never again, never again.

Lioness stretched in her garden. Alone. Alone and poppy bright.

Peter Hollywood

The Policeman

A BRIDGE WAS DOWN.

Some local farmer had called it in and Heft and Gebb were the first ones on the scene.

The region required bridges given the countless water-courses and cataracts and streams and rivers jostling, tumbling and – latterly engorged by the heavy rainfall – all feeding the mosaic of lakes that characterised the county, allowing the tourist information to designate it all: lake-land. ‘The wettest part of the province’, his new PSNI colleagues delighted in telling him when he first arrived; that he’d ‘soon grow webbed feet’, they told him too and he had mused, more than imagined, trying to stuff these into his size eleven regulation boots.

The river looked as if it had taken a bite out of the bridge. It was an old stone bridge but the country road it served had a sufficient volume of traffic to warrant their presence there on a drizzly, mid-September afternoon. The week’s persistent and heavy rainfall had swollen the river and one of the stone stanchions had surrendered to the surge and suck and pull of the brown water. However, a portion of road remained relatively intact beside the aperture, a temptation to the intrepid, to the foolhardy and impatient; so that he and Gebb knew to cordon off their end of the bridge with a cat’s cradle of yellow tape. Tying this off, he heard his name being called from the other side.

- Heft! George Heft?

He straightened up to see other officers spilling out of a white Land Rover. He pulled back the hood of the rain poncho to reveal that it was indeed himself and waved. Sergeant Frazer decided to come forward onto the bridge.

- Careful, Heft cautioned as the Sergeant approached the gap.

Frazer dismissed Heft's warning with an impatient wave.

From his side, Heft had felt a similar pull towards the hole and his partner, who was not so entranced by the opening, had also warned him similarly.

- Careful, now. It's not safe. Come on back onto the road, she had urged.

But he had wanted to look over the edge, into the river.

Now Frazer was close enough so that their raised voices were due not to distance but caused rather by the requirement to be heard above the din of the water shoving along in spate and chaos beneath them.

- The Council's sending a crew out your side to erect a temporary barrier, the Sergeant shouted. Wait 'til they've done that and warn off any traffic in the meantime.
We've got the road closed our end.

Gebb said something from the road.

- What was that? Frazer demanded.
- She wants to know how long they'll be, Heft explained, noticing the almost instant frown of annoyance on the officer's face.

The weather had caused damage and disruption all over, and the council workers and related emergency services were stretched. But Frazer did not communicate this state of affairs; instead he snapped back:

- Tell her it'll take as long as it takes. Just you make sure to stay put until the crew arrive.

With one last look into the breach, Frazer retreated back across the bridge and Heft turned to relay the reply only to find Gebb with the middle finger of her right hand up and aimed at her superior officer, an indication that she had heard well enough. Heft had to laugh; it was a rare moment of mirth on such a dank day.

- Not very lady-like, he observed as he came up the short incline, onto the road, off the bridge.
- Female? He recalled his wife remarking when he had informed her, the previous year, of his new partner.
- Yon's a miserable bastard, Gebb said, putting the offending finger and the hand it belonged to away inside the pocket of her rain coat and stamping her feet to keep warm. Remember how he bit the head off me about that old couple we found?
- He didn't like you describing it as a 'pact', Heft recalled.
- Suicide's still a sin in his book, she muttered.

They stood then with the river and its broken bridge at their back and stared down the empty road. It was late afternoon and a residue of smeared, dirty light lingered in the air. The trees had shrugged off most of their foliage during the recent gales; what leaves clung on looked grey in the gathering gloom. He sensed more than saw Gebb shiver beside him and was about to suggest she sit in the car when she declared:

- My father-in-law was killed on a stupid, wee road like this.

With the cocoon of the rain cagoule tight around his girth, he had to move his upper body to look at her.

- Car accident? He asked.
- Culvert bomb, she replied; and, when he didn't return anything, added: The bad old days.

He was at a loss how to reply. He had come over with the Peace Process to join the force here. Over from the Black Country where he'd followed his father's boot steps into law enforcement. His father had been at Orgreave.

- A culvert bomb, he heard his own voice inexplicably echo his partner's words.
- Blew his car into a field, she elaborated.

More silence then apart from the riverroar behind them and the faint fizz of drizzle on their outer layers. He surveyed then their own surroundings: there was farm-land to one side and a wood grew on either side of the river. Heft attempted to peer deeply into these dark trees. He could only imagine the worry woodland like that would have held back in the day. Then he thought of something to say:

- An I.E.D.
- What? She turned to look at him.
- 'Improvised Explosive Device' I suppose you'd call it now.
- I suppose you would at that, she agreed, already looking up, turning her attention like Heft to the lightning-flash of head-lights round the bend of the road, seeing this before any engine sound reached them.

Given the failing light, and speed of the vehicle, Gebb advised Heft to use his flashlight to motion it down. Heft was moving anyway, determining to stop the car adjacent to a gateway which would facilitate the three point turn the driver was going to have to execute. The single occupant was a woman and when she push-buttoned down the side window, he made out the stern face she presented him as if she resented his presence on that country road. There were ways to tell, apparently, which side people were on in this place; but, even after two years' service, Heft could still not read for sure the signs.

- Tell her to turn her head-lights off, Gebb counselled from behind.

Given his bulk and size, Heft tended to loom over cars; so, in part to reassure the driver, he bent down to talk in through the lowered window and noted that even though it was the faintest of movements, the woman, nevertheless, appeared to recoil from him. It made him hesitate, adapt a less imperative tone.

- 'fraid you're going to have to turn back and go around, love.
- Why? She snapped. Whatever for?
- The bridge, he explained. Isn't safe.

She almost butted him in the chest then as she appeared to overcome any aversion to his proximity and instead craned out the window to look towards the bridge. From this distance it probably seemed sound enough to her for she said:

- Can't I just try it? It doesn't look too bad.

Gebb had come up at this stage and was more direct with the woman.

- As my colleague has indicated, the bridge is not passable. Please turn your vehicle around. There's a side road back there a mile or so which will take you around.
- But that'll mean an extra six miles, she said. Six miles.

There was enough in the tone and register of this objection to cause Gebb to usher Heft aside and lean in herself to the woman and enquire:

- Do you have an emergency? Madam! Are you late for something?
- Late? The woman's head snapped up at the word. She checked the dashboard clock and looked relieved.
- No, she replied. I'm alright for time.
- Are you sure you're okay? Gebb was pursuing. You seem quite agitated.

But the woman was already ignoring the policewoman, already redirecting her gaze to the rear-view mirror not, Heft did not realise he was even thinking this, to re-arrange an errant strand of hair or apply eye-shadow or lip-gloss, as you would sometimes see people do in traffic, but because the woman had determined already to manoeuvre the car around; and then suddenly he stiffened, enveloped in the wet, glistening pupa of his poncho, unexpectedly startled to find that the driver's gaze had shifted once more, and alighted, fell rather, almost imperceptibly in the fading daylight, and had come to rest on him alone, ignoring all the while, bypassing still the presence of his female partner. He felt the full weight of this attention.

- Carpet!

His wife had called this out to him, much later, when he had returned home, warning him not to drip over the hall, stairs and landing and it was perhaps only then that it came clear to him, if clarity can be accorded a sensation that he did not yet fully grasp, a realisation that he did not wholly comprehend, as if the thought had come too fast, too fleeting for the actual act of thinking to register it there and then, that the driver, with that briefest of redirections of a gaze, was seeing him rather than actually looking at him, that she sensed – though even this nuance had to wait for later reflection – the space he occupied, looming as he was over her family saloon, so that he was made to feel his full bulk and size, his very corporality, encased as it was in the drizzle-drenched uniform which he was now peeling off in the vapoury warmth of his bathroom. He took a look but could barely read his features in the misted over mirror.

- I bet he keeps a log book, Gebb had said, as they both watched the car speed back the way it had come.
- What? Who? He had enquired, still flustered by the encounter.
- Her husband, Gebb was explaining. I bet he keeps some sort of log book. He checks her mileage, every time she leaves the house.

Heft looked at his partner, as if to ascertain that she was serious. She returned his look.

- Whatever for?

Gebb shrugged.

- Who knows? Conserving petrol, perhaps. Making sure she doesn't visit anywhere she shouldn't?
- Good Lord, he said, looking back down the now empty rain-soaked road, not yet fully aware of that nugget of information, fact rather, that he had already committed to memory; and why. A log book you say.
- Or something like that. Some do it seems, she replied. Control freaks and the like. I heard it once in a lecture, she informed him.

- Cupboard! His wife said, as he carried his micro-warmed supper to the kitchen table and which he put down there to turn back and close the door that he had left agape.

He had been thinking of telling her about the log-book; thinking of sharing with her the story of the six miles when he realised, as he began to eat, that this detail too stirred up a memory: the old dead couple that he and Gebb had found.

They were retired university lecturers and were meant to have been found, lying like lovers on the top of the bed. However, the old woman had vomited and this could not have been foreseen by the elderly couple when they had planned their actions. A book of poems was meant to have lain between them or on top of them but he could still remember the repeated lines of verse on the page that was laid bare between them.

'And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.'

The old woman had died agitated, however, half off the bed. No sweet sleep for her.

Six miles, he thought next. Never heard such a thing, he thought; and he wondered if his wife had but when he looked over at her, her attention had already returned to the bakery competition on the television and he instead searched for in his head that fragment of information, fact rather, that had been nestling there: the car's registration number.

His first day off, he sat outside their farmhouse. He noted the large German Shepherd which prowled as much of the front yard that the long chain would permit. When the woman appeared she wore a scarf and he thought how he could not recall if she had worn one two nights ago; not yet fully aware that, even in the dimness of the light refracted from the dashboard, the lustre of her blond hair had stayed with him, the impression too fresh perhaps to register yet as memory, as a moment he would want to summon in due course.

By the time he had trailed her to the shopping complex, she had donned a pair of sunglasses. There was no sun. So, he sat in his car and mused, more than imagined, averred more than theorised the blackened eye the glasses doubtless concealed.

Gebb was late that evening. They frequented a down-town establishment called 'The White Horse Tavern' and continued to do so even though the threat-level from dissident groups had been recently raised. Even though it was best practice to innovate and improvise: travel-times, itineraries and venues; to avoid the deep rut routine cuts and abrades into the substance of your daily existence, to reject the repetitive, predictable and formulaic, the well-worn route, embracing instead the need for variance, circumnavigation; the mazy, sinuous and meandering course that could, simply, one day save your life.

However, 'The White Horse' regularly hosted guest ales and craft beers which suited his tastes. Anyway, what they called dissidents or paramilitaries, Heft called punks. Drug-dealers. He had recently appropriated and not declared a fire-arm from one such figure, during a house search where his colleagues uncovered a large cache of prescription

drugs. The gun, he remembered reasoning with himself at the time, would come in handy at some stage; so it was not checked-off.

- My mum's babysitting and she was late, Gebb apologised when she eventually appeared. She's mortified because she's convinced I've got a hot date.

Heft had to laugh at this and then went hastily to the bar to get her the half-pint of Guinness he knew she would start with before going onto the G & Ts.

- I need a break from the books, she declared, gratefully reaching for the drink he returned with.
- Still determined to break-up the perfect partnership, he maintained, re-taking his seat.
- Oh, you'll get someone better, she assured him. Some big, hairy bloke like yourself who knows all about that beloved rugby league of yours.

Heft said nothing but seemed to frown at his half drained pint of ale. This prompted her to add:

- Anyway, I'll probably not get these officer exams and you'll be stuck with me.

They sat quietly the while then and when his frown refused to fade, she sat forward and said:

- All right: come on. Out with it. There's something else on your mind. I can read you like a book.

He returned her look and smiled:

- You and bloody books.
- Out with it, she persisted.
- Okay! I keep thinking about that woman. From the other day.
- The one we stopped at the bridge?
- Her. I was wondering: what if we knew where she lived? Who she was.

Heft caught his partner's suddenly arched eyebrows.

- And do we? Gebb asked pointedly. Do we know where she lives?
- Hypodermically speaking, he quickly replied.

- Hypothermically speaking, she clowned back at him; and they briefly became two bar-room barristers addressing some non-existent QC.

Gebb even puffed out her chest and gripping an imaginary lapel pronounced in stentorian fashion:

- Hypocritically speaking, Mi Lord.

Laughing, Heft reached forward and drained his pint.

- Seriously though, he resumed.

Gebb sipped her own drink and pondered the question; at length she advised:

- *If* we knew who she was – and where she lived – we would report her to the social services. For all the good it'll do: they're as stretched as the rest of us.

Heft solemnly accepted this. Gebb was already on her feet.

- Now what weird-named ale are you drinking this time? If it sounds rude I'm not ordering it mind, she warned.
- It's called 'Old Leg Over', he informed her.
- If you think I'm going up there to ask for an old leg over, you've got another thing coming, she assured him.

But Heft's mind was already made up.

The balaclava scrunched up his features. It itched his under-chin. It cut into his forehead and pushed down his eye-brows so that he peered through slits rather than eyes wide open. It was dark where he'd parked on the country lane but he still glanced in the rear-view mirror; not much of an image reflected back at him.

Satisfied, he got out of the car and walked the short distance to the farm-house. He scaled the gate and maced the dog. The uproar this caused brought the farmer to his front door and a motion-activated floodlight solarised everything in white blinding phosphorescence. Undeterred, and light on his feet when he wanted to be, Heft sprang up the front steps bundling the farmer back into his hallway. He pinned him by the wind-pipe up against the wall, where an assortment of coats swung from a wooden rack.

Heft had rehearsed a couple of what he considered apt lines for this occasion; in the heat of the moment, however, they fled his head. Instead, he began, with measured and assured rhythm, to slap and back slap the farmer's face, pausing only to bring his own close-up and observe:

- Hurts. Doesn't it?

Though smaller in stature, the farmer had worked the land most of his life and was no push-over. He began to fight back, wriggling enough under the giant grasp to get his own hand free and grab Heft by *his* throat. It was at this juncture they heard her voice.

- Leave him alone, you bastard, she yelled.

They both freeze-framed momentarily. Then Heft half-turned, as if to receive some tribute, only to realise too late that the woman was wielding what looked, in that startled instant, to be a nine-iron which she brought down squarely on his head.

Heft

Understood

Gebb had told him about the number of women who gravitated back to an abusive spouse.

Heft understood that they had him back in his car. His chest hurt where it was pressed against the steering-wheel. He understood what the two blurred forms in his rear-view mirror meant and what they were doing there. When he looked ahead and saw what his head-lights illuminated, this too made sense.

He smelt the whiskey and felt some of it in his stomach and was unsurprised to see the half-emptied bottle on the passenger seat beside him. The balaclava felt wet on his face and he accepted that this was a mixture of the whiskey they would have doused him with and his own blood. Then the car lurched forward and looking again in the rear-view he saw them running for their vehicle having helped his own on its way. He saw their rear lights flare red and realised they were not for hanging around to view their handy-work. His own engine was on and he looked ahead again. It may only have been in first gear but the car was picking up speed, rattling down the short incline. They must, he reasoned, have moved the barriers for access to the bridge was now unimpeded.

And there it was: the hole looming in the head-lights, bigger and wider than it had seemed those few days before. Heft braced himself and the car went over the edge.

The mesh of fresh metal came as a shock. In these days of austerity, red tape and bureaucracy, they had actually begun to mend the broken bridge. Heft's car was tilted and stopped by the grid in mid-drop. His head-lights lit-up the white-flecked fury of the water as it seethed around a temporary steel stanchion, erected earlier. Trembling, he reached and turned the engine off.

There was a slight see-saw effect as Heft clambered out up onto the intact part of the bridge. Reaching back into the car, he retrieved the bottle and standing up drained what remained of its contents. Then he stood a long time with the empty bottle in his hand, not lost in reverie but immersed rather in plans and calculations. Then he pitched the bottle into the river.

Next he went and popped the car boot. On account of the car's upended angle, he had to stand on tip-toes to rummage inside. Things had been moved about but he eventually located the oiled rag. He extracted this and unrolling it revealed the paramilitary's hand-gun. He put it into his coat pocket. Then edging around the hole, he proceeded across the bridge.

Heft knew where he was heading now and he wasn't going miles out of his way to get there.

Réaltán Ní Leannáin

Doors

IT ALL STARTED WHEN I was making the soup. Young Mick stood over by the open door out to the back, watching everything, taking mental notes. He'd be leaving home for university in a few weeks. Independent. I talked him through the recipe, the way you did with me. Vegetable soup. I'd set the ham in cold water in the big pot. With a bay leaf, and some peppercorns. Making it the way you used to.

I started to chop up the leeks. Mick fixed one earphone into an ear and foostered with his phone, fidgeting with the tiny screen. I added the barley. Over at the door, Mick rolled himself a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke out into the garden.

Leeks, carrots, a touch of parsnip. Mick removed his earphone and turned, the smouldering butt still clasped in his fingers, but dangled carefully outside the doorway in the open air.

'Everything alright, Ma?'

'Yes, everything's fine. Why?'

'You look as if them's not carrots you're slicing there. You thinking of something?'

'No. Just concentrating on cutting the veg and not my fingers.'

I lied. I was thinking of you, Mam. The times you showed me how to cut carrots into fine slices, and grate some into the pot as well. To sweeten the ham, you would say. Most times it was a ham bone, not the generous tranch of meat that Mick's generation were used

to getting. No matter. That was then and this was now.

I edged past Mick to gather some parsley from the back garden for that last touch. I'm quite proud of my little garden, my bocketty efforts to grow food rather than flowers in my tiny suburban plot. Parsley. Onions. Rocket. Herbs in various guises. Strawberries filling the gaps. I tried tomatoes but they didn't come on too well, in spite of starting them off in my little plastic housheen in the corner that gets the sun. It's only a little garden, no space for a proper greenhouse for the tender things. But I get a good feeling when I manage to cobble together at least some of the ingredients for a salad or a soup or a stew from the dark earth just outside my back door.

Seán from next door stuck his head over the fence. He'd just finished fourth year at secondary school, all fifteen years of him. Growing fast. This Saturday – like every Saturday – was being spent in his attic with the heavy metal band. All day. Practicing every song in their repertoire. Every single one. One by one. And then again. Including drum solos.

'Hi, Mick, d'you have a light?' he yelled over at my son in the doorframe.

Seán caught the expression on my face.

'Not for me,' he grinned, 'for Conán.'

Conán popped his head up over the fence. Seán's best friend cum bass guitarist cum extra mouth at dinner was Conán. Each was the the spit of the other – long hair, black teeshirts, struggling with pimples, baby manbones starting to push through the shining boychins.

'Does your mother know you're doing that?' My voice came out in a bark, before I could stop myself, as I stared at the rollie in Conán's skinny fingers.

'It's alright, Missus Mack. My Ma didn't like it at first but she's okay with it now. She doesn't mind,' he said. Permission received. No more hiding papers and matches. Guiltfree smokes.

'She does mind.' I looked at the two heads peering over the fence, and then at my own tall, languid teenager, who shifted in the doorway. 'She knows you smoke, and she does mind. She minds that her child is gone, the child who used to give out about the rotten smell

of smoke and how stupid smokers must be to do it.' Conán and Seán's eyes widened. 'She cries, sometimes, at night when you're in your room listening to music. She worries that you'll get sick when you're older, and she wishes you could see that. She minds, pet.'

Mick chucked the matchbox over the fence. The two heads on the other side disappeared in silence. Tobacco smoke weaved its way soundlessly through the slats and lined our lungs.

'Sorry, love, it just came out of my mouth before I knew it.'

'S'okay, Ma. I understand.'

The box of matches came flying back over the fence. Mick caught it and went back into the house.

I gathered a handful of parsley and returned to the coolness of the kitchen, out of the late summer sun. And stared. The door on every cupboard in the kitchen was hanging half-way open. Mick mustn't have been able to wait another few minutes for the soup, and had started rummaging for something to eat. I shouted up the stairs at him, but no answer came. He didn't come down so I could give out to him properly for not closing the cupboard doors. I must have embarrassed him after all, in front of the lads next door. That or he had the headphones on again.

Parsley in hand, I went back into the kitchen, closed every cupboard door, took out a fresh chopping board and finished the soup. Fine. Okey-dokey. Aren't you the joker these days, Mam. Only I didn't know it was you at the time. I blamed Mick. I reckon now, though, it was you. But you won't own up, of course.

A few days after that, I called over to see how Dad was doing. We were having a mug of tea and a ginger biccie, and complaining to each other about the hot weather. He'd just finished telling me about his most recent visit to the doctor for his blood pressure. Then, he looks over at the mantelpiece.

'See that photo?' The one of you and him in Dublin on your honeymoon, with Nelson's Pillar in the background. Black and white and a silver frame.

'Yes.'

'I came downstairs yesterday morning and it was upside down in the frame.'

I put down my half-eaten Ginger Nut. I looked at Dad. He didn't seem in the least put out, in fact he had a little smile on his face. A lot cheerier than in those last months of your cancer, Mam.

I'm assuming that was you in the gym dressing-room that day, now. I'd just finished a workout on the stepper and the treadmill and the pool and the sauna and the jacuzzi. A good session cleans the stress straight out of you. A shower and a coffee and I can go out and face the world again. There I am, drying myself off on the bench, minding my own business. There's no-one in the changing room except me. Just me. I lift my head. There, in front of me, the door on each and every locker in the room is half-way open, at a right angle to the frame. To the degree. It took the breath out of me, and I knew it was you, giving a silent shout that you were there.

Olga, one of the personal trainers, walked round the corner from the gym and stopped dead, staring at the locker doors. Then she gave a little shudder and looked over. I just shook my head, disclaiming any part in it. Olga stepped forward and closed the doors, every one, one after another. I knew it was you. She didn't, and blessed herself when she thought I wasn't looking. I kept an eye out for doors from then on.

In the weeks after that, I noticed you everywhere. I found the front door of the house lying open more often than not, and no-one in the house to leave it like that. Cupboards, as well, you were really busy with cupboard doors for a while. It was you who opened that kitchen cupboard above me as I straightened up from packing the dishwasher. I thought I'd got concussion when I smacked my head on that one. I nearly blacked out with the pain. What did I do on you to deserve that?

Was it Mick that annoyed you, the bastard grandchild in my careless, unwed womb? But I didn't want to marry the father, Mam. You know that would never have worked out. Neill, from down the town? I can't ever believe I was so stupid as to ever go out with him. Very young and very, very stupid. But not stupid enough to marry him. No, Mam. You shouted and screamed and cried and tried every way you could to shame and guilt me into marrying him, for the sake of me being able to wear a ring in the maternity ward for all to

see. But I didn't want to, and him and his were relieved I didn't cave in to you.

The doors are beginning to settle now, though. Are you nearly ready to go? I think you must be. Don't think I'm at all worried by that business with the jerseys, either. There's me, standing at the open wardrobe door looking for a clean pair of jeans and you tumble the winter woollies from the top shelf down onto the back of my head. Were you thinking you were getting your own back on me, after all those years? Or were you playing?

I didn't get pregnant on purpose, Mam. I know you hated me getting as big as a house on Mick in front of the neighbours. I was a scandal for them – and for you. But I wasn't going to hide. I certainly wasn't going to go down the country to stay with those 'friends' the parish priest knew until Mick would be born. If they were friends at all. It was the parish priest who advised that, wasn't it? I was in our old kitchen making tea in the posh china pot and he was in the parlour planning the rest of my life with you. I heard, although I wasn't supposed to. But Dad sided with me and let me stay at home. You hardly talked to me the rest of the pregnancy. When Dad brought me to the hospital, you wouldn't even come into the ward to see Mick after he was born. No ring on my finger.

But you fell in love with him the moment you laid eyes on him, the day he arrived home home in my arms. You cried with joy, in spite of yourself and what the neighbours might think. You were crying, too, when I moved out a few years later with Mick. Here, down the road, to the house with the tiny back garden. You were going to miss him, even though he was in and out to you every afternoon.

You used always say to me 'Some day you'll meet your driver'. There was always a little scolding and a little hoping in those words. I never did. I had my boyfriends, but none of them seemed worth the trouble in the long term. You disapproved when I started with them, and disapproved when I broke up with them. But then you got sick just over a year ago, and the doctors couldn't do a lot for you, and there were no more arguments of any kind anymore.

Now that I think about it, that red jumper hit the back of my neck like a kiss. A kiss from you. Thanks, Mam. But can you stop now? Please?

in review: RB Kelly

on Waters and the Wild, by Jo Zebedee

FANS OF JO ZEBEDEE'S PREVIOUS WORK—space opera series *Abendau* and alien-invasion saga *Inish Carraig*—might be surprised to find that her latest book, *Waters and the Wild*, has swapped science fiction for dark fairytale, but they shouldn't. *Waters and the Wild* is absolutely a worthy next instalment from a versatile and talented author.

The common factor is an overarching sense of place—place that enters the narrative as a dominant character and drives both the story and the characters' actions. Just as *Inish Carraig* couldn't be *Inish Carraig* anywhere but Northern Ireland, *Waters and the Wild* would be a different novel if it took place anywhere else in the world. This is what sets Zebedee's writing apart and what makes her such a valuable addition to Northern Irish genre literature.

The story follows Amy Lyle, a troubled young woman who's been in psychiatric treatment for years after disappearing on a family holiday as a child and insisting that she was taken by fairies. Convinced that the fairies will one day come back to claim her, and beset by episodes in which she's attacked by invisible creatures that only Amy can see, Amy's family has gradually crumbled under the pressure of keeping her safe and well. Her father, Phil, has descended into alcoholism and left the family home, while her brother Mark is just trying to keep everything together. Mum Emma seems protective, but she's brought Amy to the Antrim Glens, where the fairies have always seemed closest, and she's obviously got something to hide.

As with *Inish Carraig*, Jo Zebedee's Northern Ireland is both familiar and changed. In *Waters and the Wild*, the haunting beauty of the Antrim Glens becomes oppressive: looming mountains reaching up into a slate-grey sky to swallow Amy and her would-be rescuer, amiable Simon McCormick, a fellow guest at the wedding that's motivated the Lyles' return to the countryside, despite Amy's worsening condition. The Glenariff waterfall, seen by dark through the eyes of a woman who may or may not be delusional, becomes an obstacle course of dangers real and imagined. For anyone who knows the area, it's both recognisable and not—as though reality itself has been turned 90 degrees—and it leaves the reader disoriented and uncertain as to whom to believe. Mark is insistent: his sister's ill and needs help, and her headlong dash into the countryside to escape a supernatural attack is a symptom of her deteriorating mental health. Emma just wants her daughter back, but it's increasingly clear that something doesn't add up, and what looks like over-protectiveness might be something altogether less benign. Simon, who knows the family only through hearsay and rumour, has no idea whom to believe as he finds himself drawn to beautiful, troubled and mysterious Amy. There is clearly no such thing as fairies. But Amy seems convincing.

Eerie and atmospheric, *Waters and the Wild* is the sort of novel that keeps a reader up long after lights should be out, and one of its great strengths is its characters. Amy is a beguiling heroine: seen through the eyes of those around her, she's obviously not well, but given her own voice, it becomes clear that Zebedee isn't going to let us off so easily. Amy's fairies seem all too real when viewed through her eyes: solid but not solid, menacing and hovering just out of sight. Mark's despair is almost palpable—he's a young man whose life is permanently on hold because of his sister's instability, and as much as he needs her to be safe, he also needs her to be better. Phil, as kind and loving as he is, simply can't cope with Amy's issues and has opted instead for drowning his pain in alcohol and denial. Emma is strength personified, the warrior mother, and it's a testament to the skill of Zebedee's writing that we only gradually come to realise how dangerous this can be. In fact, if there's any weak link at all in the novel, it's in the character of Simon, the outsider who's brought in to shine a light for the reader on the Lyle family's problems. He's likeable and compelling, but we never find out very much about him, despite the fact that the novel relies on him to

keep Amy's story moving forward. It's a minor quibble, though, and one that doesn't become obvious until the novel is finished, so tightly and quickly does the narrative take hold.

At 246 pages, *Waters and the Wild* is economical with its prose, leaving a tightly woven story that rattles along at breakneck speed and wastes not a single word. Fans of Jo Zebedee's science fiction would be well advised to dip into her latest venture; readers who've yet to encounter her work are in for a treat.

***Waters and the Wild* by Jo Zebedee was published by Inspired Quill on July 23, 2017.**

plays

Freda Donoghue

Shelf Life

(Two women stand side by side on an empty stage. They are the same age, of similar height and build (one can be slightly bigger than the other). They are dressed completely in white, preferably in shroud-type garments, with their arms completely covered. The woman on stage right is RIGHT, the woman on stage left is LEFT. They look out at the audience at all times but they speak to each other.)

LEFT You know what I hate? You hate it too, don't you Right? It's the jiggling.

RIGHT Yeah, the jiggling, yeah.

LEFT It was grand when we were younger.

RIGHT Speak for yourself, Left.

LEFT Ah you know what I mean. We were younger, we were firmer.

RIGHT You're right, Left. But I was always firmer.

LEFT Just a little bit, Right.

RIGHT More than a little bit, if memory serves me right, Left. I mean, you were bigger, and so I was firmer.

LEFT That's not necessarily a logical argument, Right, but I guess so, I'll give you that. That's because I developed first.

RIGHT Yeah, you were the first off.

LEFT The first out of the traps.

RIGHT The first out of the vest, more like!

LEFT But she kept on wearing them. Kept on wearing them.

RIGHT Those loose 'oul things. No support.

LEFT And she thought she was lovely, so sexy like.

RIGHT Meanwhile, jiggle jiggle.

LEFT But you didn't feel it as badly as I did.

[They both start jiggling, jumping up and down slightly.]

RIGHT You're right, Left. You've a point there. But remember when she'd get into the bath, it was her weekly thing wasn't it? And we'd float...

[They stop jiggling, and they move slightly apart from each other and give a little shake to themselves and then settle down.]

RIGHT ...and it was lovely, just perfect, so soothing.

LEFT Oh yeah.

RIGHT Bobbing on the surface of the water

[They give a little shake again, move a little closer to each other and then back a little apart]

LEFT Awwwww *[slowly]* b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l!

[LEFT and RIGHT sway a little in unison]

LEFT Nothing like a bath.

[They stop swaying and settle back down, a bit apart]

RIGHT Yeah, even now I still love it, although in all fairness, Left, we're different now, a lot different.

LEFT But, sure, doesn't it happen us all? I mean, we all head south.

RIGHT Yeah, but the floating now isn't the same, is it? I mean, it's less substantial. We're more like big leaves on the top of the water.

LEFT You're right, Right! I never thought about it before, but yes! 'Cause sometimes she gets in, settles down, and I'm waiting for the float, ah here it is, and I get so disappointed, 'cause it's not the same as it used to be, not the same as it was back then.

[RIGHT and LEFT give a little shake, of disappointment, and then nestle back close together.]

RIGHT But at least she wears better bras now. We're far more snug.

LEFT And how!

[They nestle even closer together and give a big sigh of contentment.]

RIGHT I mean, remember those shelf efforts in her Disco Dolly Days.

LEFT God, they were awful!

RIGHT Now that was jiggle city!

LEFT Tell me about it!

[RIGHT stands up taller and starts to jiggle up and down]

RIGHT And here we are walking down the street and her in her high red shiny shoes and her nothing-there dress.

[LEFT joins in jiggling]

- LEFT And here we are waiting to get into the disco. Coat wrapped around us, but we're freezing, hopping like mad because it's freezing.
- [They both start hopping up and down. Music can now be heard, getting louder.]*
- RIGHT And now it's off with the coat and we're on display.
- [They stop hopping and move their shoulders in unison, left, right, left, right. The music is louder now.]*
- RIGHT And we're off to get a drink.
- LEFT Sip, sip, but *[puts on high voice]* 'Oh, I **love** this! Come on, I have to dance!' *[back to normal voice]* And we're off!
- [LEFT and RIGHT start to jiggle furiously and then jump up and down, pogoing. Strobe lighting and loud music [Felix: Don't You Want My Love]. They get very frantic.]*
- RIGHT And she's dancing this way and that!
- LEFT And we can barely stay on the shelf!
- RIGHT Barely hold on!
- LEFT Oh no! I'm falling off!
- [LEFT dances a little away from RIGHT but tries to hang on to her place.]*
- RIGHT Rather you than me!
- LEFT Oh no! Here I go!
- [LEFT stumbles and starts to fall.]*
- RIGHT You see, that's the thing with being bigger!

LEFT You're no support, Right! Thanks a lot!

[Pause. They both calm down a little, and then stop, return to a slow even jiggle.]

LEFT Phew! She's taking a breather, stuffing me back in.

RIGHT Walking back off the dance floor, hates this song.

[The music fades to a low thump. They both move jerkily backwards and forwards, their heads bobbing.]

LEFT But I love the lads staring at us.

RIGHT It's great, isn't it?

[They both stand tall and preen themselves, turning right and left, synchronised.]

LEFT Ah you know, those days weren't so bad after all.

RIGHT You'd put up with the jiggling and the shelf just for the sake of those stares.

LEFT Those looks.

RIGHT Those gawks.

LEFT Those drools.

RIGHT Those ooooohs.

LEFT Those aaaaaahs.

[They stop preening, settle themselves back down again, deflated. The music has stopped completely.]

RIGHT Ah life, life...

LEFT The halcyon days of our youth

RIGHT *[sighs]* I'll miss you so much

LEFT Please Right, not now.

RIGHT No, you're right, Left. Not while...

[They snuggle in softly closer to one another, comforting each other.]

RIGHT Ah, remember, remember...

LEFT The foursome!

RIGHT The foursome. She'd a threesome and we'd a foursome! Now that was something else, wasn't it?

LEFT It was like looking in the mirror only better. Remember, when the bra came off?

RIGHT Sure even before that!

[They stand more upright now and press against each other rhythmically.]

LEFT Yeah, being pressed against something soft. Not like hard muscles.

RIGHT I never even thought for a moment it'd be like that. Not for one moment.

LEFT So soft!

RIGHT But pert at the same time.

LEFT Substantial.

RIGHT The feel of those nipples! Even through the bra.

LEFT Right up against us, Right!

RIGHT Ahhhh!

[They both stand tall and move from side to side, rotating themselves in ecstasy.]

LEFT And then the bra came off.

RIGHT As if by magic!

LEFT And there they were!

RIGHT There we were!

LEFT Right up against us, Right.

RIGHT Right up against us, Left.

[They sigh audibly and move in unison, faster and faster.]

LEFT That's it! Right there!

RIGHT Ohhhhhh! Yeah!

LEFT Just there!

RIGHT Yeah, yeah, yeah! Right there!

LEFT *[Squealing]* Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!

[They move faster and faster together, moaning louder and louder. Then they give a big sigh together, stand stock still and tall and then collapse back down together, sighing quietly and contentedly.]

RIGHT That was gorgeous!

LEFT Nothing like it before!

RIGHT Ever!

LEFT I could have done that over and over and over again!

RIGHT Oh God! Me too!

LEFT I mean, Jesus!

RIGHT Heaven!

LEFT Face to face—

RIGHT With ourselves!

LEFT Except they weren't. But it was like they were us.

RIGHT Like when we look in the mirror and I see what you look like because usually I only ever get to feel you, Left.

LEFT There we were, Right. With us who weren't us. And we could get lost in it.

[Pause]

RIGHT And then she refused to do it again.

[They move apart, in dejection.]

LEFT How could she?

RIGHT Obviously not her cup of tea.

LEFT She thinks only of herself.

RIGHT But what about us?

LEFT We have needs too.

RIGHT You're right, Left, we matter too.

LEFT But no, of course, it's all about her.

RIGHT Always about her.

LEFT But now she realises.

RIGHT Yeah, she knows that now!

LEFT And how!

RIGHT Oh Left...

LEFT Whatever about the jiggling, Right, actually it's the poking.

RIGHT And the prodding.

LEFT The man handling.

RIGHT The woman handling.

LEFT As if we're punchbags.

[They both start jerking backwards as if being hit repeatedly.]

RIGHT The lack of humanity.

LEFT The lack of dignity.

[They stand up tall as if being pulled roughly.]

RIGHT The pulling us up.

[They move apart suddenly as if being pulled violently.]

LEFT The pulling us apart.

RIGHT I mean, what do they think we are?

[They stand still, erect, in justifiable anger.]

LEFT Who do they think we are?

RIGHT And it's far worse for you, in all fairness Left.

LEFT And now...

RIGHT Oh Twinnie, I'll miss you so much.

[They snuggle in together, their anger dissipated.]

LEFT *[softly]* You haven't called me that in years.

RIGHT Remember I used to call you that the whole time.

LEFT Yes.

RIGHT But that's who you are. My Twinnie.

LEFT Your Twinnie. My Twinnie.

RIGHT When I heard the news.

LEFT I'll never forget that day.

RIGHT And now here we are waiting.

LEFT I hate waiting.

RIGHT And thinking.

LEFT And remembering.

RIGHT We had such good times, Twinnie.

LEFT You were everything to me, Twinnie.

RIGHT I'll be lost without you, Twinnie.

LEFT Oh.

RIGHT I'm sorry. I have to say it.

LEFT I suppose.

RIGHT Soon there'll be no time left.

LEFT I know.

RIGHT You're everything to me.

LEFT And to me.

RIGHT And to think [...] It just won't be the same. [...] Any more.

LEFT I won't get to hug you in bed. Any more.

[They sidle up to each other slowly, sensuously, but also sadly.]

RIGHT The only time we get to lie together. On top of each other. Your turn, or my turn, whenever she turns. And when she lies on her front...
[sighs sadly]

LEFT But we've always been together.

RIGHT It won't be the same. Nothing will be the same.

LEFT Oh no, here they come. [...] Here we go.

[Both start moving their shoulders in unison from left to right, a slow death march]

RIGHT I'll always remember you, Twinnie.

LEFT It'll only be threesomes from now on [*grimly*], if she ever goes down that road again!

RIGHT Me and a poxy plastic cone. Snuggling up beside that won't be the best!

LEFT At least that'll make you remember me! [*laughs shortly*]

RIGHT I love you, Twinnie.

LEFT I love you too.

LIGHTS FADE

Ann-Marie Foster

I Love You Because...

CHARACTERS

- MOTHER: In her sixties. Any build, but neat and tidy, dressed in a winter coat, skirt and sensible shoes. She's a working-class widow, used to a patriarchal community.
- ANNIE: Late twenties but with the bearing and mannerisms of a young teenager. Slightly overweight and unkempt, in a worn, fluffy dressing gown and white ankle socks with no shoes. She takes what the community throw at her – and they've been cruel over the years – she knows she isn't very bright and accepts her lot.
- ROSEMARY: Late twenties and six months' pregnant with a neat bump under her maternity smock and baggy cardigan. Some OCD apparent, she can never relax.

SETTING

2017. Evening. Simple homely settings for each character.

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: The stage is dark. There are three figures in the darkness. The first is MOTHER. Centre stage she is seated on an upright chair. Beside her chair is a small table with a lamp and a folded newspaper. Her handbag is at her feet. On the left is a small sofa where ANNIE is half sitting-half lying. On the arms of the sofa are some half-burnt candles. On the floor in front of the sofa is a plastic lemonade bottle, half-full. On the right is ROSEMARY. She is standing with one hand on a toddler's buggy. Behind her is a kitchen chair. At the back of the stage behind all three is a large blow-up black and white picture of a man's face. It's not lit. The lips are set in a firm line. The eyes glower.

A spotlight picks out MOTHER

MOTHER: Always good to his ma is Jim. *(She folds her arms, conspiratorially)* Right from when he was a wean. "Ma. I'll look after you." Right from his da died when he was eleven. God that was a dark day. He pushed his way through the women round me in the scullery, his schoolbag hanging from the shoulder. "Your daddy's dead, had a heart attack lifting the pavements on the Hightown Road." His wee face fell in on itself like an empty paper bag, just for a minute, then he took a big breath and puffed it out again. "This is my ma," he told them all, "and I'm going to look after her now." Jim always knows what's best for me. I couldn't live without him...

ANNIE: *(with MOTHER)* I couldn't live without him

The light over the mother's chair dims and another light picks out ANNIE. She closes a large bag of crisps and brushes the crumbs from her chest onto the floor.

ANNIE: My cousin Jim. I was eight when his da died. My ma and his da were brother and sister but they never spoke to each other. So, he and I didn't speak to each other at school either. We just carried on the family tradition. My ma went to the funeral. She said she always felt sorry for his mum. She came home laughing after it was all over. I never understood that.

She feels on the floor for the bottle of lemonade and takes a swig.

ANNIE: Jim and I both went to the big school. I was alone in the playground one day *(laughs)* every day, but this one day he was playing football and the ball rolled over towards me. "You're Annie, aren't you?" he said. He picked up the ball and I'll always remember his wee smile "Ya wanna come to the chippy with me after school?" Well I was bloody starving, I'd eaten my jam sandwiches at break time, so I said yes and that's how we changed history, our family's history anyway. He always knows how to make me happy...

ROSEMARY: *(in harmony with ANNIE)* He always knows how to make me happy.

The light has now dimmed on ANNIE and lit up ROSEMARY, standing on the stage, rubbing her back. She wheels the buggy back and forth as she speaks, keeping the child inside placated.

ROSEMARY: Says I'm built for babies, does Jim. Says that from the day and hour he set eyes on me he wanted to have kids with me, lots of kids. "So, I can take care of all of you," he says. (*pats her belly*) This one's number four – the other two are at school. He wants this one to be a boy, for a change. I hope it's a boy too. He says he treats me like a princess.

MOTHER: (*in harmony with ROSEMARY*) Like a princess.

The light switches back to MOTHER. She's been reading a paper but shakes it and puts it down on her knee.

MOTHER: He treats me like a princess and his Rosemary too, he says. She doesn't visit anymore, Jim says she went a bit funny after the second girl, says there's no talking to her. God, I hope it's a boy this time and so does Jim. He needs a boy to take his mind of everything, all that talk. (*She folds the paper again and looks upset and angry all at once*) It was disgusting, but he handled it. "Don't worry ma, it's just a load of aul' ginnies who have nothing better to do than to make up stories". I'd had Mrs McGinty from down the street at my door the night before. "What's your Jimmy doing with your Annie?" There was a wicked lick of a smile around her chops. I wiped it off her face. "He's round that house all the time, sneaking in and out the door like he thinks no-one can see him." I told her. Sneaking? I said. You do know that wee girl was in Purdysburn Nellie, don't you? He's not sneaking. She can't take visitors. He's the only person she'll let into the house. Sure, no man in his right mind would look at her. That one will die a virgin." Says she to me "Well how come Jim's allowed in when no-one else is, eh?" I told her. Because he's a good man Nellie McGinty, a bloody good man. He's tended to Annie since she was at school, she was bullied you know, for being a bit slow. In fact, why don't you ask your daughter Jean? (*laughs and claps her hands*) And then I shut the door in her face. Aul' bitch. God, I enjoyed that. Jim wasn't so pleased (*her face falls and from clapping, she starts to wring her hands together*) I thought I'd nipped it in the bud but he came by the next night with a face on him like thunder. He said sorry afterwards.

ANNIE: (*in harmony with MOTHER*) He said sorry afterwards.

The light falls on ANNIE, swigging the lemonade bottle again.

ANNIE: He always says sorry afterwards. He says I do so many stupid things, he can't control himself. But he showed me how to make him happy again. (*drinks*

more from the bottle) The first time I made him angry was when we were at school. Every Monday and Thursday, we shared a chip. One day it was teeming and he said we should go back to his house. I didn't want to cos I knew my ma wouldn't be pleased if I bumped into his ma, but Jim said she was out at work. We went up to his room. God, it was lovely and warm. He put songs on and we ate the chips on the bed. I was starving. Then I saw the big pile of comics beside his bed. I went to pull one out. "What do you think you're doing!" I remember my chips fell on the counterpane. "Did I say you could touch them?" I started to cry with my knees up to my chin. That must have made him think how mean he was 'cos he stopped shouting and just stared at my legs. "Shush," he said, "shush Annie, don't cry. You cry all the time in school." I know I do, I told him. "Why Annie? Why do you think they don't like you?" "Cos I'm fat I said (*she takes another drink*) but you know what he said to me? "I think you're beautiful Annie." He says I'm beautiful...

ROSEMARY: (*in harmony with ANNIE*) He says I'm beautiful.

The light changes again...this time ROSEMARY is seated, legs splayed in the way that pregnant women sit, rubbing her belly

ROSEMARY: He says he loves me when I'm pregnant. He loves my belly, my boobs (*she smiles shyly*) he even likes my swollen fingers, won't let me take my rings off. He picks all my maternity clothes. (*shrugs and sighs*) And it keeps the peace. I wonder about his mum sometimes. What did she wear when she was pregnant? Can't ask her. She only lives ten minutes away by car but he won't let me drive and anyway he says she's going a wee bit, y'know, odd. So, he thinks it's better if I don't visit. He goes up to see her all the time but the older girls haven't seen her since they were babies – the wee one has never been near her – but Jim says it's for the best...

MOTHER: (*in harmony with ROSEMARY*) It's for the best.

The light picks up MOTHER rummaging through her handbag for her purse. She opens it and peers inside and nods.

MOTHER: I'll miss this old place though but Jim says it's too much for me to handle now. He says I'm not keeping it the way he likes it anymore. I suppose he's right. I can't reach the cobwebs up there now with my hip and I know I'm getting a bit lazy in my old age. He's always tutting about that. So, moving to the home will be for the best. It is his house after all. His daddy left it to him. His daddy left everything he had to him. Suppose he thought I'd be the first to go...

Light switches briefly to ROSEMARY, rubbing her knees

ROSEMARY: *(in harmony with MOTHER)* He thought I'd be the first to go.

Light switches to ANNIE

ANNIE: *(in harmony with MOTHER and ROSEMARY)* He thought I'd be the first to go *(she laughs)* but I was shy and I told him I couldn't while the light was on. "Don't be stupid Annie," he said "If I turn off the light then we can't see the pictures" *(she points to an imaginary bedside table before lifting the lemonade bottle to her lips again – thinks for a moment, then giggles)* Jim told me I was beautiful and he wanted me all to himself. He told me that while he was brushing my hair one day. It was sore at first, too many tats. He'd tap me with the brush, just on the shoulder, just a little, with the brush, when he had to pull hard. And I would cry a little. I'm always crying. And he would tell me to shut up. How was he going to make me even more beautiful if I was such a cry-baby? One day he pushed my hair to one side and kissed my neck. Yes, kissed it, right here *(pulls her hair away and points to the side of her neck)* And I loved it. It made me feel, feel *(whispers)* grown-up. I told Jim that. He said good 'cos we were grown-ups. *(another drink...her voice becoming a little slurred)* And we were allowed to do grown up things. He said he was my boyfriend. But I was too shy at the start. That's why I didn't go first...

ROSEMARY: *(in harmony with ANNIE)* I didn't go first

As the light hits ROSEMARY, she is standing again and bent over uncomfortably, holding her belly, grimacing and gasping.

ROSEMARY: I didn't go first. I didn't go at all. How could I? That first time. Lying in that maternity unit, I was expecting flowers for producing that lovely wee girl. He pushed her cot out of the way, didn't even look at her. I expected a kiss and a hug. I got the kiss. A full-blown, tongue-in-the-mouth slabber. He'd pulled the curtain around the bed so he could lie beside me. Rough kisses, like he was angry at me. I told him to stop, to get off the bed. He told me to be quiet or the nurse would come and take the baby away and she wouldn't give her back if he said I was getting on like a mad woman. I started to cry. He said I should concentrate on him instead of the baby and if I didn't, I needn't think about coming home, he would take the wean and I could clear off. After, after I'd finished him, the nurse comes by and says to him "Isn't your daughter a wee dote..." And he says "Yes, she's beautiful" and he hadn't even looked at her and I couldn't look at him. How could I go? How could I get up out of that bed with just the clothes I came in and nothing for the wean? And when I got into that car the next day to go back to his house with her he kissed me and said "It's okay sweetheart, I forgive you. And don't worry about that one being a girl. There's always the next time."

MOTHER: *(in harmony with ROSEMARY)* There's always the next time.

She switches on a lamp beside her – instead of the stage light. It illuminates the man's eyes, watching her.

MOTHER: I used to joke when he was younger about marrying again, but he didn't like that. "Why would you re-marry? Am I not looking after you properly?" I'd feel guilty but sometimes I'd have loved to talk to another adult. He was so busy. Work and then looking after Rosemary. And in between running after me and Annie. I was so lonely. Just to talk to another man for a few hours. But Jim said no.

ANNIE: *(in harmony with MOTHER)* Jim said no.

No stage light...ANNIE picks up a lighter and lights several candles on the arms of her settee...they light up the man's lips

ANNIE: He said no to turning the lights off and he spread the magazines around the bed. I thought they were comics but they were the dirty books. I didn't want to look at them but he said I'd learn to make myself more beautiful for him. *(She swigs the bottle and burps quietly...her voice slurred)* When I was afraid of the books, Jim got his mum's brandy from the kitchen and gave me a glass. "You'll feel better Annie. It's like medicine, it tastes horrible but you'll feel better." *(She lifts the lemonade bottle and holds it up to the light)* It did taste horrible, at first. But I sipped it while he turned the pages and showed me all the lovely ladies and told me what bits he thought were nice. And, and when we got to the pictures of the men with the ladies, he asked me if I thought their bits were nice. It was a special game just between the two of us, between boyfriend and girlfriend, he said. School, then chips, then brandy and the books. Then one day Jim said it was time we grew up some more. He said he'd bought me loads of chips and it was time I paid him back. I started to cry and he shushed me and put his arms around me and said "Don't worry Annie, I don't mean money." He said I had something I wanted to give him. And I said "What Jim?" And he said "You want me to be happy Annie, don't you? You want to keep coming here for chips? You love me Annie, don't you? I know you do and I know you know what I want. *(pause, and another drink)* I was still crying and he pushed me away "Do you want to go back to being all alone? Cos I'll tell you know. I'll tell that you're fat and ugly and smelly and I'll tell the things that my da used to say about your ma" So I kept the lights on, but he went first....

MOTHER: *(in harmony with ANNIE)* He went first.

The lamp comes on again, dimmer and dimmer.

MOTHER: He went first, my lovely husband Mick, before that bitch of a sister of his.

Hussy – well she was! The night before the accident she'd met him in the street on his way home, pulled him into an alleyway in the rain. Told him she'd no money and what was she going to do with their Annie. Their Annie? That child had nothing to do with his family. She had that stupid wee bastard and she thought Mick had to look after her! Bloody cheek. He told her where to go. Arrived home furious, all red faced, cursing. "I told her to clear off and not come near me again," he said. "What did she say?" I asked. But he wouldn't tell me. He said no-one would understand...

From darkness

ANNIE: No-one would understand. That's what he told me. We were a special secret.

ROSEMARY: *(From the light of a mobile phone keyboard – with low stage light)* No-one would understand. There's no point in telling now. I've stayed this long. Aah, the contractions are getting worse. Why isn't he answering his phone? The baby's coming. I don't feel right...

ROSEMARY pulls off her cardigan and lifts her skirt and stands legs apart, squatting a little. We see the cut marks on her forearms. The phone lights go out. The candles by ANNIE flicker.

ANNIE: (in harmony with ROSEMARY) I don't feel right. Not since Jim's stopped coming. He went away before when I had to go to hospital. That was after mammy died from the bad tablets and I got this wee flat of the Executive. He went away after he told me to go to the doctor but said not to tell anyone about him or the books or how he thought I was beautiful else they'd lock me up and he would never be able to find me again. The nurse said I should grow up and tell the father. I didn't know what she was talking about til, til it was born. *(another swig)* It was very sore. They told me to stop squealing. I stopped when he came out and they took him away. He wasn't squealing. The nurse said they couldn't wake him up but it was probably for the best because he wasn't right anyway. But I didn't squeal one bit after that 'cos I knew Jim would see me soon. I didn't tell them Jim, no matter what they said...

From darkness

MOTHER: (in harmony with ANNIE) No matter what they said. I always loved my Jim....

Stage lights on characters fade, except for spotlight on the man's photograph, as the Jim Reeves song I Love You Because begins to play.

THE END

flash fiction

Pauline Rooney

The Girl with the Headscarf

AT EXACTLY SIX THIRTY, I raise the shutter of the hospital's Coffee Hut. It judder-starts and the girl's sandaled feet appear. Smooth skin. Pearly toenails.

The metal grille chugs upwards revealing her delicate ankles and sky-blue uniform.

'Good morning.' Her voice has a hushed tone.

I blush. 'First again?' Then step to the side, 'The usual?'

She dips her head. 'Please.' She yawns. Slender fingers cover her mouth. 'Nightshift.'

A man in a rumpled suit appears, loiters close behind her. His aftershave cloying.

Two other men join him in the queue. Patients in pyjamas and dressing gowns. One has a newspaper tucked under his arm. He clutches a packet of cigarettes and a drip on wheels.

'Any chance of getting served here, mate?' The Suit rakes his hand through his oiled hair.

'Just be a minute, Sir.'

The girl wears a scarf on her head, even when she is inside the hospital building. Today, it is my favourite – a vibrant, green scarf with golden leaves which curl around her heart-shaped face. It is not tied tightly at the neck, as my mother would wear it, but adorns her shoulder in voluminous, silky waves.

The Suit's fleshy fingers drum out an impatient rhythm on the worktop. He glances at his faux-gold watch. Winks at the others.

'I shouldn't have to wait behind someone like her.'

The girl blinks, the whites of her eyes stretch wide.

'Almost finished, Sir.' The cup rattles on the saucer as I nudge it forward.

'She should go back to where she came from.'

The girl flinches.

'Taking our jobs.'

The Suit snatches her scarf and tosses it to the floor the floor.

Her hands rush to smooth the wiry frizz of her hair.

The Suit turns to leave. 'Coffee's like piss water here anyway, mate.'

I crouch down, grasp the silky fabric.

She seizes it from my faltering hands. Chin tilted as she ties it tightly around her wet face.

Rachel Sneyd

Not a Hand

IT'LL BE PRETTY IRONIC if I get done for kidnapping on the same day as Dad's trial. Not great for the Healy family name, but sure we've been fucked on that front since the morning they nabbed Dad when he was bringing out the brown bin in his floppy *Simpsons* slippers. No need to wait for evidence, or the barristers in stupid wigs, or any of the other stuff that's supposed to come before a judgement. Nobody cares that he never touched anyone.

I hit a patch of rotting leaves and the bike swerves. Eva shrieks, twisting herself around on the crossbar like she actively wants us to go flying off the cycle path into the traffic of Chesterfield Avenue.

'Hands go on the handlebars!' she says, echoing Dad's favourite teaching-your-kids-to-ride-a-bike mantra.

'It's not my fault you've gotten so big and heavy. It's throwing off my balance.'

'It's not my fault you're full on losing it.'

Is it technically child abduction if it's your own sibling you've run off with? As far as Mum's concerned I dropped her off at the primary school gate on my way up to secondary, and her

teacher's probably assuming that we're holed up together in some therapist's office, so I'm pretty sure that bringing her with me on a mad dash through the Phoenix Park is illegal in some way. And even if I do manage to get us to the court house without a squad car showing up, what the hell am I planning to do there? Ask Dad to hop on the back of the bike and do a runner with him, too? Find Mum and tell her how much I hate her for wanting us to pretend like this is just a normal Tuesday?

The grass under the trees is littered with empty conker shells. Dad used to bring us here to collect them every autumn, and he'd let us fill a whole bag each. Most parents don't have that kind of patience. Everyone's going to be talking about him in school today. They'll be calling him fucked up names and implying twisted stuff about him and me and Eva, even though he never actually hurt anybody. It's not fair of Mum to put Eva through that. Maybe that's why I've brought her with me.

Maybe I just can't face doing this alone.

My calves are burning and my thighs feel like jelly. We've passed the Áras and the polo grounds, and now we're at the zoo. The cars to our right are moving quick enough to show that rush hour's long over so I pump the pedals faster. Mum was already getting ready to leave the house when we said goodbye earlier. She kept putting on makeup and then thinking better of it and wiping it off again, her actions looping like the world's least funny Facebook video.

'Mum said we're not allowed to watch the trial.' Eva's been still and silent for a while now, and this catches me off guard.

'He hasn't seen us in weeks. He needs to know that we...' I press my head down against the warmth of hers and breathe in the sharp smell of her anti-dandruff shampoo. 'He was never even in the same room as any of them. Don't let anyone tell you he's...just don't...'

I'm too out of breath to talk anymore, and she's gone quiet again anyway. The end of the Park is getting closer and closer. I think Eva might be crying, but I can't turn around now, because we're already passing under the stone archway at the back of the Criminal Courts. I stop pedalling and she starts to fall, but I catch her before she hits the ground. I leave my bike resting against the rack and reach for Eva's hand. My legs are wobbly but she helps me walk around the corner, down the hill towards the cars and the small crowd of people.

Mum's there, wearing her black funeral dress, watching a car door open. Lights flash as two men take photos.

'There he is,' Eva whispers and my grip on her tightens.

Dad's cheeks are sunken in, and his head is bowed. I know that if I call out to him he'll look over and see us, but my mouth doesn't form the words.

All of a sudden I realize that I'm holding Eva back from running towards him, except I'm not really, because there was never any danger of her wanting to. Mum's face is hard like stone when Dad passes her, and I swallow back the bile that's rising up from my stomach.

Walking up the steps towards the glass doors, he drags his feet like he's wearing a pair of worn-out slippers. Like he was the morning when the guards burst into our house and seized the family computer. I can still hear him saying it, over and over, when Mum screamed and cried and asked him why: They were just pictures. I'd never lay a hand on a child.

Reggie Chamberlain-King

Museum Piece

BELFAST WAS A SABBATARIAN TOWN, so, on a Sunday afternoon, there was only the Museum open. Possibly an ice-cream parlour too. Between the two of these, the children of divorce and their fathers – for it was always fathers – had somewhere to spend their alternate weekends together, when it was too cold or wet for parks.

There was a skeleton of the Great Irish Elk with huge, empty eye-sockets you could put your arm through. There was a mummy – the first in Ireland – and, when her sarcophagus had been opened, a ball of unstirred beetles fell out, waking with a furious buzz. That wasn't in this building, with its black rubber floor, but in some old Victorian building long before they'd built the cafe, the gift shop, and The Living Sea.

Uncle Stephen took me there like I'd never been with school before. He was a real uncle – my mother's brother – and the Museum hadn't changed since he'd come with school himself: the same Elk, the same mummy, the same Living Sea. And he thought the facts were the same as well, something that was handed down intact, like a precious artefact, rather than something that sticks out of the earth and must be brushed free so you can then guess its utility.

“Look at him!” he said, pointing at a glass case labelled 'Neanderthal Man.' “A creature of instinct. His features, bestial. But, look close, you can see he's human. Just. It's in the eyes. Now, of course, we're advanced. We have museums...”

He went on and I zoned out. I'd dreamed before that my father was in that prehistoric landscape, standing on the orange rocks, looking out toward the sun-white horizon. I was standing beside him, as I am standing beside Uncle Stephen, and he has his hand outstretched and says: “One day, my son, all this will be yours.”

And he was right, although he didn't know he meant, not the expanse of rich Savannah, but the open palm. It was empty.

Empty like the exhibition case, where 'Neanderthal Man' is out for repair and Uncle Stephen is describing his reflection in the glass.

Jenny Darmody

Drawing Pictures

MARTHA STARED AT THE CLOCK. Tick tock, tick tock. It's nearly four o'clock, she thought to herself. Mum will be angry if I miss my tea, she thought. There was a piece of paper and some pens in front of her.

"In your own time," said the man on the other side of the desk. Martha didn't recognise him. He must be a new teacher, she thought. She hoped Ms Barrett would come back soon. She was Martha's favourite teacher. But this teacher seemed nice too, so she picked up one of the pencils. Green, because it was her favourite colour. She started drawing a frog. She drew him with a happy face and he stood on top of a lily pad.

"I need a blue pencil. For the water." The teacher looked at a man sitting beside Martha. When did he get here, she thought, feeling slightly frightened. He's too old to be in school.

"Martha, do you remember what we asked you to draw?" the teacher asked but Martha was too distracted by the strange man beside her.

"Who are you?" she asked. He looked sad to Martha. She wondered if he knew someone who died. That was the only thing that ever made Daddy upset, she mused in her head.

"Martha?" The man across the desk called her attention again. She looked back at him and then down at the piece of paper in front of her.

"That's a very nice frog, did you draw it?" she asked the strange sad man beside her, who seemed to be on the brink of tears.

"Mum, do you not remember Doctor Clarke asking you to draw a circle a few minutes ago?"

Martha looked from one man to the other and back again. What a ridiculous game this was, she thought.

"I can't miss my tea. Mum will be upset. I want to go home." Martha kept darting her head from one man to the other. Her brain was getting fuzzy again. She wondered if the man behind the desk was the new teacher.

"Martha, your mother isn't with us anymore, remember? Can you tell me what age you are? You're seventy-two."

Martha didn't like this teacher. He wasn't making any sense.

"I hope Ms Barrett comes back soon," she said. "She's my favourite."

The strange man beside her simply put his head in his hands, defeated.

Jenny Darmody

The First Time

I WAS EIGHT when my first memory was erased. Back then, the age restriction was ten, but most kids in my class had already done it. So, I badgered my parents relentlessly until they gave in. They had said that before I was born, the age restriction used to be eighteen, but it was lowered over time by soft governments looking for the next vote. They also told me of a time when memories couldn't be erased, but I couldn't fathom such a thought.

My first memory wipe was a trip on a roller coaster. Not just any roller coaster. It was the best ride of my life. I went on it a second time but it just wasn't the same. That rush of not knowing when the next jolt or flip was going to come couldn't be replicated. Not without wiping the memory.

After a week of constant begging, my parents took me to the clinic. The doctors put me in a narrow metal shaft and a large square helmet was lowered down as the lights went out. There was a flash across my eyes and then my whole body vibrated, as if the blood running through my veins was bubbling.

It wasn't painful though. And it only took a few minutes.

The very next day, I was on that roller coaster, screaming with sheer delight. I didn't just feel like I hadn't been on it before. I really hadn't been on it before. Every nerve in my body told me this was a new experience. Even though I knew I had a memory wiped, I couldn't remember being on the ride.

I didn't have another memory erased until I was fifteen. That one was for a movie. It had the best twist I had ever witnessed. It was the first time I really craved a memory wipe. Of course, I didn't realise at the time it was a craving.

So, I went to the clinic on my own and let my blood bubble as I unknowingly forgot the entire plot of the movie.

Even back then, I scoffed at those who used the clinics excessively. I had only used it twice. I wasn't one of them.

They used it to forget regrets.

As do-overs and second chances.

I used them for what they were really for. Reliving entertainment, the way it should be. In its most original form; previously unseen.

I was twenty-one when I became one of them.

I lost my virginity in a bath at a friend's college party to some tramp who could barely keep her eyes open. I was nervous despite my own drunken state and she lambasted me for it before taking control for exactly three minutes and forty-two seconds. It was the best I could do. She climbed off, visibly disappointed and left me half-naked with the door open.

Without a second thought, I went to the clinic the next day and erased the memory. For all intents and purposes, I was a virgin all over again with a determination to do it right when the time came. It was a long time before that banished memory crept back to the surface.

With each passing year, my trips to the clinic multiplied. I used it to relive some memories multiple times, and others I chose to forget had ever happened.

The clinic's effectiveness started to deteriorate when I was about thirty-five. That was when I started to remember losing my virginity in that drunken bathtub and not in Grace Madden's four-poster bed by candlelight.

"Sometimes that happens at a certain age," the nurse told me. "You might just need a stronger dose."

I had never known there to be a stronger dose until then, but when it was offered, I didn't question it. Then the nose bleeds started.

"We'll run a test," they said. "But it's a minor side effect. It happens to some people. Nothing to be concerned about. You may just require a different blend."

And so, I was put on the different blend the next time. I didn't question it.

I wanted to relive all my favourite movies, video games and books. I wanted to experience visiting exotic countries for the first time all over again. I wanted to forget fights and performance reviews and bad sex. And I wasn't the only one. My friends did the same. It was a badge of honour to talk about how many 'firsts' we had done lately. They talked about going two or three times a week. I lied and said the same, knowing they were lying too. We all went more than we should.

Forty was probably when I really knew I had a problem. My veins bulged from my arms, no longer blues and purples, but sickly green. I had lost at least three stone without exercise and I wasn't a big guy to begin with. I covered the mirrors for months because I didn't want to see my eyes sinking into my skull.

That's not a problem now. There are no mirrors on the streets.

The clinics had gone up in price over the years. Inflation, they told us. Supply and demand. The cost of upgrades.

I didn't question it.

By the end, I was selling my belongings to fuel my addiction. My job was long gone and that required even more visits to the clinic. I wanted to permanently forget the feeling of losing my job, but the memory wipes weren't as affective as they used to be.

They kept coming back.

Now, they're all back.

I still go to the clinic when I can. But, forgetting you're homeless when you live on the streets is a big ask. An expensive ask.

It takes me a month's worth of begging for one trip and the memory wipe only lasts three days.

But it's worth it. I probably don't have long left. I'm hoping to time my death just right.

I want to forget before I go.

Linda Hutchinson

From this Day Forward

TEARS SPRANG to his soft grey eyes when they met mine.

"My beautiful baby girl," he whispered, handsome in his good suit.

"Not any more, Dad. It's time to give me up."

My own dress was a simple one, no fuss.

"One last hug then," his arms outstretched.

"Time to go."

I was instantly entranced by Simon's dark piercing eyes. Ours was a fairytale romance. He was my Oberon, Merlin, Svengali. Magic days became sparkling nights when his lips, his eyes, his fingers wove spells and enchanted me with their power. I fell completely and joyfully, picturing our path ahead, together forever.

The next part was inevitable. Marriage. He laughed when I spoke about it.

"Oh no, my dear. Don't you know you are not that sort of girl? You're the kind for fun, not marriage."

It was remarkably easy to catch him off-balance. I didn't even have to push hard. He looked surprised. He fell completely and entirely, flying on his back, arms flailing, his beautiful face receding until I heard the crunch of body on rocks. I looked down at his twisted limbs as he lay like a broken puppet, no longer the master.

There was just one more question.

“In the murder of Simon Baxter do you plead guilty or not guilty?”

Martín Malone

Appleville

SIRENS PIERCING THE DEEP BLACKNESS of the night awakened us. Banshee sounds come alive to signal a tragedy, and a serious one because for an hour the piercing music tore at the air. I had thought a major road accident.

But in the creeping hours of daylight, from the sad song of the radio, we learned that two trains had collided at Appleville, a low lying area of bogland between towns – a moving train had ploughed into one standing stationary on the rails. On a summer's night. The eve of my birthday.

And you were coming home early to surprise me.

You did not want to talk about the accident, the circumstances of what had delayed you, when we eventually brought you home from hospital.

To respect your silence, we hid the newspapers, kept the radio posted to a music channel, the TV to a cartoon station. You anchored yourself in your bedroom, sitting against the headboard, your face grey and long and sullen, your eyes often going far off.

We could make no plans for you. You yourself had none. Your arm was black and blue where you had pinched yourself to see if you were still alive, if you'd really survived the collision unscathed. Which you hadn't, of course. Because your mind was scarred, like tines had been drawn deeply in what had been fine undisturbed sand.

7 people died and 55 were injured.

And you would not talk.

You cocooned your soul, your spirit, your essence in your room.

We counted the days, the seconds, the minutes and hours as they passed, wishing each passing moment would bring you back to us. At night we sometimes heard you up and about. On another night your screams woke the house and the ones on either side.

Then you talked, when we were alone, when your mother was out, and you started by saying that you were sorry.

'For what?' I said, handing you a tissue to dry your tears.

'Grandad's wallet.'

It was a birthday present intended for you to give me. You told me he had put one hundred pounds in it as luck money and a Saint Martin de Porres medal. He had wondered why I hadn't thanked him for it, and I said it had not been among your things. We didn't mention this to you. We thought it had been scattered by the ferocious jolting of that night. I imagined it lying in a field, but I didn't care; for we had what was most important with us.

'It's only a wallet,' I said, 'it's only money. Holy medals are easy to replace.'

Abruptly, you shook your head; your tears landed on my face, like a blessing of holy water sprinkled from a priest engaged in a funeral rite.

'You don't understand, Dad – they took it – they took it – they came to help us and I could hear them going from one of us to the next, checking and taking and checking and taking if they liked what they had checked...'

I held you

I held...

Understanding perfectly now what it was you had lost.

Theresa Ryder

Into the Midst of Things

THE SIRENS ABRUPTLY STOPPED and as the residue of their vibration settled around them, Steph took up the slack by announcing a countdown, delivered with all the indignation that a 14 year old girl could muster.

‘Three minutes, 30 seconds, motherrrr.’ Her reprimand seconded by the clucking counterpoint of Gran’s old clock. The ugly thing squatted amid frames of Steph’s life, views from Rob’s doting lens.

Joan produced a practised smile and considered her demanding daughter, standing tall, her height and looks inherited from Rob. Rob, that Joan mockingly compared to Sam, the Muppet eagle. Fortunately, Joan’s genetic contribution toned things down, adding a lighter frame and deep red curls. Steph’s attitude, however, was all her own.

Joan turned back to her task of examining the bookcase, bumping a lazy finger across worn spines to the beat of Gran’s clock. Waugh, Donleavy, Marquez, Austen. Homer’s epic, the first episode of the civilisation they were about to bookend. She hovered a finger over Plath and Woolf then selected a tatty book relegated through time to a lower shelf, flicked it open and read “Katy’s name was Katy Carr”. She held it to her face, and inhaled the musty pages and was 12 again, confined with tonsillitis, time suspended as she devoured every word to

find out What Katy Did. Joan's story lay within the neatly displayed books, a crush of memories penned into 6 foot oak shelves.

'Three minutes,' Steph's yell, coming now from the kitchen.

'Rob, give her a job.'

Rob's eagle head peered around the living room door. 'Does jam keep?' He held out a pot of apricot and was offered the same stock smile.

'No. Steph, get the birth certs and passports from the middle drawer. Jesus, Rob, what do we bring?'

But he had gone back to his tasks. A series of thuds and a metallic crash indicated that he had slid his precious tool kit down the basement stairs followed by 'I'm alright.' She knew he was. The basement was his lifeboat and he had been stocking it for months, its supplies growing with the momentum of the press headlines. A lifeboat to ride out the radioactive heave and swell of whatever was to come. Then what? To join the scrap over the remnants of this life, the meat devoured by a destructive generation. Left with the graved bones, few would get to draw on the nourishing marrow.

'Two minutes,' Steph's voice muffled now, her head in a cupboard.

Steph returned with the biscuit tin of family documents under one arm. With the other she held out a can opener with a flicked wrist gesture that oozed sarcasm. Rob's arm reached around the door and grabbed the can opener, 'Thanks, love.'

He's enjoying this, thought Joan. All his years of bowling green lawns and perfect shelving were culminating in this moment of glory. She had always been a bump in his smooth house husbandry, a tension on his reaching flex, an obstacle to his overhead drill, her open book placed over a crucial spanner.

'Mum, seriously, all those books will just help you burn faster.' Steph picked up her mobile phone and swiped. Her brow furrowed at the blank screen, she tucked it into her jeans pocket, her travelling companion into a once familiar landscape.

'Steinbeck's turtle,' said Joan, with a head-tilted smile.

‘What? Mum? One minute, 30!’ A hint of panic pushed through the veneer of disdain. Steph fled the room and pounded down the basement stairs calling after Rob, ‘Dad? You got my charger?’

Joan looked around. What do you rescue? Rob had instinctively drawn the living room curtains when the alarms began, another layer against the promised poison air. But in the now peaceful room, dust danced in a slit of spring sunlight that drew a golden dagger across the carpet. The sounds had changed. No squealing gulls, nor screeching child. The familiar hum of cars replaced by the urgent barking of distant dogs, echoing in evacuated space. And Gran’s clock, coughing out the last seconds.

The slam of the basement door propelled Joan to action. She pulled at her beloved books, piling them into her arms. Clutching the perilous load, Joan looked back at the basement door and paused to pinpoint the muffled voices below. Then, holding the stack steady with her chin, she peeled back a curtain, quietly unlocked the garden door and stepped out into the radiant day.

contributors

Jan Carson is a writer and community arts development officer currently based in Belfast. Her first novel, *Malcolm Orange Disappears* was published by Liberties Press, 2014. Her story collection, *Children's Children*, in 2016, and *Postcard Stories* published in 2017 by Emma Press.

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 the Fish Short Story Prize.

Reggie Chamberlain-King is an author and composer from Whitehead. He has published two books with Blackstaff Press, *Weird Belfast* and *Weird Dublin*, and his short prose has appeared in publications in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Canada. He has written plays for Wireless Mystery Theatre, BBC NI, and BBC Radio 3. @Reggie_C_King

Kelly Creighton's (Editor) debut short story collection *Bank Holiday Hurricane*, was published in September 2017 by Doire Press. Her novel *The Bones of It*, was first published in 2015. Her poetry collection *Three Primes*, was published in 2013. kellycreighton.com

Jenny Darmody is a journalist and editor of the Careers section at Siliconrepublic.com. She has previously been published on Microfiction Monday and she's currently working on her second full-length manuscript. @Jenny_Darmody

Freda Donoghue has been writing for the past few years. Her debut play, *The First Punk in Oldcastle*, and her second play, *Wish You Were Here*, were performed on the amateur drama circuit in 2015 and 2016, respectively, both of them winning awards. She lives in Co. Cavan.

From County Down, **Ann-Marie Foster** was inspired by the NaNoWriMo movement to start writing creatively again as an antidote to broadcast journalism and reading the news with BBC Radio Ulster. Awarded a James Kilfedder Bursary from her local council in 2013, she writes poetry, short stories, novels and plays. @annmariefoster

S. P. Hannaway's first story appeared in *Litro Online* in 2014. Since then his work has featured in journals such as *Dream Catcher*, *Gravel*, *Brittle Star*, *Lighthouse* and *The Bohemyth*. He's studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths University. He's worked as an actor and lives in London.

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).

Linda Hutchinson is retired. She taught English and later worked for several charities. She took up writing three years ago when recovering from cancer and enjoys writing short stories and flash fiction. She has just started work on her first novel. This is her first published story.

Rose Keating is a columnist for the Waterford News and Star. She is the winner of the Hot Press Write Here, Write Now Award. Her stories have been published in *Not One of Us* magazine and the *Quarryman*. She studies at UCC on a writing scholarship with the Quercus program. @RoseKeating1

RB Kelly's short fiction and non-fiction articles have appeared in magazines and journals across the world, and her short story, *Blumelena*, was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in 2012. Her first novel, science-fiction thriller *The Edge of Heaven*, was published in 2016.

Martin Malone is the author of 7 novels, a memoir, 3 short story collections and several radio plays. His first novel *Us* won the John B Keane/Sunday Independent Literature Award and was shortlisted for the Kerry Ingredients Irish Fiction Award. He was nominated for the 2012 Sunday Times EFG Short Story Prize and is a winner of RTE's Francis MacManus Short Story Award and The Killarney International Short Story Prize.

Belfast-born **Réaltán Ní Leannáin** was the first Irish writer to be awarded an international residency with <http://www.otherwordsliterature.eu/>, her work then being translated into six languages. Her best-selling short story collection, *Dílis* (Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2015), was much acclaimed. Further details of her work are on her blog: <http://turasailse.blogspot.ie/> @RealtanNiL

Pauline Rooney, from Belfast, was shortlisted for Hennessy New Irish Writer 2017. Her short story *Counting Strokes* was runner up for McLaverty Award 2014 and Aesthetica Award 2015. Her writing has been shortlisted for FISH, BATH and longlisted for Mslexia First Novel Award. She is working on her first collection.

Theresa Ryder was PA to author, J.P. Donleavy before graduating MA (Classics) and teaching degree. She won the Molly Keane Creative Writing Award, 2015 and has been published in various literary journals. She was selected to read at the Women X Borders Readathon, 2016. She is currently working on a novel. @asincup facebook.com/theresa.ryder.3

Claire Savage is one of Lagan Online's 12NOW (New Original Writers) for 2016/17. Claire launched her debut children's novel, *Magical Masquerade*, at the Belfast Book Festival 2017. Her short stories have been published in The Lonely Crowd and The Incubator journals, SHIFT Lit — Derry magazine, The Launchpad and The Ghastling. @ClaireLSavage
www.claresavagewriting.wordpress.com Facebook: Claire Savage – Author

Rachel Sneyd is a writer from Dublin. Her work has appeared in the *Stinging Fly* and she reviews children's books for Inis and Gobblefunked.com. She is currently completing a young adult novel about a teenage runaway who founds a cult. @RachelSneyd

the incubator journal

issue 14. December 2017.

interview: Jan Carson, author of *Postcard Stories*

review: RB Kelly on *Waters and the Wild* by Jo Zebedee

fiction: S. P. Hannaway. Rose Keating. Peter Hollywood. Réaltán Ní Leannáin. Pauline Rooney. Rachel Sneyd. Reggie Chamberlain-King. Jenny Darmody. Linda Hutchinson. Martin Malone. Theresa Ryder.

plays: Freda Donoghue. Ann-Marie Foster.