*In loving memory of David Riley (1955 – 2018),*
*our much-missed colleague and friend.*

# Contents

# Editor's Introduction

*Dr. Darran McCann*

Convenor of the M.A. in Creative Writing, 2013-18.

*This centre holds and spreads.*

*Dr. Darran McCann*

Two years ago, I began and ended my foreword to the inaugural edition of *Blackbird: New Writing From The Seamus Heaney Centre* quoting this line from 'Kinship,' centrepiece of Heaney's 1975 collection *North*. At the launch of the first book, I topped and tailed my speech with the line too. It has become the unofficial motto of the Centre his name adorns.

What strikes me now is the messianic note to the phrase – at least in the way *I* was using it. (Not in its original context, mind you, not in Heaney's deft hands.) It was all so terribly important, it made me so terribly *earnest*. My sense of proportion absconded altogether, and I recall rising to quite the crescendo. *This Centre Holds…* (long, pregnant pause)…. *And Spreads!!!!*

The applause was polite. Perhaps a bit bemused. The audience must have thought they'd stumbled into some sort of revivalist hoedown.

Much as I cringe at the memory, I can't promise not to do it all again. You see, I was very proud of *Blackbird*, proud of the Seamus Heaney Centre, and bullish about the future of both. I still am. Perhaps even more so.

*Blackbird* is a book that has both practical and aesthetic purposes. Agents and publishers are always hungry for fresh talent: our students, who have it, want to find representation and publishers. With *Volume 1*, I hoped that maybe there'd be one agent, one writer, one connection that might be forged because of that book – as it turned out, *eleven* different agents made contact, and I brokered introductions with eight of our featured writers. *Blackbird* had arrived as an important conduit in the literary marketplace. Some of those writers are now on their way. No doubt some featured in this edition soon will be too. This is *Blackbird*'s practical purpose.

But *Blackbird* is also an end in itself. It showcases some of the remarkable work that's been going on at the Seamus Heaney Centre these past two years: fiction, poetry, short stories and drama, that will surprise, provoke, bewilder, charm; everything except bore you. The writers are men and women, young and old, of all faiths and intellectual traditions, from every sort of educational and professional background you can imagine. They hail from across Ireland, from Britain, from the US, from Bangladesh, from Malaysia, from New Zealand. They are diverse in form, in sensibility, in background, in thematic concerns, diverse in almost all respects. But not all.

Everyone featured here is writing to Masters level, at least. Many have already published with quality titles, or won prestigious prizes. (Two, for example, won the John O'Connor Prize during their time with us.) Some have gone on to doctoral level. Several, I confidently predict, will add to the stocks of our bookshops and libraries in the years to come. All of which means that, in terms of talent, technical ability, and knowledge of the craft of writing, this is not a terribly diverse bunch at all. These are all One-Percenters, in fact.

Some of these names, you will come to know in the future. The reflected glory will be zealously and unapologetically seized. For others, different possibilities await; and that's all right too.

To create work of great quality and share it with the world even once is no small thing. What *Blackbird Vol. 2* is, above all, is a very good book in its own right, one that shows how the work coming out of the Seamus Heaney Centre just keeps getting better. This Centre is doing more than just holding. The spreading is already tangible.

Editing *Blackbird Volume 2* will be my last act, for now, at the Heaney Centre. During a thirteen-year association with the place, I've been an M.A. student, Ph.D candidate, teaching assistant, Lecturer, and ultimately Convenor of the same M.A. in Creative Writing that produced me. Year after year, I've seen people arrive at the Heaney Centre, palpably tentative, and observed how write their way towards confidence in their own creative abilities, and into a sense of themselves. That has been a privilege for which I will always be grateful. I've now moved on to other things – Dublin City University to be precise – but I take with me many wonderful friendships, memories I'll cherish forever, and a kind of missionary zeal for the work we do.

So I end where I began, back in the pulpit. It seems I can't help myself. I'm off to share the good news with the Dubliners, to be part of the *spreading* that is our Centre's mission. The writers included here will play their part in that spreading too, as will their successors in *Blackbird Volume 3.*

In an era when it seems like things are falling apart, when the centre cannot hold, art becomes *more* important, not less, than in calmer times. The future of this society, this world, has rarely been harder to predict; but the future of this Centre, happily, is clear. There is comfort in that. This centre holds, and spreads.

DMcC, Christmas 2018

# Incandescence

*Roisin Maguire*

THERE ARE several different kinds of warmth in this, my favourite room, and I love each one of them.

Warm sunlight drifts through butterflies I have painted on the French windows. Little colourful whimsies that took the whole of a long and lovely afternoon many years ago. The refracted light becomes a rainbow on the arm of my chair, a splash of life in a still space. A child doodling with colour. There have not been enough children here. There has not been enough life here, I realise, for quite some time, and now it is too late. There has not been enough frenzy or bawling or general disorder and the air rests, still and quiet, with me in my chair, waiting. I stopped having them to see me, years ago, my acolytes. Or perhaps they just stopped coming. I can't remember. Once there were long and rowdy nights, long languorous days sprawled on each others' limbs like cats in the sunlight. Now, instead there is the emptiness of every chair but mine, and an ingrown silence.

The polished wood of the floor casts its own glow in the sunlight and reminds me of fine malt whiskey on stormy nights, when the sea beat its war-drums and cast small stones and seaweed like insults over the garden wall, and the gathering huddled close and talked nonsense and swilled from huge heavy tumblers warm in the hand, and the hot faces were never the same. Today the water fusses quietly at a distance and no gale screams at the windows, but the storm is never far away. The gulls

wheel and circle out there in the bright sky, seeming placeless and adrift. Busy idling, they tilt and angle and I know that they will wheel and circle even when I'm gone.

The painting on the wall in front of me glows like a demon. A mess of yellows and oranges, reds and browns from a less ordered period, when the crucible of my body held all the promise in the world and you could risk a random, lustful splashing on the canvas without fear of ridicule or – worse – indifference. I can't remember creating this one. I can't recall the buzz and fizz of creativity, the spark of loin-energy, but I suppose it must have been there. It must have crackled through these fingers like sparks in a thunderstorm and burned my eyes on the way out, to find these rich slappings, these fiery hues. Several substantial bids went onto on this particular work at my last retrospective, of course; it always provokes a strong reaction when I show it. They like the rash, raw power of it, they say. They want to own its rude unkempt beauty, they tell me. But I've always said it is not for sale. Its heat stirs up the air in my space, not theirs, now that my own fires have cooled.

I don't know who will buy it now. I don't know whose eyes will suck up the blaze from it, when I do not.

They've sent someone to help me pack and organise, as if I am incapable. I hear them park and slam car doors outside. I grunt up from my warm space, leaving the seabirds to their timeless circling, and go to let them in.

As I work through the lock and the snib and the chain and the bolt, I sense polite impatience through the wood of the door. There. The day cracks through to show my visitors, waiting with fixed smiles. My Amazonian social worker. And an awkward young man hovering behind her, all odds and ends like an unfinished jigsaw. To fetch and carry, I suppose. Skin shining on a pale face. Once, I would eat young men like him for breakfast. I liked to suck their smooth soft skin. I won't bite. Not any more.

I think I may have spoken out loud. He had been looking straight ahead, expecting a face, but he recalibrates quickly to see me, down here, shrunk like a joke. Colour flares in his face, pretty, like a flower.

One dark face, one pale, here to shepherd Granny to the Home. I shift my arm a fraction wider, a silent surrender, and they move inside.

Past them and across the lane I can see the beach with its sand all whitened in the sun.

With a sudden ache I know how it would feel under my bare feet, which curl, remembering, in my slippers. I realise with a lurch that I've forgotten to put on my shoes again. Twists of seaweed crisp and dry at eye level on the sea wall, and one great gull airs his feathers on the stone coping. He eyes me contemptuously – a wisp to be blown away by the wind. Once upon a time I'd have captured his arrogant great soul and pinned it, miniscule, to a seascape.

My guests are behind me, shifting a little on their great big feet, awkward and uncomfortable. The gull lips the outside of my vision, launching his power free into the sky. I press the door closed on him and shuffle wordless to the sun room again. I smell myself, a waft of staleness as I sit. The rainbow alights on my speckled hand once more like a little bird.

'Well Lou, I'm sure you're all packed up for us and ready to go.'

Low and gentle, her voice slips down to me from her great black height. Once upon a time I would have desired her length, her burning, contained vitality, for the canvas. Now she wearies me. Makes me see how far back inside this husk I have retreated. Their tall faces shining down, sharing my sun. I settle myself back in my chair, a recalcitrant child, and do not reply as the sun bars my cheek once more.

'I've got Eamon here, to carry your things to the car. We'll get going – get you settled. If you're ready.'

Suddenly I'm not ready at all. My dry stomach aches and stretches my chest tight. I do not like to be coerced, even if it is by death. I will not be driven. I drive my own cart. I walk my own path. There is a bitter

fear in my throat. I want the ghost that was my mother. I am old. I am weak. I am half mad. I am regularly found in the street in my pyjamas. One day I will be naked. This time I have no choice. With horror I feel the burn of tears. I turn my head to the windows, see the sunlight flare in the moisture, rainbow in my vision. My hands grip the wood of my chair hard, as they once gripped a brush to hurl colour and life onto a screen, onto a page, bare and brown and strong.

'Well, maybe I'll just make us a cup of tea first.' My Amazon nods gently at Eamon. At the straight wooden chair placed there to deter visitors just like them. He sits, creaking. There is silence again in the room as the water skirrs into the kettle down the hall, and I gather myself, wiping my eye with a furtive sleeve. The boy says nothing, and sits quite still. The space widens and elongates and I look sharply at him to see why he does not speak. All young people are incessantly noisy, in my experience, seldom with anything sensible to say. He does not notice. He is looking at the painting. I can see he is breathing in the colours and textures of my work, that potent lusty message that has seduced so many. His eyes are wide – it is difficult to make out their colour from where I sit.

'I painted that.'

The sound of my voice makes us both jump.

Blue. His eyes are grey-blue, like the spring skyline.

'It's... great. The colours are amazing...' he manages. His skin is flushed pink from sunlight, and from those deepdown quivering sensations he is only beginning to know. I am suddenly, terribly envious.

'Do you have a girlfriend?' I ask, rudely, unkindly.

'Yeah,' he smiles slowly, '– sometimes...' A soft laugh, his eyes meet mine, sweetly.

His eye-teeth are crooked, throwing the symmetry of his features off-balance. I can feel how a charcoal sketch would go and how the dust would rasp on my fingers as I shaped his face.

I find a 'humph' has escaped me. I sit still and alert. His gaze returns to the picture. I can't tell what fleets behind his face as he drinks it in – its vigorous splashes of scarlet, florid orange, livid purple, core colours without apology. But his tacit relish, his rich silent appreciation, bolsters me a little, and plumps me up inside this withered skin. I did this, and many others. He will know my name, should he ever ask, should they teach them anything in schools nowadays. I was something, once.

The tea is drunk, the time time is over. The boy lifts and carries the few things I will be taking with me to the car, while I say my goodbyes to the silence and the space. The teacups are clanked and rinsed in the sink, the heating turned off, the tea towel draped to dry on the hook. Things unplugged quietly, decommissioned, redundant. All this will be raked over, ransacked and valued, unhung and decanted, lifted and shifted, sold and gifted, once I am gone. It doesn't matter where I am going, nor for how long. It is the leaving that matters, and the fact that it is over.

She takes my arm on the step outside and I do not object. The sun has slipped a little in the sky, but it is still a beautiful day. The scree and grumble of lapwings can be heard at the waterline, a constant bitchy squabbling in the quiet afternoon. With her other hand she pulls the door closed behind her and readies me for the three steps down.

'My painting – ' I say suddenly.

'Oh, which one, Lou? Did we forget it?' She has bent to me, concerned.

'No, no, the one in the sunroom, where I was sitting… I wasn't taking it. But…' I am urgent, now. This is important. 'I want *him* to have it.'

I nod sharply at the young man, standing at the car, turned away from us. He is watching the water seethe and rumble in the distance.

'Eamon? Oh, I see…'

She is taken aback. I can tell from her silence.

‘It’s worth a great deal of money, of course, you know, Lou… Are – are you sure?’

Her face is very close to mine, and her forehead is wrinkled. Her eyes skip back and forth between the boy and me. Her breath smells of biscuit.

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ I say, and I give her my best glare. Compos mentis. ‘That’s what I want.

Make sure he gets it, won’t you? Please?’

She hesitates, but nods her agreement. As a light sea breeze begins to stir the paper cups and crisp packets in the corner of the front garden, I clasp my coat tightly and lean on her, to take the first step down towards the car. The sun will have gone from my room by now, and its fingers will soon retreat from the kitchen window at the back too. The clocks, normally so silent, will tick loudly in the wide space of evening. As the boy opens the car door for me, I feel my house exhale, ever so gently, and settle back on its heels. Empty. But in the sunroom my painting will burn fiercely in the dusk, a brave hot light in the gathering darkness.

# Heading Home to East Tennessee Via the Town of Bat Cave

*Dawn Watson*

Driving North with a migraine, fifty miles a long
    wait
    for the Bat Cave sign on the interstate,
we pulled off to find there are no bats
and no caves for anyone looking.

It's not worth stopping by the granite fissure,
deepest in North America,
when all those trees are downwind, steep-banked
to the feet of hawks, drifting hatch traps
of ruckus need;
                a small jackrabbit
the colour of a dropped leaf carried
over Elk Mountain, over Beaverdam Creek Road
with wings tipped for pike salute,
for a corkscrew loop
                in the huckled foothills
of the Blue Ridge Mountains,
                peaks whipped
and buckled like torn flags
as the heat rose bold through the valley and lifted
the bird on its shoulders as if that sweet, fat hare
weighed nothing at all.

We passed Wide River, neither wide
nor a river,

and in Johnson City, my mother-in-law turned
into a gas station to ask
                why I love horror films.

There was no gas in the pump, just peaches
in a barrel,
        like in *Rawhead Rex*, when a girl gripped
her boyfriend's hand as they ran for their lives
through the woods. She looked down
                to find
it was literally just a hand she was holding.

I thought knowing horror might stop me
being devoured. It didn't,
and on the highway, a storm hung
ready to break
        over Bat Cave, which didn't need
bats or even caves to be Bat Cave
                and I thought of the
soft body of the jackrabbit, snatched
from its hopsagespace suit,
from its pitch pine jackboots, from the hot red bluffs
of the foothills with just a steam-whistle warning,
a thin *klee-uk*
        to cut the clear morning, which itself
was nothing but a small bush growing stars.

# In Belfast

*after Medbh McGuckian, after Eavan Boland*

You wouldn't believe all this place has cost me—
In felt puppet terms, it's a hand up my arse.
I've been filled with words and emptied,
Filled again, filled and drained
By terror dactyls. Exits
Circle like gorse fires. It is a feeling
Of being cut off, a star-man
Capsuled. I am the woman, older
Than the redoubt. I am nothing less
Than drained with worry. There you are
On the Appalachian Trail, decamped
And running as if I am all those towns

In between. I am all the black bears
At once, short-faced, spectacled,
Crested and blaze-chested, at ease
With hard masts and huckleberries,
Garbage dumps and trout.
Who cares which? You uproot
To copperheads, deer ticks, and ravines
That took eons to split and swell
Into gullies. Plains are not nothing.

It is not for me to decide value. I am
No less vital for being unfenced.
Let's keep moving, you said,

but I didn't. I am passing on the things
I wish to know, the well-ploughed acres,
The split streets. I am the apiaries
Devout in the suburbs. I am the basalt hills
haltering the city. I was small
When my father set fire to the shipyard
Grain store. I stood on the road. I heard
Horns in the dark. I smelled the hops burn.
Now, masts jut black in the port. So far,
I have balanced the witch-tree
With the tilted clock. I am swinging
My feet off Samson in the dry dock.

# The Negative

*after Instagrammatic by Alan Gillis*

The camera went snap and the moment
was ruptured. It was a weatherless day.
But when I picked up the photograph
months later it was halved
and jammed in an oval frame.
The scene was meant to contain me, I'm sure,

smiling awkwardly—not just you,
blonde and eye-shadowed. My hands
had been wrung between my knees, but here
I was jagged, white paper, the image torn.
And you were just yourself: wild
in the eyes with the mouth of a child

told off at the table. My mother,
true to life. It was as if shame
had erased my place in the frame,
and I imagined a set-up where we pay
stand-ins to replicate scenes of our life
while we work hard at not being born

to begin with. I wondered, what hope
has love, if even for a photograph,
aged ten, with your mum,
you sit close barely long enough
for the shutter to click, for the flash to pop.
Then you're ripped out. Then you're gone.

And so now, when I think of you, younger me,
I want to reach back and tell you:
these will be the toughest years of your life,
security will jack-knife,
your teeth will chip,
your lips will learn to stay zipped,

your hair will not be girlish,
your small breasts are queerfish,
your tongue will click in the dark,
your stoic hope a crayon shark,
and as you tilt your head at social workers, surprising with a grin,
you are a forest of silence burning in the wind,

and your sense of humour will be black,
your nose will bleed when it's whacked,
your anxiety will be an aura,
your blue eyes will be raw
(and if these are the windows to your soul, then you're a deer tracked
through a gun sight in the outback),

and your stomach is a river,
and your words are gathered darts to give her,
your legs are soft to smack,
but your chin is granite or, at least, won't crack,

and when I reach for you I press against a windowpane,
smuttered up with heavy rain,

and your heart is a rescue raft sunk,
your hope is at the party, but its lift home is drunk,
your laughter is a second late,
but your resilience is copper breastplate,
and I'm sorry I can't go back thirty years
with a coat for the wind and a smile for the tears,

but your determined head is a wonder
and a dark cave holding thunder,
your love is a free ice cream eaten in the sun,
your trust is a hit and run,
and your future days are a ball of dew magnifying mists
    free-wheeling down a mountain of glowing air—
just remember to hold on. I'll get there.

# Chicken Wings

*Dawn Watson*

I read God described as a bar of horizontal light, which makes sense: solid, angular radiance and geometric dependability. It's an image I can feel in my teeth; something I can get behind. I can run my tongue along its cool, hard ridges. I feel this way about chicken wings—but look, they're never right. If they have hot sauce, they're not crisp. If they are crisp, they have no blue cheese dip. If they have dip, there's no celery. I saw a woman with blue plasters on every fingertip eat chicken wings on the top deck of a London bus. I watched her rip and fling small bones. I almost cried, she was so determined. Near my stop, I told her, What we need is a horizontal bar of chicken wings, moulded stiff with celery, sauce and dip. She made an O with her mouth and agreed it would have solid, angular radiance and is something she could get behind.

# Power In The Blood

*Gary Hunter*

THE BOY AND his grandmother made their way along the Bone. The old woman moved slowly, stopping occasionally to rub at her hip. The boy, eleven years old and self-conscious, hoped nobody from his school would see him carrying her net shopping bag, in which she kept a purse, Polo mints, and plastic rain hat. Smoke from foundry chimneys streaked the winter city dirty grey-black.

The two slight figures, insubstantial in the murk, came to a tinker encampment, established on waste ground for as long as the boy could remember. Clothes hung from washing lines strung up between caravans. A dog, tethered to a gas canister by a length of rope, stirred and growled. A grubby-faced girl approached them, swinging a yellow plastic bucket full of squirming black and white puppies. 'Hey Missus', she shouted at the old woman, 'wanna buy a dog?'

The girl was dark, short and stocky. She stood before them, holding up the bucket in both hands. 'Buy a wee dog, c'mon.'

'Can we get one? Sure they're only wee,' the boy whined.

The woman shook her head. 'Son, we don't have room. God help them, they're not old enough to be away from their mammy, the wee things.'

'They're six weeks so they are,' said the girl. She raised the bucket and the old woman flinched. The girl jabbed a thumb over her left

shoulder towards where a dog was tethered. 'The mammy's over there, see?'

'No, love, we have to go. Oh, Glory Be! The time!' She dug into her purse, took out a half-a-crown. 'Here, get yourself somethin' nice,' she said.

The girl closed her fist around the coin. She spat, then skipped off, swinging the bucket. The boy tugged at his grandmother's sleeve. 'What'll happen to them dogs?'

'God knows. Drowned maybe.'

Somewhere down the road, a church bell chimed. The sound made the boy feel lonely.

They came to a newsagent. The woman stopped to read a billboard. *No Reprieve for McGladdery* it read.

'Who's McGladdery?' I asked.

'A young fella did somethin' bad, and he's getting' hung for it.'
'Hung till he's dead?'

'Aye.'

They walked on till they reached the Bethel Hall. It was red brick under a tin roof, and sputtering yellow light issued from inside, oozing like spoiled milk over gravel. They went inside the door, and found coats smelling of damp and coal hanging on pegs.

'He's gettin' awful big Lily,' observed Mrs Phillips as she pinched the boy's cheek. She turned away towards another woman, and asked her how she got on in Saltcoats. The boy rubbed his face. Mrs Young, a cadaverous woman in dark clothes and support stockings, waved at him. The creases lining her waxy face were caked with powder. Gran said Mrs Young lived alone and never opened her blinds. She had TB when she was wee, and it was an awful pity of her, she wasn't right in the head.

The hall filled and everyone sat down. Mrs Milligan struck the opening notes of *Power In The Blood* on a piano in the corner, and the assembly rose as one. Everybody sang the words; except the boy,

who didn't sing but instead tried holding his breath until the hymn finished, just to see if he could. He gave up when he saw lights flashing behind his eyes and felt a pulse pounding in his neck. As the final note reverberated around the hall they all sat down, and an elderly man, Pastor Wilson, shuffled to the front. His long face was scraped raw, and the cuffs of his trousers were frayed. The boy choked back laughter at the sight of him.

He hoped the preacher would speak in tongues or heal somebody. But there were no miracles. The boy fidgeted in his seat. There were testimonies, then another hymn about a rock of ages. The boy thought about an Orange banner he had seen on the Twelfth of July that showed a woman chained to a rock in the middle of a raging sea, waiting for God to do something. Then a fat man in a smart uniform marched to the front to lead the assembly in prayer. The boy knew him as Mr Graham, he lived in Gran's street, and the boy used to think he was a peeler but actually he was an officer at Crumlin Road Gaol. He held his hands out like he was pleading.

The collection plate was passed around, and afterwards, a tea urn and a plate of biscuits were set out on a trestle table. The boy was handed a mug, and his gut lurched when he saw it was encrusted with brown stains. Mrs Young lifted a biscuit, sniffed it and set it back. She slurped tea and smacked her wormy lips. Gran fussed over the preacher as he punched a scrawny arm into the sleeve of his coat. Someone gave the boy a pencil with *Jesus Saves* printed in gold letters on it. He waved to Mr Graham. As they walked out and turned right, Gran made him button his coat all the way up.

The street lights were muted and eerie in the fog. As they turned the corner towards home, a bus trundled past, and the boy saw a man sat at the front of the top deck, smoking and looking out of the window. He was the only passenger.

*  *  *

Jim Graham waved at Lily and the boy as they turned up the road towards home. The other day he had been wiping the windscreen of his Ford Popular when the boy had come over to talk to him. He was in his uniform and was on his way to work when the boy came up, carrying a wooden sword he'd been playing with. The boy asked if he was a policemen, and Jim had told him he was a Keystone Cop. They both laughed.

Jim made the short walk to the prison. He stepped through the inner gate of Crumlin Road Gaol and made for the Officers' Mess. It was the nineteenth of December, 1961. Robert McGladdery, murderer of Pearl Gamble, was condemned to hang the next morning, and Jim had to sit with McGladdery through the night, then escort him to the scaffold at 8am. He stopped outside the Mess and listened to the hum of voices for a moment before he opened the door and went inside. The heat from a paraffin heater almost knocked him over.

Four warders lounged on chairs, smoking and drinking tea. A half-full bottle of Bushmills sat on a card table. A tall man in a three-piece suit, brushed-back grey hair and thin moustache held court in their midst. Wesley Carr, Principal Officer, stood up and placed a big hand on Jim's shoulder. 'Harry,' said Wesley, addressing the man in the three-piece suit, 'this fat bastard's Jim. Him and Cookie will be sittin' with him tonight.'

'Oh aye?' said Harry. Jim knew who he was. Harry Allen, Official Hangman. He stood up and grasped Jim's hand. 'Good lad.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Jim replied, looking into Harry's face. For many poor buggers it was the last face they'd see.

Harry sat down again and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply and blew a smoke-ring towards the ceiling. 'So how's he been? Any trouble?'

'No, he's been fine,' said Wesley, rubbing the bridge of his nose, 'Bit long-faced since the appeal failed, and sure why wouldn't he be?

Faulkner turned him down on the fifth. So that's it for him, and he knows it. He's quiet though. Poor bastard.'

'Poor Pearl more like. Save your sympathy for that lass, Wesley.'

'Aye, well, he's all right. Settled. Don't think he'll give you any trouble. Chaplain's with him. Mind you, Curran shouldn't have been allowed to try that case. Y'know, with his own wee girl getting' killed in '52 and nobody swung for it. No way is McGladdery walkin'.

Blood sacrifice, he is.'

They offer Jim tea but he said no. He went to the sink, filled himself a glass with water and swallowed two aspirin, to ease the headache pulsing behind his eyes. 'Any confession out of him?' he asked. The Principal Officer shook his head. Jim checked his watch, and wondered where Cookie was. Their shift kicked off in five minutes.

'Nice to meet you Harry,' he said, as he stood up. 'Aye lad. See you in a while.'

Cookie caught up with him in 'C' Wing, in the corridor outside the condemned cell. Jim banged on the door and the dayshift boys let them in. Two cells had been knocked into one, and there was a small bathroom with a big cupboard against one wall. The execution chamber was in through an entrance behind the cupboard, and when the prison clock chimed for eight o'clock, that's where they would pass through. Jim wondered if the prisoner, Robert McGladdery, 237/1961, knew just how close he'd been living to the scaffold these past few weeks.

The dayshift boys left. They nodded at the figure lying on the bed but didn't speak.

Reverend Vance, the Chaplain, sat on a chair beside the bed, reading aloud from the Book of Psalms. Robert looked at him occasionally, blinking through smoke from his cigarette. A plain crucifix was fastened to the wall above the bed. It was Jim's first death watch. Cookie had done it once before, the time Samuel McLaughlin swung for murdering his wife.

The chaplain left, and Robert, Cookie and Jim sat playing cards. Robert talked about films and bodybuilding. There was a loud bang nearby. Cookie and Jim pretended not to notice.

Robert looked at Jim.

The cell door opened loudly and the Governor entered with. He had Harry Allen with him.

Cookie and Jim jumped to attention, and Harry sprung forward. He shook Robert's hand. 'All right lad? How are you?'

'What?' Robert looked at his guards. 'I'm all right, aye.' Harry clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good man.'

'Anything we can get you McGladdery?' asked the Governor. Robert shook his head.

Then the visitors left, and the cell door slammed shut. 'That was him, wasn't it? That was the fuckin' hangman.' Robert slumped onto the bed.

'I've been weighed n'all. What the hell's he want?'

Robert turned onto his side, facing the wall. Jim knew it was one of Harry Allen's rituals, to visit the condemned on the eve of the execution; but he didn't tell Robert that.

The night crawled, and every time the cell door opened, Robert looked up expectantly.

Reverend Vance, his overcoat damp and his hat in his hands, came to sit with him. Just after 3 o'clock, Cookie dozed. From somewhere out on the lough a ship's foghorn, mournful and muffled by fog, rumbled long and low. The Wing was peaceful, apart from occasional footsteps in the corridor. Jim used the toilet, washed his hands and stared at the bookcase. He kept picturing the rope, stretched by a sandbag that weighed exactly the same as Robert – 152 pounds. Robert was five foot nine, which meant Harry would give him a drop of five foot four. You had to be very precise – too short a drop and he'd strangle, too long and he'd be decapitated. You wanted a clean break between the second and third cervical vertebrae. The Hangman's Fracture.

*  *  *

In a terraced house in Alliance Parade, Gran knelt by the boy's bed as they said their prayers. She kissed him goodnight. He lay still, hands balled into fists. It was quiet outside, as if the night choked on cotton wool. Far from sleep, he prayed that God would save the dogs in the yellow bucket.

*  *  *

Just before 8am, heavy footsteps thudded to a halt outside the condemned cell. Robert, sitting at the table, looked up and rubbed his eyes. The prison clock began to strike. The cell door swung open and Harry Allen entered with his assistant and the doctor. Cookie and Jim jumped to their feet, yelling at Robert to stand. Robert looked dazed but drank the brandy from a tin mug proffered by the doctor. Harry grabbed Robert's left hand with his right and spun him round, pinioning his hands behind him with a leather strap. 'Right lad, follow me and it'll be all right.'

Jim and Cookie moved fast, through the bathroom and shifting the cupboard to reveal the scaffold beyond. Six witnesses, including the Chaplain and the Under-Sheriff of Belfast stood around the walls. The Chaplain mumbled a prayer.

Harry Allen positioned Robert on a chalk-mark on the platform, and his assistant crouched down to pinion his legs. Jim and Cookie held Robert steady on the boards placed over the trapdoor, while produced a white hood from his breast pocket and pulled it over Robert's head. He adjusted the noose under the left side of his jaw. The hood sucked in-out, in-out, in the O-shape Robert's mouth was making.

The team stepped away from Robert and off the boards, and Harry wrenched the safety bolt from the lever. He pushed the lever forward. The heavy trapdoors crashed against the sides, and Robert plunged into

the maw of the pit. Jim stared straight ahead, and saw dust motes float in a beam of sunlight that angled through the barred window. He didn't hear the crack of Robert's neck snapping, and he was glad about that.

Harry Allen was rubbing his hands. 'Nice job that,' he said. Robert would hang for an hour before they could take him down. They filed out for breakfast.

Jim made his way through the prison gate to where a small crowd had gathered. The road was busy with morning traffic.

* * *

Mrs Phillips called in while the boy was eating cereal in the kitchen. She and Gran sat in the living room, listening to the news on the wireless. 'Go out and play son, while I talk to Minnie,' Gran said. The boy noticed Gran was shredding a tissue into tiny pieces that drifted onto her slippers. He thought of snow, and bits of bone.

He put on his duffle coat and wrapped the tartan scarf his Auntie Elsie bought him around his neck. It was still foggy outside and the sun, straining through gloom, was deep orange and fuzzy around the edges. A milk float thrummed down the street. He went to the hardware shop and looked at the Christmas display in the window, then walked back to Gran's. On his way back, he saw Mr Graham coming up the street, his outline shaky in the fog. Mr Graham waved and stopped at Gran's gate, breath coming out in white puffs.

'All right there young Johnny? Not long to Christmas eh?' he said. He rubbed his hands together and blew on them.

'Yeah. Gran says it'll snow soon.'

'Wouldn't surprise me. Sure look at the weather, eh? What's Santa bringin'?'

'I want a dog but I'm not allowed one. Were you workin' last night?'

'I was, aye. Just clocked off. Long oul night.'

The boy waited for him to finish, it seemed like he had something he wanted to say. But he just stood there staring at his hands, and the boy thought he saw tears in his eyes. Probably it was just the cold, and because he's tired, he thought. I'm sure that's it. I'm sure he's just tired.

# Argument

*Adam Gittin*

words flying thick
as the phony snowflakes
that populate the atmosphere
of an impossible frosted town
until their flittering subsides
down through the syrupy
freeze-frame of a daydream
ready to be upended another time

# Cigarette

*Adam Gittin*

I watched
the tip of
a lit fuse
flush red
and fade
back to a
soft white
air-stifled
c r u m p l e
d a n g l i n g
in its own
slow spill
of bluish
curlicues
—
each easy
pull drew
the pretty
ash-flake
ring of bl
ack just a
bit closer

# Predator Call

*Adam Gittin*

Who is this bestial gray-flank glimmerer
Stealing a second from an expected passby
Ah, that's Badger again lit into the wood
Nice to search for and then divulge that

What is happening
Is not the brain gone slack
But the drawn out slubs of a thoughtshudder
Birthed to issue round the valley asking

When does it end
Up where horizon gave the land a place
Ancient volcano rain pitched blotting tephra
Hot and parch that fertilized the scene

Where should it go
Approaching slantwise to the explanation
Streams' magnet effluvia to center
Lake vortex like Badger's own navel

Why the spoken name she
Suffering everything suffers nothing to tell
This story cut from shine and shadow both
Types of the fact no singular design

How black is inert
And white is verb two labels printed backward
Now for the twined stripes of culled light
These known sounds for new names and ends

# Badger Listened

*Adam Gittin*

The deeper the woods went echoing
Faraway spurts of applause made Badger
Head-tilt and ramble closer to the cause
With a haunchy walk craning to hear.

Or
This tak-tak-tak rattledrum thunder
Was actually a breathless laugh a rustle
Here or there of ash-heap leaves
Did nothing to interrupt.
Or
This static company of hollow taps
Was a blacked memory unjailed to ruin
Eardrums with explosionsof
Staccato-limitedvocabulary.
Or
This hitch-jam weariness drained Badger
For a woodpecker tattooed a brain suffering
In a bole and through her ears
Until the whole valley seemed bored.

Or
This sudden the woodpecker outshot
One cell to another one in another
Tree like a candle-flicker clearing
The evening with pinpoint trajectory.
Or
This day is done with
And the crawking cadence
Showered splinters so thin
No splinters fell at all.

# and the Magpie

*Adam Gittin*

Maundering on the wet lawn
Ruffling wings' gloss remiges
purplesheen
shimmerblue
glittergreen
Perking at downpecks in the mud
Grubbing for grubs between struts
Blinked and never saw herspring.

Wanting the garnishment, Badger
Hobbled the bird still flopping and
Unpinned a million years
of chance per feather
Clutched with millions of years
per claw herprize.

Badger wore the colors in her fur
Arranged and rearranged her new plumage
Marveled the spasmodic tricks of radiance
Naked playing in the sun—
But the feathers fell out when she ran.

She pasted them in with blood —
        But the feathers fell out in the rain.
She jabbed them into her side —
        But the feathers fellout
                When she shook dry.

So Badger knotted the feathers in
With sinews to her coat—
        But soon she grew hungry
                And chewed them loose.

When it became too early for preening
Badger gunnysacked her want
In the manifolds of her brain
And, drained, shuffled off toward her sett.
And the magpie flummoxed flacked
Poked the grass for raked feathers
And croaked a rattle of corvid laughter.

# Badger's Subsequent Indigestions

*Adam Gittin*

Badger swallowed her meal —
She vomited a fur vest with a missing bone toggle.

Badger gnawed a twig —
She hacked up a dog-eared ream of A4 paper.

Badger chewed on a flax stem —
She booted a new pair of shoes worn at the heels.

Badger snorted a line of saltpeter —
She farted blanks.

Badger popped a nugget of magnetite —
She hocked a Luger, locked and loaded.

Badger chowed a chunk of coal —
She coughed out sprung coil springs.

Badger lapped the sick —
She sneezed a sleazy mattress.

Badger drank crude oil from a seep —
She retched a Model T with a blown transmission.

Badger slurped a polypeptide —
She voided a ruptured blister pack.

Badger masked the taste of the conceit
With a spoonful of quark
And stepped on a stray nail.

# Hunger

*Louise Kennedy*

THE CONDOLENCE BOOK looks too heavy for the table it rests on, a desk-with-chair- attached from a classroom. A placard is propped nearby asking the mild folk passing by the Town Hall of this midland town to SUPPORT THE HUNGER STRIKERS.

Che McGarr is struggling to pin a crude black and white image of Bobby Sands to the front of the desk. Che used to stand outside Mass selling month-old copies of *The Morning Star*. A charge of early summer wind wraps the poster around his narrow hips. I don't know where to look. I wait till he has subdued the poster before taking the pen, one of those yellow biros that won't write unless you carve deep scores into the paper. Che McGarr's face is a breath from mine, and this close I can see his hair is thinning, and he doesn't look like Adam Ant.

I bend to the blank page, etch my sympathies onto the paper in ornate pseudo-Celtic script.

I hand the pen back.

'Tiocfaidh Ár Lá, chicken,' Che says. *Our Day Will Come*. I run down the steps and light a cigarette. In the window of Gogan's Hardware there is a tabby cat, supine on a mat emblazoned with the face of John Paul II. It opens a green eye at me as I pedal home for breakfast.

My mother has been up since six. She is standing at the ironing board beside a pile of wrinkled clothes, scratching at the taut skin on her belly.

She is nine months and seventeen days, and her housekeeping has taken on a demonic quality. The books call it 'nesting'.

'Have you thought of a name?' I say.

'It's probably another bloody girl anyway,' she says. She nods at a box of Bran Flakes. I pat my stomach as if I'm full.

'What about Bobby? Dad's grandfather was called Bobby. And you loved the Bobby Kennedy who got shot,' I say.

'Jesus Christ. Can I get through the delivery first?' my mother says. She leans on the edge of the kitchen table and waves away my grandmother's cigarette smoke out of her face.

'Poor wee fella, all the same. Sixty-five days he lasted,' my grandmother says as she puts her cigarette out and lights another one.

'Don't encourage her,' my mother says, stretching her arms above her head. I try again. 'You can still call it Bobby if it's a girl. Bobby Magee was a girl,' I say. This might work.

'Me and Bobby Magee' is my father's favourite song. *Somewhere miscellaneous I let her slip away*, he sings at family parties. I haven't the heart to tell him the line is *Somewhere near Salinas*.

'Thatcher's a bad article. She abolished the free school milk,' my grandmother says.

'I was the only person at the Town Hall. Nobody down here cares,' I say.

'Where we lived in the north, nobody cares either. We are not from Ballybloodymurphy,' says my mother. 'Now go to school.'

True enough, in the pretty North Down town we left two years ago, it's unlikely they'll be be waking to the clanging of bin lids. I have no answer.

'Language,' says my grandmother.

While she fills the kettle, I steal a dizzying gasp from the sopping cigarette she left in the ashtray.

In school, my English teacher says that at least the hunger strikers have the courage of their convictions. I am the only northerner in

the building and everyone wants to talk to me. My day has come. 'Although,' he says, 'of course this IRA is nothing like the old IRA.'

'You lot down here got your crappy Free State and left us as second-class citizens up there under apartheid. That's the difference. Sir,' I say.

He gives me a warning.

At break-time an older girl I don't know very well pauses in front of me. 'Hi, Attracta,' I say.

'I wish the rest of you murdering northern bastards would ever starve yourselves to death as well,' she says.

She is holding a pink Cadbury's Snack bar, two bags of cheese and onion Taytos and a packet of Silvermints. The Silvermints will have their work cut out.

After school I go back to the Town Hall, climb the steps again and lean over the condolence book. There are about twenty signatures now. Che McGarr's handwriting is more elaborate than mine. Jim, carpenter who never finished building our garden shed, has signed his name. My father says Jim is an armchair republican and a workshy berk, but he underestimates him. In a few months, the Gardaí will stop a car near the Curragh and Jim will open the passenger door and come out with his hands up and a gun in his pocket. Elmer Fudd, Hong Kong Fooey and Deputy Dawg have signed their names too.

Che McGarr tells me that nature is calling and slinks into Mallon's pub, leaving me in charge of the book. I sit in the chair and watch a pigeon tap and tug at the wrapper of a spice burger. After fifteen minutes Che hasn't come back. I look at my own entry.

'Ireland unfree will never be at peace. I love you, Bobby Sands,' I have written. I feel ridiculous.

A truckful of sheep spatters the town's only pedestrian crossing with hot, terrified shit and again I take the Town Hall steps, the poster snapping behind me. I pedal home as fast as I can.

My sisters are doing their homework. My grandmother is fully dressed, not in her usual daytime ensemble of velour tracksuit,

unfastened bra and quilted dressing gown. I run into the kitchen to look for my mother, to tell her I don't belong here, that I want to go home. But she has gone. My father has driven her to hospital.

At three o'clock on the morning of the sixth of May 1981, twenty-three hours after the death of Bobby Sands, my mother gives birth to a baby boy. They name him John.

# I am you but longer

*Toby Buckley*

robins
are longer in
America and have
brighter feathers
and they can hear
earthworms

right through
the ground something
surprising until you
discover that
they aren't all that
closely

linked they're
a different
species entirely
I don't look much
like my family
either

maybe
my genes are wrong
or I'm a different species
some sort of tall
frog or a weird
robin

# new wilderness

*Toby Buckley*

the kitchen's gone sour in my
absence and I can only look on in horror
as creatures like white and legless camels
make their pilgrimage
across the linoleum desert
until at last they reach
a ravine by the skirting board and
disappear from view

# Pickling

*Toby Buckley*

My head under water in the bath sounds
the same as it does in every house I've
lived in, like heartbeats and muffled
voices and machines whirring far away.

In here I have to try hard not to think
about body parts jarred in
formaldehyde,
but bends in the water make my vessel
look corpse-ish, bloated and wrong.

I am almost as hollow as a water wing
because when I breathe in my body
floats up to the surface but my buttocks
stay on the bottom of the tub like eggs.

That's a sign that the sulphurous gases
haven't filled me, that I'm not yet
rotten.

# Customer Service Jotnar

*Toby Buckley*

The last of the Frost Giants has had to take a job
in Greggs, as there aren't many other jobs going
for humongous ice-warriors. His co-workers have not
made an attempt to learn his real Scandinavian
name, dubbing him 'Josh' for their convenience.
They try not to mind that his hairnet is always
covered in snowflakes, that his beard and fingernails
are icicles. In the name of tolerance, many of his
customers even try not to mind that his eyes glare
as coldly as a full-moon's reflection on ice,
and that when he speaks the room is a blizzard
and their pastries are cold. The assistant manager
is unsure how much longer he'll last in this position.

When asked, she maintains that *he's trying his best*.
*That's all any of us can do after all.*

And that *some people's best just looks a little different.*

He doesn't especially like this job. It isn't the nasty
looks and comments he receives on a daily basis,
or even that the heated deli counter keeps melting
his fingernails. Really, it's just the monotony of it all
that bothers him. Breakfast rush is from eight
to eleven, lunch from one to two-thirty.

At five, he hangs up his soggy apron and cap
and crunches out of the shop, heading home.
He selects the meatiest neighbourhood dog
for his dinner. He hangs its collar up with the others.

# The Cosmic Comet

*Toby Buckley*

I get this
nightmare where the bricks of my house, all
aligned neatly and morally
cemented

together,
learn to form opinions. On the worst
nights, they decide that they don't like
me so much.

They begin
to close in and crush me into this
tiny cube. But on better nights,
they stick to

insulting
my clothes, my glasses and all my life
decisions. Oh, I know maybe
it isn't

‘possible’
for a mindless stone - however large -
to be inherently evil
or benign.

It isn’t
always that simple. Probably, some
are quite neutral. Maybe even
most of them.

# She Went By Birdie

*Corinne McNulty*

BRIGID INSISTED ON calling a cab instead of letting Joanne collect her at the airport. Otherwise they could have arrived at the house together.

'It's only ten minutes away. I'll just get an Uber,' she said.

Joanne hadn't gotten the hang of Uber yet. She didn't like storing her credit card information in apps on her phone. But Brigid did everything that way – bill-paying, banking, calendar-keeping, all on her phone. 'They're very safe, Mom, or people wouldn't use them,' Brigid told her.

Still, she didn't like the idea of it. She'd seen an article only a few days before, in *The Post, or – or was it The Times*? – about identity theft, and how the majority of victims were older, single women. When Brigid's car arrived, it looked nothing like a taxi. Just a regular Ford Fiesta with a tiny U sticker in the corner of the back window.

Despite her pregnancy, she looked thinner than she'd been at Christmas, as though all the weight had shifted to the baby. Her hair was caught up in a red bandana like Rosie the Riveter, and baggy jean overalls were stretched across her belly. She never wore any makeup anymore, either. It made Joanne want to ask if she was eating enough.

Joanne waited on the porch, the house keys leaving a jagged indentation in her palm. She thought about lifting Brigid's suitcase for her, giving her a tight hug, telling her she'd missed her, but she held back. They'd done a test once at Brigid's suggestion – Brigid was a

certified psychologist now – and the test measured their 'love language.' That is, how liked to give and receive love. *Physical touch* scored the lowest on Brigid's list. 'I'm not a hugger. Never have been,' she would say.

Joanne wasn't sure she had ever known this about her daughter.

Every time *Joanne* did the test, it came back with different results. The questions were things like: *What cheers you up when you're down – a hug or a listening ear?* How were you supposed to decide something like that? Brigid loved tests like this. Tools in the process of understanding yourself, she called them.

When the Uber driver had gone, Brigid carried her own suitcase to the porch.

'Good to see you, Mom,' she said. They did hug, sort of, but Brigid left several inches of space between their bodies. 'Haven't you gone inside yet?'

Joanne's suitcase was still sitting beside the front door. 'I wanted to wait for you.'

Joanne didn't like the idea of standing in her mother's foyer beside the mahogany grandfather clock, listening to the ticking echoing through the empty house, alone.

'I'd couldn't have waited,' Brigid said. 'Can you imagine what Nana's left in here?' Joanne just put the key in the lock and let them in.

Dust swirled, the particles glittering like diamonds in the swath of sunlight stretching from the kitchen. They had to step over a little mountain of advertisements and bills left through the mail slot over the past three months. Joanne set her suitcase down beside the tall wooden coat rack, where her mother's fur coats still hung. Brigid pushed open the door to the sitting room. It smelled like mildew and stale heat.

'We should get the AC going. Feels like a sauna in here,' she said.

Joanne pushed the mail into a rough pile and scooped it up. 'I was trying to cut down on the electric bill,' she replied.

Brigid was already crossing to the thermostat beside the kitchen. ‘It’s not going to make a difference if we use it while we’re here, Mom.’

In the sitting room, the burgundy oriental rug and golden upholstered furniture had faded in the sunlight. Her mother had always been so diligent about closing the curtains when the sun moved to the front of the house, but no-one had done this during her last couple of years of life as her memory faded. The room now looked like a pastel watercolour.

The house gave a rumbling, like a sleeping giant waking, as the whirring fan of the Air Conditioning began. Brigid filled the space in the doorway beside Joanne.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘Where should we start?’

Joanne suggested the kitchen but Brigid was already climbing the stairs to Nana’s bedroom.

‘Aren’t you just dying to look through her things, Mom?’ she asked, waiting for her at the top of the stairs. Her dark hair hung loosely over her shoulder.

When she was little, Brigid was always begging Joanne for braids or hot-rolled curls. She would add little butterfly clips with flapping wings, or sparkling burettes or beaded headbands to whatever style Joanne managed to arrange.

‘I saw a dandelion outside, Mommy,’ she’d say, her legs swinging on the bathroom stool. ‘Did you now?’ Joanne always found it hard to answer with bobby pins in her mouth. ‘And three worms. I wanted to show them to Caitlin, but she said I couldn’t play with her because I was too bossy. I showed the worms to Louis instead.’ ‘Hold still, Birdie,’ Joanne would say.

Brigid’s monologues were always like this, the significant and the childish given equal weight, and Joanne would be left wondering if she should make some grand statement about bossiness. That’s what her own mother would’ve done. Did she want to be like her? Then, lost in thought, she’d pull too hard, and Brigid would say she was hurting her.

'Mom?'

Brigid still waited.

'Sure, let's start in the bedroom.'

There was a mahogany four-poster with a blue-flowered duvet and white fur blanket on top. On her dresser sat a black tray with painted red Japanese houses. It held several glass bottles of perfume, as well as a silver-backed hairbrush and matching mirror. Brigid picked up one of the old-fashioned perfumes and squeezed the attached sprayer.

Gardenias and rose. Her mother swirling the tea spoon in her cup and setting it on the saucer with a gentle clink. Leaning forward to pour a cup for Joanne, her perfume reaching across the space between them, in the sitting room full of trapped heat. Coming to stay for a week to help with Brigid, the smell of her on the pillows and towels in the guest bedroom after she'd gone.

'It's like she's in the room, isn't it, Birdie?' Joanne said.

Brigid rolled her eyes and laughed. 'No one calls me that anymore, Mom.'

They worked for a couple of hours, first with the makeups, perfumes and jewellery, then in the closet with Nana's accessories and clothes. Brigid made a pile on the bed, things she wanted to keep. Joanne didn't share her mother's style.

The writing desk lay untouched. When Joanne looked at it she thought of her mother's elegant cursive, the way the letters sloped and stretched like waves rising slowly before they crashed. She'd written thank-you notes to the nurses after she'd had her hip replaced. Joanne carried this tradition with her, consciously or not. After Brigid's fifth birthday they'd sat together at the kitchen table, writing notes to each of her friends.

'Thank you for my new Barbie clothes. I will always use them. Love,' Brigid had dictated, before signing her name in fat capital letters, 'Birdie.'

Brigid began opening the drawers of the desk, admiring the stationary and calligraphy pens. The bottom drawer revealed a small filing system. Old bills, notes Nana had kept from friends, restaurant menus—when had her mother ever ordered takeout?—banking information, receipts, and then, at the very back, one last folder simply called 'Joanne.'

'What's in there, you think?' Brigid asked, sliding it out. The sides of the folder bulged round.

Joanne was about to say that her mother might not want them to look; but then she remembered. Brigid sat cross-legged on the floor, clutching the thick manila folder in one hand while settling the baby with the other. She opened the cover and pulled the first item out – a plane ticket to Atlanta, saved from one of Nana's visits. Beneath that, an entire stack from other visits. And then, under these, a birthday card from Joanne, one she'd sent so long ago that she didn't remember it. In fact, *every* birthday card she'd sent was stored here in a neat stack. There were others too – postcards from holidays, childhood notes written in the deliberate hand of an Elementary Schooler. Even the little post-its Joanne would sometimes leave on the counter when she left – half-hearted Thank-you stickers that just said, *Had a great time, Love you!* – were here, all preserved in this over-filled folder with her name on it.

At the bottom there was a journal. This time, Joanne placed a firm, staying hand on her daughter's wrist. Reading her own notes was one thing; hearing her mother's response was another.

'But, Mom.'

*Mom* hadn't carried much weight with Joanne until she first heard it in Brigid's little voice; then it became her favorite word. Nowadays when Brigid used it, she sounded like Joanne did back when she'd said things like: *You have to put your coat on, Birdie, it's cold outside;* or *I know you don't like broccoli but it's good for you*.

‘The folder has your name on it. And Nana isn’t here anymore,’ Brigid said.

‘All right. Go on, then.’

Brigid folded the cover back. With her head bowed like that, her hair tossed over her shoulder, her feet tucked tightly under her knees, one hand resting on her baby, she wasn’t Birdie anymore. She was someone else entirely. Someone with a mind and soul of her own.

Once, if Joanne had asked what she was thinking about, her Birdie would answer readily that she was thinking about those trees over there, and what kind of green that’s called. And Joanne would feel that she could know her daughter’s mind, every wandering inch of it. But maybe there were unexplored corners even then that neither of them knew. Places Brigid had found by herself.

‘It’s a baby journal,’ Brigid said, lifting her head. ‘She’s written about the first weeks after you were born.’

‘I did the same,’ Joanne said, surprised. ‘I kept a journal when you were born.’ Perhaps that had that been her mother’s idea. She could not recall.

‘Maybe I will too,’ said Brigid, smiling at Nana’s handwriting. ‘We should compare this journal with yours. You and Nana always were so similar.’ She stood with some effort, stretching her arms up high and shaking the stiffness from her legs. ‘I could do with a glass of water. You want one?’

When she’d gone, Joanne sat at her mother’s desk, alone now. The journal lay open on the bed, a piece of her mother’s mind waiting to be known. She thought about penning a note on the spare stationary, thought too about looking through the folder named Joanne. Funny to think that she could discover something new about her mother even now. You could be so sure of someone, and not sure about them at all.

In a moment, Brigid would return, water glass in hand. Maybe she would see the tears in Joanne’s eyes and say, ‘Oh, Mom,’ in that way she had, as though the word encompassed all her amusement, exasperation,

affection. Maybe she would she take Joanne's hand and give her a hug, even if she wasn't a hugger. She would have to wait and see.

# Nausicaa

*Claire McSherry*

Lion-like, with sudden impulse to confront the women
Who lay together behind the overgrowth, washed and beautiful
From the lake's water, and naked still from their bathing,
Odysseus, in his nakedness, approached the women,
Fully aware of his appearance, a towering figure, bare and
Made filthy by mud and branches with leaves that hid
The maleness of him, a terrifying sight, and with this
Sudden entrance he shocked and scattered the women,
Splitting them up, like gazelles in open ground, yet
Odysseus observed the beautiful and fearful Nausicaa,
Who, exposed, stood frozen but for her trembling legs,
Which Athena saw and soothed, giving the woman courage
To face the man before her, and as Nausicaa stood there,
Gathering her fortitude and resisting the urge to run or scream,
As her companions had done, Odysseus, too, considered his options,
Whether to touch her beautiful body or to speak from afar,
For touching her pretty knees might frighten the woman,
Cause her alarm and incite her to flee, stopping him from
Achieving his desire, so instead of touching her smooth skin,
He chose to speak from a distance, using charming and calculated
Words, which could not be interpreted the same way actions are.

# St Stephen's Green

*Claire McSherry*

Between time differences
And signal strength
Your messages stop reaching me.
Except for that birthday card
With a stamp from Hong Kong
And edges that I ran my fingers over.

But because paper is flimsy I think it is human,
And you have dogs and potted plants
And we haven't returned to that gate
And shouldn't have left so much unsaid,
So many words, words like anxious children
We take by the hand and trail home to bed.

So there is something in September,
At the point of autumn, or brink of summer,
That makes me think of you:

That coat, that hat,
Your hands in your pockets,
White breath on a black winter night,
At St Stephen's Green gate
As it closes.

# Bearer

*for my father*

Us at Milford following the course
of a river, watching wild ducks,
and my head as high as your stomach,
our fingers braided,
your stubble and laughter,
the sloshing sound of wellyboots on water.

*

A collapsed viaduct
Positioned over a river,
Sheep deep in overgrown grass.
My father and I ventured
Toward the water.
He spotted ducks,
Pointed them out to me.
Got down on his knees
So as not to disturb them,
I followed suit,
My head always tilted upward.

Next to a stick and spit nest,
A mother duck bobbed,
Surrounded by a plump of ducklings,
Bleeping and chirruping and miniature.
Alive as I had never seen them
And strange for being so.

My foot pushed a stone quietly into the water.
The mother saw us, took her young under wing,
And swam away.

So my father loaded me onto his back,
Placed my arms around his neck, instructed
I hold on tight, joked 'I'm like Saint Christopher',
Then waded gently in, breaking the surface,
Beautifully in slow, drawn out motions,
He carried me across the water.

# Tattoo

*Claire McSherry*

He sat on a train to
Belfast,
a greying man with disintegrating
gentility
and faded tattoos across his
knuckles.
The black ink gone blue spelled out
TRUCE.

They've become midnight
letters
like a bruise that takes decades to
fade
and never does.

# Wind Turbines

*Claire McSherry*

In motion, as if bouncing
From one leaf to another,
We climb toward the colossal
Wind turbines, made tiny
By the distance between us.

We had seen them through
The car window on our way here.
We sought one out, like the end
Of a rainbow. I did not think
We would meet it, come so close.

Once they had been so small
And we had been so big.
But in making up the distance
We reversed the order of things.
We could not see another

Person for miles. They were
Fidgeting dots in the distance,
I imagine they wave to us.
But these unmanned masses,
Made unmissable, wave to no one.

# Picture

*Claire McSherry*

I

As you lay dying in that room,
The light rose from the carpet toward
The picture of the Sacred Heart
Opposite your bed. I held your hand.
I felt my fingers indent your skin
In the way that only older skin can be indented.

II

When, on your last day, you could no longer see
We brought the Divine Mercy leaflet
That you held during those last hours.
Your thumb's indent is still visible:
A sharp crease at the base of Jesus' feet.
I do not open it for fear of smoothing it out.

III

So spirits depart their bodies just like a dream,
And I could no more hold you than when I woke.

# The Long Spoon

*Jim Simpson*

‘GRANDPA, will you play a game with me?’ Molly asks, all sunshine in her yellow cotton. ‘It’s a new one I’ve invented. You won’t have to run or jump or even walk. All you have to do is sit back in your deck chair, here among the roses and I’ll ask you some questions. It’s called *Interview*. Is that all right?’

‘Do I have any choice?’

‘No,’ she says, ‘and you must give nice short answers or else you’ll be disqualified.’

‘Is there any cash in it?’

‘No money, but I’ll bring you a can of Guinness from the fridge to keep you in good form. You mustn’t spill it over your linen shirt when you pull the metal thingy off. It’ll be like TV.’

‘I wondered why you were all dressed up in the posh outfit!’

‘You’re not allowed to ask anything, even if you’re dying to, and you have to be polite and not get cross. I’ll fetch your old straw hat in case you burn your head again, like you did last year on sports day.’

I watch her skip through the patio door on her way to the kitchen. Her broad hairband is the same mahogany red as the nasturtiums. She is so like Felicity.

‘Here we are,’ she says, all out of breath.

Beads of condensation slipped down the icy tin.
‘Are you quite comfortable?’ she asks, holding up a wooden spatula.

‘The long spoon is the microphone. I want to talk to you about your bees. And remember, you mustn’t be silly, like you are sometimes.’

‘I’ll have to work on my behaviour then,’ I say, tilting back the pewter tankard. The Guinness beams at me. ‘That’s a pint and a half.’

‘First question. Do all the bees in a hive belong to one big family?’

‘Ah now,’ I say, swirling the widget around the empty can.

‘“Ah now” is no sort of answer.’

‘They all have the same mother.’

‘Well is she the queen?’

‘Yes. She lays all the eggs.’

‘Like a real Mammy, in a way?

‘She *is* a real mammy.’

‘I think that’s being *smart*. How many eggs does she lay?’

‘A good queen will lay hundreds of thousands in her life time. Most of them turn into female workers.’

‘That would be a lot of daughters to look after. I mean if they all hatched out. I’m sure you’re glad there’s just one grand-daughter in *this* family. Are there any *bad* queens, like in fairy tales?’

‘A ‘*healthy* queen!’ would be a better way for me to put it. Sometimes they can be sick, you know, like us.’

‘That wouldn’t be their fault. Human Mammies get ill too. They have to go to hospital.’ ‘That’s right,’ I say. I think of the wan half smile on Felicity’s pallid face, when we would leave her in Acacia One.

‘What are the daddies like?’ asks Molly.

‘The drones? There are only a few hundreds of them. They’re fatter than the workers, with big backsides. Six or seven drones will mate with one queen, so most of the bees will be half- sisters.’

‘Like me and Lucy.’

Lucy was eighteen when she left for good.

‘She used to tell me stuff about *her* daddy,’ Molly says. ‘I hope *she’s* not in hospital.’

‘Maybe we’ll see her again, some day,’ I say.

'I say a prayer every night for her so that God will keep her safe.'

My throat is dry. I take another draught.

'Don't wipe your hand on your mouth, like that,' she says, 'I'll go and get you get a tissue.'

Where have I heard that tone before?

'Apologies, viewers! This is a very old beekeeper,' she says, back in the role now. 'Do bees live in *happy* families?' she asks in her best presenter's voice.

'There can be up to sixty thousand of them at a time. We can't talk about them as happy or unhappy.'

'They're not like us.'

'They don't have feelings like we do. They've been programmed over millions of years, by evolution.'

'Can you tell me if they have any enemies inside the hive? You know, things that would do them harm? The audience will want to know.'

'Oh yes.'

'Like what?'

'Like, diseases and intruders and parasites. Parasites are…'

'I think we all know what parasites are. They live off other creatures.' She frowns. 'Mammy used to say that Joe was a parasite.'

'There's a special one that attacks the bees by clinging to the hairs on their legs and bodies. It sucks them dry.'

'Oh yuck. Would Mammy and I have been dead if the police hadn't arrested Joe? Why did she want him to be my daddy anyway?'

'She wasn't herself.'

'Will he ever get out of jail?'

'You'll be grown up by then. It will be a long time, Molly,' I say.

'Are there no kind drones to be good to the queen and stand up for her babies?'

'It's not in their nature.'

'Emily Robinson and her sister says it was all the daddies in their house that got them taken away. They had to go to foster care.'

'That must have been sad for them.' 'Do the drones ever hurt the queen?' 'Why do you ask?'

'*I'm* the interviewer,' she says, flicking her curls.

'Oops, I forgot. No, the drones die after they mate with the queens and that's the end of them.'

'Yippee,' she says. 'I love to think of heaps of rubbish drones. I hate them all so much. We should make a hot fire in a bucket and burn their bodies up.'

'A kind of crematorium.'

'For drones,' she says. 'Do you think bees have long memories?'

'They remember enough to return to their own hives, but if the weather's wet and they're not flying, they can become confused and then they need to memorise the landmarks all again.'

'Lucy told me she remembered awful things happening to Mammy and her, in Dublin. She says the inside of her head was like a dead chicken she saw on the road, all blood and stinky.'

'She had a tough time. Felicity was poorly for a long time before you came to live up here.'

'Lucy told me there was no one to look after us, just bad people.'

'Mental illness puts a terrible strain on a family. It should have been easier when you moved closer but your mammy wanted to look after you by herself.'

'And then I came to be with you. So who *is* there to protect the bees?'

'Guards,' I say. 'Tomorrow you can put on the small bee suit we got from Thornes and see them patrolling the entrances to the hives.'

'Brilliant,' she says. 'But Grandpa, sometimes I dream about monsters wearing glasses with dark rims. I think they look like drones. Athough, I suppose an interviewer shouldn't talk so much about herself.'

‘Interviewing is a complicated business.’ I tap my empty Guinness tin on windowsill. ‘What about another one of these to keep the vocal chords vibrating? You can bring yourself a Loop-the-Loop while you’re at it.’

‘We’ll take a short break viewers,’ she announces. ‘That’s most of it over,’ she whispers to me. ‘There are just a few other questions but we can do them without the cameras. Now promise that you will not fall asleep.’

A moment later she skips back along the crazy paving. ‘There,’ she says, ‘reinforcements to keep you happy. I’ll have an ice pop when we’re finished. I was wondering, if I could ask you one last thing?’

‘Ask away.’

‘It’s kind of hard to find the words exactly.’ She jiggles her leg.

‘Try.’

‘Well, do you think it might have been better if I had been born, you know, into the world of bees instead?’ She asks it with all Felicity’s earnestness.

‘Like a grub? What would you say about that yourself?’ If I can break the rules for once?’ She stares at the cherry trees for what seems like a long time.

‘I think it could have been better in some ways. I liked hearing about the queen laying the eggs. An insect wouldn’t get depressed. And I’m sure that bees don’t drink much alcohol.’

I don’t interrupt her.

‘I would definitely want the guard bees for my friends,’ she says, her head to the side. ‘But on the other hand, although the drones can’t actually do you any harm, I would hate them watching me with their great big spooky eyes.’ She purses her lips and looks directly at me now. ‘You see Grandpa, I keep all my bad memories in a black suitcase in my head, like the one that Mammy takes. And sometimes I’m scared it will burst open and they will all come crawling out like maggots.’

‘That’s hard for you,’ I say.

‘I bet a bee would have forgotten them all by now,’ she says. The sun has begun its dip to the horizon.

‘The creatures are like giant insects crawling through my dreams, trying to climb through the windows,’ she says. ‘But there are no guards. I think they are coming to eat me with their great big jaws, and I am in Acacia One.’

‘Would you rather not visit your mammy for a while?’ I asked. ‘She doesn’t want to make you sad. I wouldn’t make you go, you know.’

Molly slips her hand into mine. ‘Your arms are so brown,’ she says, ‘you should put on sun block. Tory Conroy, this girl I know, says *her Grandpa* was a terrible grump, but she cried when he died of skin cancer all the same.’

‘I’d better buy a man-sized tube, I guess.’

‘Is seventy five so *very* old?’

‘Not these days. My Dad lived to be ninety-three and he could still take a take the train to Cork to see his old school friend till the day his ticker stopped.’

‘The insects go away when I waken in the morning,’ she says, ‘and then I’m happy here, in my room, with the light shining through the primrose curtains and Patch licking my face. And I can hear you downstairs, clanking about and making the porridge. There’s honey and pancakes for breakfast and it feels like I’ve always been here.’

‘I’m glad about that,’ I say, stretching out my arms. ‘Come here.’

‘No hugs until the end of the show. We’re nearly at the end now, but I want to tell you one last secret that nobody knows.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’m going to become a beekeeper. Like you.’

‘An assistant at last!’ I say. ‘That’s the best news anyone could give me!’

‘So how do I get started?’

‘Tomorrow I’ll talk to the Association. Then we’ll see about getting you a tidy box of bees and a new little queen of your own.’

'It'll take years for me to know as much as you.'

'Beekeeping is like life. It's a long road with many ups and downs, but you stick with it.' 'I know. And I was just thinking, even if Mammy and Lucy don't come back for ages, at least, some day, I'll be twirling the long spoon you brought me from Scotland into a jar of my very own honey.'

'You're a great girl Molly,' I say. 'It's going to be such an adventure.'

# The Pangs of Ulster

*Bonnie Staines*

Bitter, she cursed every man's blood
until his son's son's son and son on
suffered from the pain of childbirth.

# Instant Miso Soup Machine

*Bonnie Staines*

Lacquered bowl
below the nozzle –
miso flows like milk.

## *Bonnie Staines*

*___ with a Pearl Earring,*
*Gone Girl, __ Interrupted,*

the girl who killed herself.
I miss her all the time.

# Graffiti

*Bonnie Staines*

The little girl sits below
*orla is a slut* with her
knees squeezed tight.

# Watching The News

*Adeline Henry*

ON TUESDAY, I came home on the school bus and Mummy and Daddy were both waiting for me in the car at the end of the road. Usually I walked the mile home; sometimes Mum would come to meet me; but something was different today. I slung my bag onto my shoulder and walked up the aisle of the bus, eyeing our orange Hillman Hunter. The bus driver, Ronnie, grunted to acknowledge my *thank-you* as I stepped down the three steps onto the road. Daddy lifted his hand in salute to Ronnie. Daddy knew everybody.

I opened the back door of the car and threw my bag in. 'Hello,' I said, sitting into the car. 'Well Muggins,' said Daddy.

'Why are you both here?'

'We're just on our way out of Armagh. Dad had an appointment,' answered Mum. 'How was school?'

'All right. It was long division. Mr Smith made us help the P6's.'

Mum turned the car at the road end and we were driving back towards home. 'We've something to tell you.'

'Oh?'

'You know Granny's neighbour, Mr McCall?'

'Sarah's uncle? He was fixing Granny's back door when we were there on Saturday.'

'That's him.'

'He always gives us mints.'

'He's died, Margaret.'

'Died? He wasn't old, was he?'

'He was fifty.'

'That's funny.'

'It's not funny at all!' Dad said sharply.

'I didn't mean… I just never knew anybody who was dead before.'

We pulled into the yard at home and Mum parked near the door. It was a fine winter day, cold and bright. Mum went to the kitchen and put on the kettle, while Dad put on the radio.

'I just want to hear the headins' of the news.'

He stood by the old wireless he'd had since before they were married. It was oblong, with brown leather effect round the edges and the handle, and white plastic on the front where the sound came out. It was half past three, there'd be no news till the hour. Dad said he had a wee job to do outside. I went into the kitchen. Mum was drying mugs to put on the tray.

'The thing about Mr McCall, Margaret…' she started. She didn't break from her task as she spoke. 'It was a shooting.'

'A shooting?'

'Somebody shot him.'

'He was nice.'

'He was nice. A decent man.'

I got out the digestives and set them on the tray with the mugs. 'Does Granny know?'

'It was in Granny's yard.' I stared.

'Go and sit down, Margaret.'

'Is Granny ok?'

'She's gone over to Auntie Dorothy's for a while.'

I went and sat on the sofa, not sure what to do. Mummy sat beside me and put her arm round my shoulder. That was strange. I felt like I should be crying or something. A thought came into my head.

'Did Granny see him?' Mum pulled me closer.

'Did she *find* him?'

She had tears in her eyes. Mum never cried. 'But what happened? Why did they shoot him?'

'That's enough, Margaret,' she said, as she got up. 'That tea'll be brewed now.'

She poured three cups, one for each of us, and sent me to get Daddy. She sat with her cup in her usual chair and opened the *News Letter*.

I went out to the door and yelled: 'Tea's made.'

'Right-o,' Dad shouted back from one of the outhouses.

I went back in to the house and sat at the table. I got my tea and picked a biscuit from the tin. There were still some chocolate ones in silver paper from Christmas. I unwrapped it and smoothed the silver paper out with my finger, flattening all the creases so it made a shiny square, wafer thin. But then it ripped. I scrunched it up and threw it on the tray.

Dad came in just as it was coming up to the hour. He put on the wireless as the pips went.

*'It's four o'clock, this is the BBC News on Tuesday the fourth of January. There's been a fatal gun attack in South Armagh in the early hours of this morning. The victim, Mr James McCall of Whitecross, was gunned down in the yard of a neighbour's property. His body was found around nine 9 o'clock by the owner of the house, Mrs Aggie Edgar. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack…'*

'*No-one has claimed responsibility*. Scum of the earth,' Dad said. 'Turn it off, John. Don't torture yourself. Didn't the doctor tell you?'
'Why would somebody shoot Mr McCall?' I asked, again.

* * *

The next day at school, everybody was talking about it. Ivan McKee said his Dad had worked with James McCall just before Christmas on a building job. Noreen Stewart was related to the McCalls on her mother's

side, they were far out cousins. Then Adrian Allen said to me: 'Here, Maggie, your Granny found him. Maybe it was her done it.'

I didn't know what to say. I didn't like anybody to think badly of Granny and I felt sorry for her sleeping at Auntie Dorothy's, afraid to go home. I didn't mean to, but I started to cry.

'Maggie Brown is cryin'. Maggie Brown is cryin',' chanted Adrian. Arlene came over and took me away to the other side of the playground. 'Pay no attention. He's just a stupid boy.'

I felt silly, a P7 sniffing and snivelling. I never cried at school, except the time when Iwas in P2 and Brian Magowan ran into me in the playground and I fell and scraped my whole leg on thetar.

'Is your Granny ok?' Arlene asked.

'I think so, but she's staying with Auntie Dorothy.' 'I wonder what she saw.'

'There'd definitely be blood.' I shivered.

'Yeah, and maybe puddins'.' Arlene's hand gripped my arm. 'Ask her.'

'I will not!' I was horrified at the picture Arlene was putting into my head. The bell rang and I was glad to go back into the classroom.

'Right, children,' said Mr Smith, 'get out your maths books and we'll start where we left off yesterday.'

I wasn't all that keen on helping the P6's with long division, but today it was all right because it pushed the pictures out of my head.

* * *

On Friday night it was Brownies in the church hall. It was ok, but I hated playing Ladders because I was always the slowest and people were watching and shouting at you to hurry up. Auntie May was Brown Owl. Usually she was lovely but at Brownies she would always be strict.

'Get into your Sixes, girls!' she called.

We all scrambled into our groups: Leprechauns, Imps, Elves, Gnomes and Pixies. I wasn't a Sixer or a Second, but that was fine. I had Carol Montgomery as my Sixer. Everybody loved her.

'We're going to start with a prayer this evening,' said Auntie May. Everybody settled down. 'Dear Lord, thank you for our time together this evening and for our fellowship with our Brownie friends. We think of the McCall family circle, especially Mr McCall's niece, our helper Sarah, and pray that they will find some comfort in the support of their family and wider community at this sad time. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

When we opened our eyes, it was quiet.

'Right girls, this evening each of the Sixes is going to write a sympathy letter to Sarah.

Come up to the front and collect some paper and pens. I want each of you to write one sentence and the Sixers and Seconds will decide which order to put them in your letter.'

Carol went up to get paper for our Six. I had no idea what to write. I could hear the others whispering to each other. Jane and Valerie were giggling. Auntie May raised her voice from the front of the room.

'I don't think this is a time for laughing, girls!'

They exchanged glances and made their faces straight. I glowered at them, feeling it was my duty to help make the occasion respectful.

When I got my piece of paper and pen, I wrote: 'Dear Sarah, Sorry about your Uncle Jim. He was lovely. He gave me Foxes Glacier mints at Granny's. I hope you aren't too sad, love from Margaret.'

* * *

Mum collected me from Brownies and gave Pamela Porter a lift because she lived on our way home. It was about three miles. I was sitting in the front. Along the Bog Road near Pamela's house, a red light appeared. Mum slowed the car and as we got closer to the dot of red, we could just make out a soldier in army clothes and helmet, standing in the

middle of the road with a rifle under his arm. There were three or four others, like ghosts, behind him in the ditch. One was pointing his rifle at the car, looking through the sights. I knew what it was called because Daddy had let me see *his* gun one day when he was cleaning it. He said he would give me a shot out of it when I was older. Mum stopped the car, put off the headlights and wound down the window.

'Good evening, Madam. Where are you heading?' The soldier was English.

'Just going home, the Lisdrumman Road. Two miles away.'

'Can I see your driving licence please?'

'Yes, just a minute,' said Mum. 'Margaret, reach me over my handbag there, it's at your feet.'

I lifted her bag and opened the flap. She could see dimly by the light from the soldier's torch. Rifling through her messy bag, she finally found the paper licence in its broken plastic cover. She handed it to the soldier.

'Is there any problem?' she asked.

'No Madam, just some routine checks. There's been a bit of trouble a few miles up the road. Just get on home now.'

'Thank you,' said Mum, putting the lights back on and heading off towards Pamela's lane. As we passed, I saw the soldier lying in the ditch with black camouflage marks over his face, his gun at his shoulder. His eyes glinted in the headlights.

At Pamela's house, we waited for her Mum to come out. 'Hello Moira. Thanks for bringing Pamela home.'

'Not at all, Gwen,' replied Mum. 'There's an army checkpoint just down the road there.

They said something happened this evening. Did you hear anything?'

'No, I didn't. I'll tell the boys to go the other way if they're going to the pub later.' 'I'm sure it'll be away before that. These checkpoints never stay in one place long.' 'That's right enough,' replied Pamela's mum.

I waved at Pamela as the car moved off. Even over the sound of the engine, I could hear a helicopter flying overhead, and when I craned my neck I could see the flashing red lights at its tail, probably heading towards Bessbrook. It was the busiest heliport in Europe, Mr Smith said.

When we got home, all the doors were open and the kitchen was cold. Daddy turned and looked at us, his eyes dark. His hair was standing up on end like it sometimes did on hay making days or days when the vet was coming to test the cattle. He had the news at full volume.

'Moira, there's been another shooting…'

Mum closed the outside door, then took off her coat and hung it out in the hall. Then she came in and closed the hall and the kitchen doors, and set her bag into the cupboard where it lived. I looked at Dad. He had turned back to the TV, to watch the English news. Now it was something about the Labour party, that he didn't care about.

'Where?' Mum asked, finally.

'*South Armagh* they said. Huh! It's *County Armagh*. No divide in it. We used to travel the length of it threshing and baling. Who do they think they are? Bloody reporters.'

'Mind the language, John,' said Mum. But I'd heard it all before.

After the main news from London finished, the local news came on. A shooting. It wasn't clear how many were dead. Bessbrook Road out of Newry. A vehicle. Bodies on the road.

Catholics this time. It was only six miles away. I went into the kitchen and got myself a slice of wheaten bread. Mum came in too.

'Butter me a slice, would you Margaret?' I nodded and went back to the larder.

'And put honey on it. Plenty of butter and honey.'

'I'll take a cup but I want to be in town before closin' time,' called Dad. 'Don't go in tonight, John. There'll be checkpoints everywhere.'

‘I’ll juke in the back roads. It’ll be all right. I just want to hear what the boys are sayin’.’ I set out his night-time tablets beside his mug of tea. ‘Please stay at home, Daddy,’ Isaid.

‘Och, I’ll be ok, kiddo, don’t you worry!’ And he went out to wash his face and change his clothes.

Mum was sitting in her favourite chair, staring at the TV. ‘Mum?’ I said. ‘Mum!’ She looked up with a start.

‘Do you want to watch Val Doonican, or will I see what’s on the other side?’ ‘Oh, just leave it there.’

Dad thundered back down the stairs in a clean pair of trousers, shirt and sports jacket. He threw his tablets to the back of this throat and drained his tea in one go.

‘Right, I’m away.’

‘Don’t be too late, John,’ said Mum. They exchanged a glance.

‘I’ll be back before twelve. Night-night, Maggie.’

He tickled me under the chin, pulled open the door and went out leaving a vacuum. We heard the car starting, reversing across the yard, and the rev of the engine as he accelerated up the lane and away. The room settled.

# Yous’

*Emily Lee*

The coats disappeared
one by one
from their hangers

They were like spilled milk
and tea, over the breakfast table
all pooled in different places

I used to know who the culprits were
now I miss having the little green bruises
that I got outside the bathroom

Now there’s no elbows or scowls or
knuckles, just a silent see you later
dropped into the corridor

And when I walk down the street,
my limbs have nothing to cling to
I’m a bag of spanners

This fence is still broken
I’m still real, I wiggle my toes
and remember that I can’t swim

# Laura

*Emily Lee*

You standing at the end of the bed
brush in hand
haunts me at forty-three minutes past seven in the morning

You come into my room
and ask me to plait your hair
*do it yourself* I said

Now I plait your hair in my dreams
while the sea sleeps between us
and I wake up with empty hands

# Dock Leaves

*Emily Lee*

I see you shivering in your favourite green shorts,
Your head's too big for your body and your mouth like a coat hanger
from crying. Livid red blotches bloom all over your belly
My guilty tears mix with the tap water and dock leaves I'd torn
from next door's garden. Remember, I wrapped you up in the soaking leaves
lay down on the bathroom floor with you and prayed
as your crying came in and out like the sea.

A Sunday in August it was, grandma's back lane, no shoes
*Don't go far and if you fall ill belt ye.*
We were supposed to go to the beach but
I chased you around the block until you landed
in a clump of French nettles. You screamed
I said *shit* and pulled you out of their clutches
I've half a mind to send you some dock leaves in the post.

# Hebburn

*Emily Lee*

I remember my mother telling me it meant ‘high burial’
in the Old Norse language, or ‘graveyard by the water’
from the Vikings who slaughtered the fisherman and their wives,
even the children. That longship is still in the Tyne, you can see it
sometimes when the tide is low.

When he was drunk my grandad used to shout, ‘Vikings me arse’
and tell me about the first time he went to prison
for vandalising that statue in the town centre of two massive Vikings,
he always threw his head back laughing when I asked him what he wrote
FUCK OFF in bright yellow across their chests.

A bus full of pensioners empties outside of Asda
in the town centre, while a group of kids leg it away
from the ‘community support officer’.
A group of plump women stand smoking, dishing out dirty looks.
I look at the pavements stuck up with grey chuddy

I imagine bones crunching underneath the pavement slabs
if I sit down in the grass I’ll jump up thinking of skeletons
trying to pull me to the earth, and sometimes I’ll dream
about the fishermen, all silver and dead, mouths stuck open
except the last one who shouts, ‘Vikings me arse’ and his soul comes
out of his mouth.

# Mother's Day

*Emily Lee*

You were
a gob on legs
shooting from the hip, left right and centre

*Islands in the stream...that is what we are...*
We'd hear you before we saw you
swaying down the street seasick with your cans of Scrumpy Jack

Everyone's favourite workyticket
with a laugh that could wake the graveyard
and a punch that would have Zeus on his back

Today they're missing
those tongue-in-cheek eyes of yours
gleaming and rebel black

I saw your son yesterday
in the card section of Asda, he picked one up
then put it back

These streets are too peaceful now
Scrumpy Jack cans rattle around
instead of you

And nobody talks
when *Islands in the Stream*
comes on the radio

# Shields Beach

*Emily Lee*

Reminds me of you, scraping together the metro fare
on a Sunday after church
and filling a bright yellow Netto bag with cheese sandwiches
and two bottles of lemonade in the bottom of the pram

We'd be alright without sun cream
and we didn't need a bucket and spade to build a sandcastle
I still laugh at Sophie and Carl running into the sea
with their little white arses on full display

Then there was the possibility of chips on the way back a bath,
a cup of tea, Emmerdale
and you saying, the sea air gives you a good sleep
then squashing the four of us into one bed

Then there's you in your hospital bed
hardly able to breath, telling me
in the summer we'll be going to Shields beach
and this time bugger it, we'd get Marks and Spencer's sandwiches

On the day of your funeral I went to Shields beach
early in the morning, the damp velvet sand
was like crumbled cake and I thought of you as a child,
recognising all of the footprints that were yours

# Nighthawks

*David Riley*

*The set is based on the painting Nighthawks by Edward Hopper. Two of the four characters (the man and woman next to each other in the picture, here named Nora and Frank) are on stage. The other two (the man with his back to the glass, and the waiter) do not appear. It is 2am in the museum where the picture is housed. The scene is not Phillie's Diner, it is the painting. The characters are in the painting.*

*Stage is dark.*

**NORA** *(OFF)* You're in here. I know you're in here. Somewhere. Where else would you be? Where's the Goddam switch?

*Lights up. The fluorescent light flickers on. Nora is at the back. Frank is at the counter, in the pose from the picture.*

**NORA** *(Advancing)* Ah! Now – would it have hurt you to answer? Well? Tell me – what the hell are you doing?

*Frank holds his pose.*

**FRANK** I'm doing what I do.

**NORA** Frank, that's Popeye. 'I does what I does,' while thinking on coffee?

*Frank stays posed.*

**NORA** Frank, no one is watching, even the guard's done his rounds. Will you cut it out? You don't impress me. You can stand down. Come on, lighten up. Spin me a yarn. Come on, tell me your story. Why you are here, this time of night? Pretend I can't guess.

**FRANK** I told you, I'm doing what I do.

**NORA** *(Looking out.)* What for? No-one-is-watching. It's 2am or some such witching hour. The gallery's deserted. Who's going to see? Except me…

**FRANK** That's the truth…

**NORA** **…**and I've seen it more than enough.

*Nora returns to the counter. She sits next to Frank, copying his pose till he moves.*

**FRANK** I dunno, it's how…

**NORA** How you were brought up?

**FRANK** No I…

**NORA** Cos if that's what it is, there's questions to ask, like – where's a lady's cup?

**FRANK** Uh?

**NORA** *(Indicates her empty cup.)* A gentleman would have filled my cup – you know, maybe once these past 70 years?

**FRANK** No…

**NORA** I know, I know, It's just – you 'does what you does.'

**FRANK** And you do too.

**NORA** Don't remind me, I'll be sat by your side in plenty of time. *(Nora does her pose.)*

**FRANK** It…it's what we do.

**NORA** Sure, I told you, enough. *(Pause)* Not that I'll listen to you anymore.

**FRANK** What?

**NORA** Feeding me dumb talk – why? Just cos of the time? You think cos it's late I'll take all this crap? 'Doing What You Do.' *(Pause)* You're here, doing what you do? After nearly seventy years, you have to practise, to do what you do? It's not a good story, you've let me down.

**FRANK** I guess I felt… the need… *(Looks to space at counter where the other character, missing, sits in the painting.*

**NORA** Yeah, you felt something but it wasn't to… *(Pause)* Look, I got needs too.

*She approaches Frank affectionately, but he doesn't respond.*

**NORA** I coulda shown you. *(Pause)* Damn! Damn, you – why am I wasting my breath? You already knew, knew all of my needs. *That's* why you're here, to hide in plain view, 'doing what you do.'

**FRANK** Your needs? You think I'm hiding out from your needs?

**NORA** Hiding best you can, from a femme fatale. That was me tonight. I'd be the lonely lady.
But you never showed up. Kinda fitting, uh? Well, that wasn't what I had in mind.
*(Pause)* Hey, now I got you here, c'mon, let's play

**FRANK** I don't want to play…

**NORA** Be the P.I. in the diner for me.

**FRANK** Not now.

**NORA** What's wrong Frank? I frightened you off? OK, I'll give you more time. Take it real slow. Let's get in the mood.

**FRANK** This isn't the time. Just listen to me. I got something to say…

**NORA** Oh c'mon, be a tough. Ask me questions, get mad then, I'll let you get rough… *(indicates the back of the set)* back there.

**FRANK** Jeez Nora. No. *(Pause)* No. *(Pause)* Just listen. OK, let's put it this way.

*He begins to follow her around.*

**FRANK** You want to play? What if I say: OK but we should stay – what's wrong with right here?

**NORA** You want to stay here?

**FRANK** Yeah, why go back there?

*Frank clears coffee cups from surface.*

**NORA** Frank, this isn't like you…

**FRANK** What makes it different – back there? C'mere.

**NORA** There's no one to stare. I don't want some voyeur ...

**FRANK** Right but – who's here to watch? Who's here to stare? Didn't you tell me yourself – nobody cares? No-one-is-watching?

**NORA** Well sure, not out there. But here, well, you know… *(Pause)* Oh, wait a minute…you're *being* a tough guy, starting to play, this *is* all a game…

**FRANK** No, damn it, it's not. I'm trying to say…will you look around?

**NORA** I *like* it, we've not done it this way before. I thought you were bored. Nice touch with the cups.

**FRANK** Nora, just look. Take a good look around.

**NORA** I've seen every inch. We've been here so long. *(Pause)* Hey, just a minute…

**FRANK** Yeah? So? How's it look?

**NORA** But – they're gone…

**FRANK** Bright girl…

**NORA** The big guy – sitting down at the end. Where is he? And Chuck, behind the counter…

**FRANK** Yep. They're gone. D'you want to know where?

**NORA** What's going on Frank? Oh no, don't tell me – *they* are in the back? The two of them they…

**FRANK** No, not in the back.

**NORA** They always looked shifty – did you think that?

**FRANK** Are you listening? *(Pause)* I said not in the back.

**NORA** Not in the back? Then where…

**FRANK** They're out.

**NORA** Out? Out *where?*

*Frank points out stage front.*

**FRANK** Out there.

**NORA** Out?

*Frank nods.*

**NORA** Out? Are you crazy? Are you still playing?

**FRANK** I wasn't playing – and it's not a game.

**NORA** They're out. As in out of the painting?

**FRANK** *(Claps)* Got it at last.

**NORA** Holy cow – since when?

**FRANK** I dunno, I caught 'em sneaking back in, couple weeks ago.

**NORA** Couple weeks? I was meaning tonight. Out since what time tonight? *(Pause)* Just how long has this been going on?

*She advances to front stage. She examines the glass / the fourth wall.*

**FRANK** Every night now, for a while. They let it go quiet, wait till noise dies away. Then they go on out. And I worry, till they come back, the next day…

**NORA** How do they do it?

**FRANK** Guess we just missed 'em. They're out on the town. *(Pause)* That's why I do it. Why I do my thing. I do what I do…

**NORA** But there's no way past…

**FRANK** …Helps me get through, then it isn't so bad. I don't worry so… You've got not-listening down to a fine art, ain't you?

**NORA** What's that you say? No. What's it *they* say?

**FRANK** Who?

**NORA** Tom and Jerry. You know – Chuck and the big guy, when they come back. What do they say about beyond the glass?

**FRANK** I haven't asked them.

**NORA** Oh Lord, give me strength.

**FRANK** I worry, OK? If you'd listened, you'd know. I worry. I don't say nothing to them about coming back but I ...

**NORA** Worry, yeah, you said…

**FRANK** I mean what if one day they don't? They just don't come back? What happens then? This is their life, with you and me.

**NORA** Who gives a…

**FRANK** I do! *(Pause)* But yeah, you're right, it's not just their life – it's ours. No, it's more than that. Do you ever listen to the people as they go past?

**NORA** I used to. First forty years or so, sure.

**FRANK** You know, we're a draw.

**NORA** Yeah, they all come in and talk film noir.

**FRANK** They all wonder what we're saying.

**NORA** If only they knew.

**FRANK** About dark and shadow. Our city in here. They talk about you and about me. You know why that is? 'Cos of how we sit. We get to 'em cos of how we sit.

**NORA** So what? So what if we do?

**FRANK** It's the way that we're posed. All of us – *all of us*. It gets 'em to think. But without the other two, where would we be?

**NORA** Oh, Frank, do I look like I care?

**FRANK** But – it's what we do…

**NORA** We does what we does? Is that enough for you? I don't care about poses, or about sitting just so. It's not good enough Frank. Maybe it is for you, but not for me. I want more. Tell me more about Chuck, and the big guy. Tell me something they've seen. I want to know. I want something real.

*Pause*.

**FRANK** There is a window.

**NORA** Yeah?

**FRANK** They told me, from this window…

**NORA** ...Yes? What could they see?

**FRANK** The city.

**NORA** And this lights their fire?

**FRANK** It isn't in oil, this isn't made up. *(Pause)* You should see their faces when they come back. They tell me stories about scrapers that light up the sky, about cars like a blur…

**NORA** I want to see.

**FRANK** And people, real people, passing on by, just beyond the glass. You know what they say, those two? You know what's the best of it all? You're gonna like this. They say, those people, the ones who come to look at us – they're not asking questions at all.

**NORA** So what are they doing?

**FRANK** They're just living their lives, walking on by.

**NORA** D'you know the way out?

**FRANK** See, best of all – this is what they tell me – *they* don't have to stay posed. They can just sit and look. No-one-is-watching-them.

**NORA** Frank, listen to me, that's what I want. I want to do that. Tell me the way out.

**FRANK** I… I'm not sure, I don't try. I worry…

**NORA** Yeah, I know, OK, but what do they do?

**FRANK** I've said too much.

**NORA** Oh come on, let's try. They go through the glass?

**FRANK** I don't know…

**NORA** Come on Frank, don't hold me back.

*Nora walks to the front. She rebounds off the glass.*

**NORA** Holy…

**FRANK** You all right?

**NORA** It's nothing. Come on, let's try it again.

**FRANK** Are you sure? I mean…

**NORA** Is it something they say? Some way they walk?
**FRANK** I don't know, when they go, I just can't watch.
**NORA** Here, let's do it again, lets try it this way.
Side by side, in step, are you ready? 1-2-3-4…

*They reach the front. Frank passes through the glass, but again Nora bounces off. They can no longer hear each other through the glass.*

**NORA** Frank – where are you? Where did you go?
**FRANK** Nora…
**NORA** Sweet Lord no! *(She bangs on the glass.)*
**FRANK** Nora can you hear? I want to come back in…
**NORA** Frank – Frank, can you hear me?
**FRANK** How did I do it?

*Nora gesticulates.*

**NORA** Ah go on, get lost. Just get away from me.
**FRANK** Nora, don't go away, please let me come on back.
**NORA** Frank, you're still there? Go, find the others, find the window. Do something will you?
**FRANK** I'll go find the others, find the window. Don't worry now – I'll be back.

*Exit Frank.*

**Nora** You got a gift Frank. Somebody's wish. Best thing to do now? Don't ever come back.

*Nora resumes her pose at the counter.*

*BLACKOUT*

# The Day I Wore A Dress

*Maisha Hossain*

I WORE a dress today.

The kind with a low V-neckline, the kind that ends just above the knees. The kind I have seen the girls here wear all through summer, sunbathing in parks, flaunting in the streets. The kind I had always pictured myself in, sitting on the green grass with little red flowers under a beech tree. The simple cotton, white-with-red-florals kind.

I hated it.

It brought out my wobbly knees, blackened with bruises. It tightened around my flabby belly and invited too much attention to my cleavage. I tried my red heels first, then my expensive leather boots, then the kind of flat summer shoes I see the girls here wear. They always look perfect. Why didn't I?

I hid myself in a coat, and headed out with my face down.

A blast of cold wind and drizzle greeted me. Just as I had been dreading. I finally gather the courage to wear a summer dress, and it's the one day there's no sunshine. Everyone has been wearing summer dresses for the past two weeks, except me. No-one is wearing one today. Except me.

They knew to predict unpredictable weather.

They knew I was new. There were hardly any other women of colour in this neighbourhood. I hid my otherness by wrapping the coat more

tightly around me, put in a song of loneliness on my phone and trudged on.

A man walking his dog was coming from the opposite direction. A young bloke, probably in his twenties, like me. I quickly pulled down the hems of my dress, vainly attempted to hide my knees. I pulled at the neckline, till it reached a level of modesty.

He was closer now. I looked down. I shuffled. He was next to me.

He smiled.

He nodded, and moved to make way for me. Then he walked on. Wow.

Relief swept over me. I smiled to myself and ambled on, my stiff arms loosening, my dress flapping near my knees. My pace quickened. I changed the song to a happier one. It was going to be all right.

I saw another woman approaching. She was in a dress herself – silk and purple, prim and expensive, paired with net stockings and heels and hoop earrings. She was what I had always wanted to be. I slowed down again, the insecurity resurfacing.

She was next to me.

She looked at me. Her symmetrical face broke into a bright smile. Really?

It happened with every person I passed. The ladies, the gentlemen, the kids. Formal, casual, walking past me, walking with me – every time I neared someone, I slowed down, and every time they passed me, they appreciated. An old woman gave me a thumbs up.

Another young boy raised his eyebrows. Not in the way we're used to – in the way you do when you see something pretty. An elderly man opened a door for me and said: 'After you, love.'

I treated myself to a hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows. After, it was raining harder, but I braved it. I walked to the nearest park, took off my coat, lay down on the moist grass and let the rain fall on my face, my floral dress, my bare legs. It rained freedom. I didn't leave the

park till it stopped. My hair was wet and messy, and my dress drenched. I wondered if they would stare now.

I slowed down when I saw someone like me. She was a woman of colour, dressed in colours. She wore a maroon headscarf and thick-lined eyes. She might think I had crossed a line. Betrayed my kind. Should I wear the coat again?

She was already near me.

She smiled. I raised my hand towards my face, and offered her my salaam. She returned it, and smiled again.

Two boys in tattoos and piercings were saying something. I took off my headphones. 'Hey, girl.'

'Uh, hi?'

'How you doin'?' 'Good?'

'Yeah? You are looking good!' They both raised the bottles in their hands. I raised my imaginary one to mimic a Cheers. They laughed, and left.

I kept colliding into happiness all day. I ran into smiles, stumbled onto nods, bumped into appreciations. I walked faster, even took a small turn on my toes in the middle of the footpath, the way a little girl dances over a dress. My dress made a whirlpool of red and white. I twirled with my frills. I swirled in happiness. I ran across the street through the yellow light on to the other side, and shouted, 'Sorry!'

I was not sorry at all.

I was sprinting, prancing, dancing.

I was the Emperor who wore it right.

Think about this. You are speeding ahead on the highway, stopping to see that small raised hurdle on the road, slowing down, tumbling over, and then reminding yourself to keep your speed in check? That's what I was used to. That's what always happened. Except this time, I was moving faster every I time I tried to slow down. They were not speed breakers in my way. They were not obstacles. They were urging me to

move, giving me a little push every time I thought I should stop. They were speed makers.

I spent my whole life slowing down for bumps on the way, and apologizing for the delay. Today, I wore a dress.

Thank you, foreign land, for all the pushes.

# Fragment (A Kletic)

*Eva Isherwood-Wallace*

here in this time trees run ginger
out of earth to soak us in a gold bowl
to show us over-red berries I am a thing
too much and you are always north of me

I dreamt all light was blue I stood
at my window naked as the marble statues
who lost their clothes somewhere
in another century I watched a stag

move through the ferns and dip
his head out of seeing I watched him
where I cannot see and wake and
think of an elsewhere unlike this

# א

(after the Royal Ballet's *Yugen*
after Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*)

rise stringed instruments
and I will wake morning
as it reaches through the rigging
in a spar of light
everything sized between
the lamb and the sky

our bodies are spilling
cup and wine
see what good we have made
as us as one as a
our body is an aleph
lifted on a wave

have we ever been still
or known stillness
float and listen
now listen I am quiet
play: here comes the king
in his red silk pyjamas

# Les Sylphides

*Eva Isherwood-Wallace*

In gauze like sea bleaching snow, dancers step
out of death
towards acrylic-stiff Siberia.
Unspun by
gravity, calligraphic spectra where
white finds blue
in winter. More resemblance than themselves,
they dance like
ice envies glass and dark will send them out
with her broom.

# Katedrála

## *František Kupka (1912-13)*

*Eva Isherwood-Wallace*

in these magnolia weeks
rain falls so thick it draws
lines of shadow down the cathedral
before a flash from someone
opening a distant window
—a thousand blades tilt
to pavement as the rain
changes pedals and starts
to play *una corda*
on the fishskin
tarmac where
the black road
is blue

# Stan

*Jo-Anne Foster*

KYLE AND I are having a couple of beers out the back of my place, in the shade. He asks me how my new job's going. I start to tell him about my first day. This is what I say.

'Well there's this orderly, Stan, he's a bit like the godfather of all orderlies. He's been there so long, about 20 years. He's the one that shows you round, teaches the newbies. He's a big dope smoker, sells it too. Well, on my first day, he asks me, what's the worst thing I could see working here? I didn't have to think about it, I tell him a dead child. When I say that he sort of cocks his head and asks me if I smoke. I ask him if he means dope. He says yeah, we'll have one on our tea break.

'So we go to his house. It's about five minutes from the hospital, one of those old terrace houses, cats everywhere and the place reeks of hooch. He has this huge ginger cat, more like a dog, and he whacks it.'

Kyle gives me a puzzled look.

'Yeah he whacks it, just like you would a dog, real hard pats, on its side and back, the cat loves it, comes back for more. Then he rolls this fat joint, we smoke it, have a glass of coke and go back to the hospital. I'm sure he gets away with murder cause he's been there so long. No one bothers him, and he pretty much does what he likes. The next couple of hours suck. We have to load all these dirty sheets, and man do they stink.'

'What, were they covered in shit?' Kyle says.

'Yeah some of them. Anyway they really pong, and we have to fill up these big trolleys and push them down to the laundry. We do that about four times, and then in the afternoon we're called down to A&E. There's been a big car crash, about four people dead, that's what the nurses are saying. We just sit and wait to be told who to push to theatre, and who to push to the morgue. It's creepy, just waiting. We take two to the theatre and then they call us back and we have to take this dead girl down to the morgue. It just didn't seem right, you know.

We're taking adults to the theatre to be saved, an old geezer and a woman, and then we're taking the youngest to the morgue. A girl, her life hasn't even started.'

Stan shows me how to place the sheet over the girl. 'You need to do it a special way,' he says. 'There are these concealment trolleys that have lids on them, so it looks like an ordinary trolley with no one on it. Then the body is placed underneath in a long box, and you hang sheets over the sides so you can't see the box.'

'No way', Kyle says as he lights a cigarette.

'Yeah, so when you walk through the hospital it looks like an empty trolley. There are these freight lifts that the public don't use, so there's not much chance anyone's gonna see a dead body. She was pale, Kyle, real pale, like she'd never seen the sun. She didn't look dead, not that I've seen a dead person before, but she sort of looked asleep. Her hair was in plaits with purple ties, and she was kinda smiling.'

'Was there blood or anything?' Kyle asks.

'Nah, Stan said it was all internal injuries, her outside was perfect. So we take her down in the freight lift. The corridor on the way to the morgue is so bloody long and they have those timer lights, so if you don't walk fast enough you're pushing the dead in the dark.'

'Ahh man, I couldn't do it,' Kyle says.

'Yeah, I thought that myself. What the fuck am I doing here? I'm pushing a dead girl.

Didn't seem right. Anyway, we get to the morgue and you know Grafton Road.'

'Yeah,' Kyle says, getting up to grab another two tinnies from the fridge.

'The corridor to the morgue runs right under the road, the cars are driving over the top of you and the morgue's on the other side. We get to the morgue doors and Stan says, watch out for the old dude. I ask why and he says, just watch out for him. Try not to let on you're new. We go in, and there's this voice. "Oh, Stanley, darling, what have you brought me today?" And out from behind a plastic curtain comes this guy. He's got a scruffy beard and black-rimmed glasses. His hair's all matted together and it's got bits of grey and red in it. He looks mad. Well, he looks straight at me and my uniform and I could tell he knew I was new. It was written all over me.

'"Oh you've got a newbie Stanley, now what can we show him today?" he says, walking closer to us. Stan says, lay off Billy, you can't show us nothing. And the old guy says, Well not you, you old queen, you've seen so many stiffs in your time, there's nothing I can scare *you* with. He lifts the sheet off the girl and asks if she's from the crash. Yeah, Stan says. Then I tell him, two adults lived and we've taken them to theatre. I knew straight away I should never have said it. The old guy looks at me, curls his lips and gives me this real weird grin.

Shit Kyle, I wish I'd never spoken. This guy's scary.

'He moves closer to me and says, is that right? Still grinning at me. Then he kicks off. Well there's nothing that resembles God in this building, isn't that right Stan, and he goes into this long speech. He says, there's no mercy for the young ones, it's a numbers game. A lot of people think his job is the worst in the world. He says it's not and he reckons he shows these dead folk a bit of respect. He says probably more kindness than what they got when they were alive.

'I start to feel hot, all clammy, you know, even though it's cold down there. I look at Stan who is standing behind me, next to the dead girl.

The old guy goes on about once they come through the double doors it's his responsibility to do the best handiwork he can. He cleans them up, a stitch here, and a tuck there if they're damaged, a bit of cosmetic surgery. Probably something they couldn't afford if they were alive, he says, and then he laughs. A short laugh, like a dog barking.

'I start swaying and it feels like the building is gonna crash in. I can picture the street above me. The old guy keeps going on about respect and how the longer you work here the more you'll know. We're just about to leave when he opens up one of the steel boxes in the wall and slides a tray out. He pulls the plastic back and shows us a mauled face. Man, it looked like this guy had been eaten by a dog. What a prick! Straight away, I throw up, and some of it gets on the dead girl. I start wiping it off her with the sheet. The old guy comes over, slaps me on the back and says, Hey sonny, you'll get used to it. Now get out of here, before you vomit on anyone else.

'I kept saying, I'll clean it up, I've got to clean it up. Stan pushes me away. And then the old guy says, Yeah not nice to vomit on a dead girl is it Stanley? Stan tells him to shut up and shoves me out the door. I wipe my mouth and walk down the corridor as fast as I can, not looking back.

'All I can think about is the girl. I was still feeling bad at knock-off. Stan told me not to worry about it, he says, the old guy loves to scare the shit out of newbies. When I walked home I just kept thinking about her. It felt like I'd dissed her, and there was no way to say sorry.'

'Shit man,' Kyle says. 'Are you gonna keep working there?'

'What?'

'At the job, I mean if that was your first day.'

'Yeah true. I did think that, but there's no work around. It's cushy compared to labouring.'

'Yeah, but is it worth it? The pay's not that good, is it?'

'It's above minimum.'

'I dunno. It wouldn't be for me,' Kyle says.

'Sandy would kill me if I left. She's real happy I'm working.'

'Did you tell her what happened?'

'Nahh, shit no. She wants to have kids. Don't think it's the right thing to tell her.' Kyle shakes his head and lights another cigarette. 'Where is she?'

'At the swimming pool. She's doing that aqua-aerobics. Wants to lose weight.'

'Yeah, women and their weight, it's never bloody ending,' Kyle says picking up his cigarettes. 'I'd best be off, gotta help Matt with his Corolla.'

'Sure thing, thanks for the beers.'

'No worries, hang in there,' he says, and he walks around the side of the house.

I feel sort of pleased I've told Kyle the story, but I'm not telling anyone else. One person's enough. I look across at the chair Kyle sat in. Hang in there, he said. Maybe that's all we're doing. I feel drained, and it's not even midday.

The neighbour's cat jumps over the fence down the back and sits under the jacaranda. I see how it spots a sparrow pecking at the bread Sandy threw out this morning, how it slowly tracks toward the bird. I stand up, clap my hands, and the bird flies off. I look down and see one of Sandy's hair ties on the ground. It's purple. I bend, pick it up, put it on the table, and then I go inside.

# In the walls are doors, on the walls are paintings

*Francis Hesketh*

The fence lifts out in the middle,
making a door. The front door
has an Art Deco rainbow of stained glass
and on the walls beside are my mother's paintings.

The door in the kitchen wall out to the lean-to
leads to the back door. On the walls are oriental-patterned plates.

The door in the lean-to wall is chewed to bits,
and the doors upstairs are clean as a whistle.

My mother's cosmic rainbow paintings
are on the walls so much that they are the walls.

# So!

## *after Beowulf*

*Frances Hesketh*

Hanagan flashed a red card
when he was supposedly angry.
He went outside, barely out of sight,
and smoked in the school ground sky.

Alex crept into the scene like a blur
in front of a cinema screen. Once,
he went and he never went back –
Hanagan, a lump in a creamed soup.

# How many poets does it take to change a light bulb?

*Frances Hesketh*

One waited all week for the rest to come home. The others
just twaddled in the dark.
A highwayman came in and fixed the bulb, then said: ‘Stand and
deliver!’ and stole all their stuff.

# A Fair Grief

*Hannah King*

I HAVE ALWAYS been intrigued by grief. Not necessarily the kind that follows the death of a loved one. Any kind of grief. The sinking in your stomach as you read a letter from your husband to his lover – that's a kind of grief. The lump in your throat as you watch from across the street as another woman, seven months pregnant, bundles herself into his car – that that counts too. Grief is different for everyone. It's the second most subjective thing in the world.

From the moment I told Ezra to leave our home, we had shared very little. Four texts, a glance in a solicitor's office, the pen that we both used to sign our divorce papers. Now we shared grief. We took equal parts and held ourselves up as best we could, unaccustomed to the weight.

'How have you been, Alena?'

His first words to me in six months and eighteen days. I squint at him, bringing my hand up to my face to block the sun. He sits next to me on the grass, stretches his legs out to reach into his back pocket. I barely have time to recall the length of him before he produces a hipflask.

'I know you don't like whiskey, but in the circumstances I thought…' he offers.

He trails off he lowers the flask. I am determined not to absorb his badly trimmed whiskers, or the new wrinkle between his eyebrows. But I can't help it. He looks older. Still handsome though.

'How have you both been?' he repeats.

'Okay. Coping. Lyra has been great. She has really grown up in the past few weeks. I know you spoke to her at the funeral. I'm glad. I'm sorry, I couldn't. But I'm really, *very* okay.'

It's the first time I've ever found it easy to lie.

'That's good,' he says.

He sips from his flask and throws it to the side. It hits a rock and falls onto the grass with a soft thud. Just ahead of us, where the grass gives way to asphalt, a young mother is teaching her son to ride his bicycle. She peeps quickly at the hip flask, then steers her child away from us.

'It seems like no time at all since that was me and Reuben,' I murmur. 'Like no time at all, and forever ago at the same time. Does that make sense?'

I am very conscious of the sound of my own voice. Lyra would say I am *waffling*. 'Perfect sense,' says Ezra. I can feel his eyes on me, but mine stay on the young family in front, now almost at the opposite side of the park.

There is a long pause.

'Why did you want to meet? And why here?' I say at last.

We both look around, as if we haven't been in this park before. In different circumstances I might remark upon the leaves of the trees behind us changing colour, or the reassuring crunch underfoot. Or any of the other things that happen every year, without either fail or consequence, that I have always claimed to love. But instead, I am struck with how unremarkable the seasons really are.

It is cold, even for the early evening, and my jacket is thin and old. The wind jostles my hair, and my thoughts. Suddenly I wish I'd remembered to wear a scarf. I find myself justifiably angry at Ezra for being so inconsiderate, choosing to meet here.

‘Shall we grab a coffee?’ he suggests. He nods at the small, dirty-looking café across the street behind us. It’s not much bigger than a doorway.

Without answering, I stand and begin to make my way across the grass to the road. I glance back once to check on the bike-riding child’s progress, and almost manage a smile at his feeble attempts to balance alone. His mother is patient with him, encouraging and praising at all the right moments. I wonder if she has read a guide.

There are no cars on the road: we have scheduled our meeting just before the evening rush.

Ezra keeps up with my hurried pace, as though afraid he might lose me on the thirty-second journey to the café.

Once inside, I take a seat at the cleaner of the two tables and fold my hands in my lap while Ezra orders. The man behind the counter wears a waistcoat that stretches too much around the middle. He is silent, and he narrows his eyes at Ezra. You’d think Ezra was cracking some kind of crude joke.

Ezra sits down, places my mug in front of me. He glances about for a moment. When he catches my eye, half his lip curls upward. He looks like a teenager again.

I remember him at eighteen, standing in our kitchen before our first date. My father was only a year dead, and Mother and I barely knew enough about farm work to stop ourselves going hungry. Ezra was the youngest son of my mother’s oldest friend, and though Mother had met him only twice, both times briefly, in the weeks leading up to our blind date she must have gushed at least five times a day about how wonderful he was. How clean his fingernails were. Oh, I would adore him. I hadn’t seen her so happy for more than a year, so agreed to the date. I didn’t want her to stop smiling.

‘I have a great feeling!’ she prattled while she tied my hair up in a complicated knot. ‘Oh God it’s nearly five, he’ll be here in a minute!’

He was exactly six minutes late, but Mother was right about everything else.

'Alena, you look beautiful,' he told me. 'As do you, Mrs. Marks.'

He had this way of making everyone he met feel important.

'I'm sorry I'm late, but I tripped over those milk crates outside!' he continued, teasingly. 'Mrs Marks, I think you're trying to break my neck, so I can't take Alena out? It's just a film, I promise we'll be home by ten!'

Mother giggled. Colour rose from her breast all the way up to her cheeks. 'Oh, I'm so sorry about those crates,' she stuttered helplessly.

'We can't move them,' I added. 'We tried but they're too heavy.'

They were the first words I spoke to Ezra. I remember the diction of each syllable.

He went straight out the way he had come, and heaved the mountain of milk crates into the barn, one by one. He smiled all the while. He didn't have to be asked. When the crates were moved, he found a host of other things around the farm that needed doing, and until dark I sat on the back step and watched him rake hay, shovel manure; and after dark he came inside and opened some tightly-closed jars in our cupboards. And he made us both laugh too. We never did make it to the cinema that night.

After that he came often, and we married within a year. Reuben nine months after that. Lyra followed.

Fourteen years later, Ezra left us and became a father again.

Three months after that, we stood together again while a bald man with a long nose read a prayer as our son was lowered into the ground.

Some things you will forget. You will forget your PIN number, or your mother's birthday. You will forget to set an alarm for work and wake up too late to shower. You will forget to leave the bins out, or you will forget to pray until it is too late. But you will never forget how to ride a bike; and you you will never forget your first love. For me, it was Ezra. For Ezra it was our Reuben and Lyra.

For a while I had tried to forget Ezra, but now I know that will never be possible. He will always be the man who carried milk crates for us when they were too heavy. He will always be the man who taught my son to swim, and my daughter to write her name.

'I just thought that we should meet up to talk,' Ezra says, lip curling upwards in a pathetic attempt to look hopeful.

'I think that's a good idea too.'

I wonder if I should ask about his new family; but I neither know them nor want to. 'Have you cleared out Reuben's room?' Ezra asks.

'Not yet. I'll let you know when I do. I'm sure there are some things you can take back to your house.'

'I'm not living with Sian anymore,' 'You're not?'

'I'm at my mum's house, sleeping on the sofa.'

Ezra lets a little bit of extra air out of his mouth. It masquerades as a laugh.

'This is what you wanted to tell me?' I will my tone and expression to remain impassive. I am not sure how to feel, but I know I don't want to show him anything.

'I just wanted to see you. I miss you.'

I will Ezra to speak more, and he does, for a long time. He tells me that what he and Sian had was not Love but its evil twin sister, Lust. He knows that now. He has rehearsed this. I raise a hand and stop him. He is startled and stops mid-sentence. When I do not immediately speak, his eyes begin to dart for a distraction. He reminds me, in his panic, of a confused bird, trying to escape from a house. It smashes itself repeatedly against the closed window.

'Ezra,' I say evenly. 'I do not want to talk about the stupid things you've done. I only want to talk about good things. I want to talk about our son.'

And so for the next hour, Ezra and I talk about our Reuben. We talk about the first time he saw a dog, and was so scared he cried for days and never allowed any pets in the house after that. Not even a goldfish.

We talk about his first school play, and how his only line was 'It is!', and how he said, 'Is it?' instead. We talk about him, we laugh, we smile constantly. We wipe away each others' tears. Then Ezra's phone rings. He doesn't answer, but he does stand up.

'I'm sorry,' he says. He tucks his hip flask back into his pocket – he's been surreptitiously adding whiskey to his coffee all the while.

I say, 'This has been…'

I trail off. He knows how it has been.

He wraps a thick section of wool around his neck and tucks it neatly into the front of his duffel coat. Unlike me, Ezra has the sense to know today is scarf weather.

'Tell Lyra I love her. Maybe I'll see her next week?' He seems to struggle for a moment. 'I think we should meet up more. If you like. We can try...'

Milk crates float around my head. 'Maybe,' I say at last.

Another gust of wind takes Ezra's place as he leaves the café. It settles itself beside me. I look out of the window just in time to watch as the little boy from the park cycles along the street opposite by himself. His mother follows, cheering, as the little boy makes his first self-sufficient journey home.

I sit in the café another hour, my hands wrapped protectively around my now-empty mug.

Just as I'm about to leave, my phone bleeps. I find myself squinting to read the screen, and note how old I've become lately. It's Lyra, asking if I can bring some fresh fruit home for the Pavlova she's going to make for me tonight. I smile and forward the message to Ezra, adding, 'Lyra preparing me a dessert – who is this grown-up girl?'

The man behind the counter looks mournful as he shines the latte glasses. I throw him a grateful smile but he just blinks at me. I want to ask him why he is so sad. I want to ask him if his son has been taken away from him and, if not, why he thinks he has the right to be anything but gloriously happy.

I stare out of the window in the direction the little bike-rider took, and wish again I had a scarf. I dread the walk home. I wonder if regular meetings with Ezra will do me good. I suppose we are learning to ride our bikes again, peddling determinedly against the wind.

# Surplus Value

*Katharine May*

EVERYTHING WAS READY FOR DECISIVE CONFLICT WITH THE MOUNTAIN. It was decided that the first attempt would be made without oxygen.

The first task, which we really did not consider as part of the climbing but as one of the depot stages, was to climb the Ice Cliff. This is one of the most dangerous parts of the whole ascent of the mountain. To anyone standing below, the Ice Cliff looms as terrifying, so sheer with its walls of ice a thousand feet high, so threatening with its

yawning crevasses, that it looks a thing too terrible to ever propitiate. But it has to be done. It is the only way to the summit.

getting the downstairs bath-room adapted into a wet room for her mother these past seven days they valiantly attempt to continue the ascent

We had to cut about two thousand footsteps in the ice, and fix over three hundred feet of hand ropes, attached to wooden pegs driven into the ice, following a zig-zag course to avoid the danger of avalanches.

We had to take the risk of these avalanches which we knew might crush us any moment. Steps were cut two feet deep through the snow into the hard ice beneath.

mother and daughter shuffle between mother's house and her daughter's next door before nine

a.m. Rheumatoid Arthritis foreign power coloniser A resistance movement aims to expel the colonial forces from the region, re-focussing its attentions and activities. Increasing guerrilla attacks are countered by troop build ups and the building of security walls that aim to stem the outflow of refugees and prevent further attacks. The military hold the advantage over the resistance. Challenges to colonial rule are met with mass arbitrary imprisonment, mock trial, torture and forced disappearances. There continue to be re-ports that torture and forced confessions are practiced.

her mother's indigene body turns virulently against itself cripples her limbs under torture the daughter in exile

(let's lighten up a bit!)

i can wash out forty four pairs of knickers and hang them out on the line i can iron two dozen blouses before you can count from one to nine i can throw fat in the skillet, go out and do the shopping, be back before it melts in the pan i can rub and scrub this house until it shines, i can wash the car, feed my sister, brother and mother, powder my nose, all at the same time i can get all dressed up, go out and dance 'til three a.m. and then go to bed at four, jump up at five, and start all over again if you come to me sick you know i'll make you well if you come to me all hexed up you know I can break the spell if you come to me hungry you know I'll feed you till you're full i got a twenty pound note says there's nothing i can't do i can

make a dress out of a feed bag and i can make a woman or man out of you!)

not knowing if her mother will survive the ordeal thankfully so far by some miracle her mother keeps ongoing

So the advance again sounded. Any new way would be a more difficult way and would need more engineering and more step-cutting, even if safer from avalanches. We hacked our way up the ice wall, step by step, with all the skill of ice-climbers. We were clinging to the face of the sheer wall.

She feels afraid for what lies ahead imagine what her mother feels in her eighty-third year under this onslaught this ambush of not just physical pain but emotional as well this

R.A. flare-up criminal minimisation!

Step by step we plodded our way over the crevasses of the glacier, bridged by snow but hollow beneath our feet. We were roped and took all precautions. Reaching the actual foot of the cliff and starting the ascent, the tremendous work began. We slipped back at every pace almost as much as we climbed. The danger lay in one of those little slips developing into a slide of the whole snow surface. Once started, it would, with an overwhelming sweep and deafening roar, develop into an avalanche of hundreds of tons in weight. By our ice craft and careful step-cutting and zigzagging, but yet mainly by luck, we avoided this happening. By making superhuman efforts we gradually reached higher and

higher until we passed the Chimney and reached the foot of the Traverse.

David from Attendance Allowance rings I think your mother has under-stated her needs and Avril the Occupational Therapist's equipment arrives with perfect timing

Wearied and hampered in breathing, our body protests and our brain becomes dulled. Yet we needed utmost presence of mind and skill in mountain-craft to win through.

How hard the mountain fights! This trouble seemed more than chance or ill-luck. It was more like the fight of the very mountain herself.

Next day we climbed one thousand five hundred feet and built our highest bivouac at twenty-six thousand five hundred

feet, just below the North East shoulder. Up and up, higher and yet higher to twenty-eight thousand feet we went. Then heart and lungs found their limit. Slower and slower and slower we went only step by step now.

they reach safety at last! her mother successfully installed in her daughter's bedsit settles into the Chesterfield armchair covered in red velour she and her mother bought together from the red-haired woman husband murderer!

she helps her mother take off her pyjamas and helps her get dressed she puts on her socks and shoes where's the girl who broke the sixth form open high jump record? her mother energetic director of school plays, favourite English teacher who enthused students to read,

survivor of a violent marriage, lone parent who fed and clothed her daughters and her son matriarch

the daughter beseeches the stars for her mother to have just once an easy night

# Veterinary Science

*Stephanie Lyttle*

INITIALLY, DOCTOR Rendelson's vet clinic smelled of the chemicals they used at the municipal swimming pool. Underneath that was something intimate and musty, like the smell that started close to the scalp when you didn't wash your hair for a week. 'No matter how much you mop,' Doctor Rendelson said that first day, 'the smell never goes away. Sorry.'

It was still the best senior year internship any of us had got. The other girls were desperately jealous – Doctor Rendelson had Heathcliff eyebrows and a leanness around the cheeks and jaw that suggested nobody was feeding him right. I told him I didn't mind the smell. I was a working girl, in my borrowed pussybow blouse and shoes, both a size too big, and I was going to act like it.

The lights hanging from the ceiling of the clinic were mismatched. They were dinner-party pendant lights, not your standard hospital fluorescents. Doctor Rendelson showed me to the receptionist's desk, a shining hunk of dark wood topped with a small Tiffany-shaded lamp and an electric typewriter. He'd made the desk himself, it had been in his study before he opened the clinic. I could imagine him bent over it, his dark hair falling into his eyes as he wrote. In my mind's eye he was still in his white coat – an acute failure of my imagination. I ran my hand slowly along the edge of the desk.

He was looking at my hand, stretched along the wood. 'Can you type?' he asked.

'I got straight As in my typing classes,' I told him. The look on his face made me buzz with pleasure. 'I want to go to secretarial college next year.'

'Very sensible,' he said. His tone suggested that 'sensible' was the absolute best thing a girl could hope to be.

He led me down a corridor and allowed me to look briefly in on the kennels. One droopy bulldog snoozed in the closest cage, his cheek mashed up against a hysterical headline about the Zodiac Killer. In the furthest corner, a vivid green lizard lay under a heat lamp, blinking at long intervals. Opposite the kennels was the examination and operating room, with a plain slab of a table in the centre. Ranged around the walls were oxygen tanks, a box labelled SHARPS DISPOSAL, and glass bottles filled with coloured liquids. A stethoscope lay discarded across the table.

'We're not equipped to do very complicated surgeries,' Doctor Rendelson said. 'Castration and bitch spaying, stitching up wounds, put-to-sleeps and straightforward amputations. For anything else, give them the number of the animal hospital in Marlingsbridge.'

I swallowed. 'Straightforward amputations?'

Doctor Rendelson opened a wooden drawer, and lifted out a silver hacksaw.

'Straightforward,' he said, rueful. The saw had so many perfect teeth. I couldn't look at it.

My thoughts were showing on my face.

'Sorry, Darla,' he said, and stowed the saw. 'I'm hoping you won't see any blood while you're here, of course, but I can't guarantee –'

'It's fine,' I said, embarrassed. 'I'm fine, honest.'

We returned to the corridor. At the very end was a heavy wooden door with a round golden doorknob. Like much of the rest of the clinic, it looked as though it had been salvaged from elsewhere and forced into

service. Unlike the kennels and the examination room, there was no explanatory sign, but there was a brass push-bell mounted on the wall.

'There's an isolation chamber beyond here, for seriously ill or contagious animals,' Doctor Rendelson explained. There was an all-in-one scrub suit on a hook next to the door, as though someone had shed their skin and hung it up to dry. 'You mustn't open that door, Darla. No matter what. It's a matter of life or death, you understand? If you need me, you ring the bell and you wait.'

'Okay, Doctor,' I said, feeling like I should apologise for something I hadn't done.

He laughed. Technically, he said, a veterinarian isn't a doctor, so there was no need to call him that. I waited for him to tell me the alternative, but he offered nothing more.

* * *

I started the following Monday, in the second of my two borrowed blouses. The clinic was opposite a plasma bank and tucked in the mouth of an alley, so Doctor Rendelson gave me a key to ensure I was never stuck outside. I let myself in that morning and started paging through the appointment book. Doctor Rendelson came through the door fifteen minutes later, a lit cigarette in his mouth. He raised his hand to me before he went down the corridor.

'Wait!' I called, grabbing the glass ashtray off the reception desk. He looked at me balefully, half-awake, when I caught up with him by the examination room. 'The oxygen tanks,' I explained, slightly breathless. His face cleared.

'What did I do before I had you, Darla?' he murmured. I glowed. I'd had it drilled into me, as young girls do, that brilliant men were absent and dreamy – the more brilliant, the more helpless – and it was a woman's pleasure to gently correct them. And it *was* a pleasure, a

delicious one, to feel so useful. It was the beginning of the end for me. I was in love.

I was far from the only one. Doctor Rendelson performed examinations and operations at close to cost price, and this being such a deprived area, he had the status of a cult leader among his clients. On my third afternoon at the clinic, one of these followers, an elderly woman with a large, bouncy poodle, gave me a suspicious look.

'Doctor Rendelson is a good man,' she said, as if I had been saying otherwise. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'He certainly is.'

'He wouldn't even take a cent from me when my beautiful Teddy died on the table, you know. He understands,' she said. 'He's suffered, for such a young man,' she said.

There was a large photo hanging on the wall of the waiting area, amongst all the posters explaining the benefits of spaying and warnings about hot weather and unsuitable food.

Doctor Rendelson's son, slumped in his wheelchair, watched over everything in the clinic. I had so far avoided looking at the photo, but I felt his eyes burning into me then.

'Doctor Rendelson will call you soon,' I said, flicking through the appointment book for something to do.

It wasn't good news. The dog had something pervasive, a dark growth right in the tender skin of the armpit. The old lady came again a week later, leaning heavily on a cane, without the poodle.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I said. Raw pity made my throat into a fist, and the words almost wouldn't come.

'I just wanted to leave these for Doctor Rendelson,' she said, handing me a cheap box of chocolates. 'I know he did everything he could for Bella.'

I took the box and, trying to think of the right thing to say, I looked awkwardly away from her colourless face and down at her cane.

'I was in an accident,' she explained. Her unbrushed hair stood out from her head in a soft white halo. 'But I'll be just fine, soon enough.'

I offered her my arm to walk to the door but she said there was no need. 'I'm getting better as we speak. I'm one of the lucky ones, really,' she said.

* * *

The worst case I saw in my time at the clinic came in my second week, five minutes before we were due to close. A man burst in with his dog in his arms, wrapped in a towel. At first all I could see was her head and the towel, but when he got closer I saw that she was slit open at the stomach. The wound was a clean, continuous slice, almost from sternum to pelvis, and it was weeping steadily.

'Please!' the owner gasped, holding the dog out. 'Please! Doctor!'

He shifted her in his arms, and there was a fresh gasp of blood. It was so dark it looked black, under the weak pendant lights. I glimpsed the pale, alien tissue of her intestines, and everything in me seized at once. I ran up the corridor shouting, rang the bell at the contamination door, and Doctor Rendelson appeared within seconds, out of his scrub-suit and in his familiar white coat.

'Darla?'

Doctor Rendelson saw the wound, he rushed the dog into the examination room. The owner and I waited for what seemed like hours. The night was black with rain, heavy enough that the lamp on my desk flickered, and all I could think about was the void of that stomach opening up, dark and terrible. I called my mother from the clinic's phone to tell her I wouldn't be home, and the failing electricity made her voice crackle in and out, like I was calling from across the sea.

It was after ten when Doctor Rendelson came to the waiting area with a blanket in his hands. He draped it over my shoulders, and then left his broad hand there.

The owner stood up. 'She live?' he asked.

Doctor Rendelson's Heathcliff eyebrows drew together. 'I don't know,' he said quietly. 'She's sleeping. She's very weak.'

The owner was very understanding. I wasn't sure if it was because he knew the words, or if he could parse the tone. He took off his cap and twisted it in his hands. 'I go?' he asked.

'Come back tomorrow,' Doctor Rendelson said, with a brief accompanying mime. Under any other circumstance, it might have been funny.

We watched as the owner went out into the rain and was swallowed up by an alley on the other side of the street. The flickering of the pendant lights made it seem like Doctor Rendelson and I were standing in a host of candles.

* * *

Soon after, he moved the dog with the open stomach behind the contamination door. Sometimes in the evenings when the clinic was quiet, I could hear a soft sobbing. I went to that door several times, even reached my hand towards the doorknob, but thought of Doctor Rendelson crying over his scalpel, and the unfairness of it all. I never turned the knob.

As time went on, I discovered a third layer to the smell of the clinic. Swimming pool chemicals, unwashed hair, and then something rawer: cheap meaty dog food, oily fur, faeces, blood. I began cleaning in any spare moment I had. This is why the first time I met the Rendelson boy, I was on my knees.

His nurse wheeled him into the waiting area in his chair, and I stood up so fast I banged my leg on the desk. His hair was the colour of eggshells, parted severely down the middle and combed neatly against his skull. His arms and legs were thin as daisy stalks, and he was hooked up to a complicated assortment of tubes. He was beautiful.

'I'll just go get Doctor Rendelson,' I said, flustered. 'He's in the back.'

A high-pitched, tuneless moan followed me, and then, quieter, the sound of the nurse fussing and shushing. I rang the bell and waited five long minutes, but there was no answer.

I knocked on the door.

'Doctor Rendelson!' I called. 'Your son is here!'

We had no patients staying over the weekend so there was nothing stopping us both going home early. He must have made plans with his son and forgot. For the first time, his dreaminess annoyed me.

I tried the handle. I expected it to be locked, but it swung open easily. *No patients*, of course. No contamination to worry about.

'I'll just be a minute,' I called back over my shoulder, pleased with myself.

The room beyond was dim and cool. Larger than I expected, and inexplicably, it had the air of a church. Against the back wall were two vague white shapes – another few tentative steps in the weak light, and they resolved themselves into hospital beds. The people in them seemed to be asleep, under the watch of two softly beeping monitors.

I froze mid-step, afraid to breathe. The beeping continued in the same rhythm. When I crept closer to the first bed, I could see the man's pulse marked in a gentle black wave on the monitor. I wanted to turn back but knew I'd never get beyond this door again.

Behind the beds was a connecting door, lying ajar. Eager to get away from the eerie stillness of the hospital room, I went through. The next room was wood-panelled and beautiful, like the library in a fancy old estate. One wall was dominated by a huge glass case. Inside, ranged in a beautiful tableau, were several taxidermied animals. A winged Afghan hound leapt across a bank of grass, and a cat was stuffed into a tortoise's shell, the furry legs pulled through the holes and the head poking out as though it was wearing a strange sweater. In the back was the dog

whose stomach had been slit open. The stitches had been pulled out and replaced, so she appeared to be bleeding a length of bright silk instead.

I heard footsteps behind me. I knew what I was supposed to say – *I'm sorry, I didn't mean…*

'Who are those people in the hospital beds?' I said instead.

Doctor Rendelson stared past me, into the glass case of his creations.

'They are my patients,' he said.

Follow-up questions crowded my mouth – *Is it safe? Is it legal?*

'*How*?'

'The doctors told me my son wasn't *viable*. That it would be a waste of a heart,' Doctor Rendelson said. 'I have *never* wasted a single part of my animals. Not an organ, not a *hair* –'

My stomach lurched, as I thought of the saw in the drawer. Of how he didn't charge for cremations.

'Did you –'

'I did it myself,' he said. 'It turns out that an Afghan hound's heart is about the right size for a small boy.'

He came towards me. I had nowhere to go but up against the glass. The pane rattled in the frame.

'None of our clients have medical insurance,' he said. 'When I knew I could do it, wouldn't it have been immoral not to *keep* doing it?'

His breath was warm against my face. From the corner of my eye I could still see the animals. The winged hound was the only one that didn't look out through the glass. Instead, her bright, artificial eyes gazed upwards, towards an invisible sky.

# Terminal Six

*Milena Williamson*

After exiting JFK, I hold my hand
out the cab window
and reach for the dark buildings.
From the mirror, dice
hang. The cabbie turns to my brother:
*you look like a terrorist*.

I think, *you look like a terrorist*
*too.* The cabbie drives with one hand.
Turning to my brother,
I catch his face in the window,
spilling like dice.
I reach for him in the dark as buildings

rear back. As kids, we reached for building
blocks and did not look like terrorists
when we knocked the towers down. A roll of the dice—
our small hands
might shake then the roofs and windows
would crumple. On lucky days, my brother

finished a tower, tall as he was. My brother
tears down and rebuilds
singing, “And their shoes were like windows,
and their shoes were like bone.” We terrorized
our cities, hand-
built from red blocks like diced

cubes of meat, but nobody died.
Nobody lived there but my brother
and me. It only looked a little like Manhattan.
Tonight, my brother faces the buildings.
The cabbie turns onto the highway, terrified
of the rain on the windows

and the rain on the roof as I wind
my watch back like a bomb. The dice
clack against each other like terrorists
tapping out codes. Looking out, my brother
uses his fingers to measure buildings.
The cabbie swings one arm, the hand

of a speeding clock. The buildings on our street reach for my hand.
The cabbie turns in the terrible dark then turns on my brother.
My brother’s eyes are dice in the reflection in the window.

# When We Meet

*Milena Williamson*

I am doing a handstand. Pressing green
palms to earth, I lunge with my head bent down
then fling my legs. You take off your glasses,
laying them down next to mine in the grass.

You stretch your shoulders then ask if my name
is spelled like Kafka's lover's. *Yes, it is*.
My mother studied Kafka while pregnant:
talking to the typewriter & my heartbeat
sliding the carriage as she finishes
a line, searching for syllables to shape

a daughter. We balance at the tipping
point where our names might revert to verbs.
If we can hold still for just a little
longer, the letters will descend like birds.

# Tee-ball in the Land of the Dead

*Milena Williamson*

I run out the back door
and into the field behind our house.

Dad and I toss the ball back and forth,
warming up.

It swivels like the shadow
on a sundial.

Our neighbor Allen passes
and asks to read our palms.

Dad smiles—ball in one hand,
glove on the other.

I'm wearing my sister's mitt.
Even here it says, *you steal this, you die*.

I survey the bases:
lilies, pie tin, toothbrush, photo of dad.

I grip the bat as he leans over the mound,
his bent license plate.

Dad shakes his head at the catcher
who signals fast ball maybe

curve, slider, change-up.
The ghost runners tense

as he spits, winds up, walks toward me,
and places the ball on the tee.

I swing, hitting the ball
over the river

and into the crowd
where people wake.

# The Museum

*Milena Williamson*

*I overslept until the evening*,
a trough for salt, a custard cup,
a sculpture of decay.

Reproductions of originals are available
upon request. Statues are captive or coupling
and the Beaker People are busy carving.

A crouched burial is hard to find
but grave goods are easy. A sign says
*From Past to Present is Out of Order*.

A girl asks her parents
if the skeleton in the corner alone
is rock or paper or bone.

# When Everything Blooms in the Stumpery

*Milena Williamson*

We go to the castle without going to the castle.
There will be no kissing during summer
though the daylight plays tag with itself,
particles and waves racing to the Lee's arms.
The river is the crook who hoodwinked the land
and tricked the city into forming around it. Cork,
Irish marsh of watch-your-step bridges
and ogham, an alphabet of lines.
We escape the city for the castle grounds—
ferns, waterfalls, watchtowers, lilies.
Everyone is majestic atop a stump.
When everything blooms, we stand
and stretch and sing for the trees.

# Nursery

*i.m. Anthony Rampton, 1915 – 1993*
*and for my brother, 1992 –*

*Milena Williamson*

The man plays pat-a-cake with the baby.
He lifts the envelopes of his hands
and the baby opens his mouth to laugh.
The stroke is a gutter broken in his mind.
Somewhere between them is a well of words.
The man turns the handle
and the baby climbs into the pail.

# Postcard Stories

*Shahminee Selvakannu*

## Parent-teacher Meeting

'Your child has problems,' the teacher began. The mother listened, neither ready to defend nor attack. 'He's too playful. Loves to ask too many unnecessary questions. Answers questions intended for his friends, correctly,' the teacher continued.

Mother waited for a good comment or praise, but it never came. She went home that day, held her child by his shoulders, her stern eyes fixed on him. 'Don't be playful. Stop asking questions. And no more helping friends.'

Fifty years later, her child found himself standing on the flat roof of a twenty storey building, looking up at the sky, feet on the edge.

## First light

They walked past each other every morning. She loved his clay coloured hat, she thought that it made his jaw stronger and his nose sharper. He never looked her way, so she decided to catch his eye. She splashed her dress with expensive perfume the next morning. No reaction. The following day, an extra layer of blood-red matte lipstick. Still no reaction. The day after, a micro-mini skirt… absolute zilch! She found herself becoming more and more frustrated., so one morning she walked right up close to him. Such beautiful eyes, she thought.

'Good morning,' she began, accompanied with a smile. 'Good morning,' came the reply.

It wasn't a male voice that she heard.

## Dinner table

She found herself between two different worlds at the dinner table that evening: her husband with his usual updates about his job and what he had read on the online news website; her six-year-old boy with his ramblings about his friend's slime experiments and shaky tooth.

She felt pulled into one competing conversation and then the other. Lost, her grip loosened on a fried chicken drumstick and she watched helplessly as it fell onto the floor. Her family stopped their chattering, looked her way; then continued on.

The following day, she was smiling and nodding lovingly to her family at the dinner table. No food fell onto the floor. And that night, when everyone was asleep in their warm beds, she quietly cleaned her earplugs and placed them in her dressing drawer, still smiling.

## Light

You came to my house in a tiny box, and you hooked me instantly. Mother said that we couldn't keep you. 'Too pricey,' was her reason. But I refused to eat or speak for a whole day, trying to make her change her mind and let you stay. She gave in, and I named you Siddhartha, Siddy for short. You were very naughty but smart. You learned how to shake hands, how to fetch a ball, how to keep vigil at night.

One afternoon, after your normal roam around the neighbourhood by yourself, you didn't come home. We thought you had found light and decided to leave, just like how your namesake Buddha did; but mother saw you by the roadside with the other dogs after a few days. She said you looked all tired and scruffy, but happy.

When you finally found your way back, you couldn't sit or lie down. There was an infected wound on your behind. Mother took you to the

vet, hoping you could be healed – but when she returned that night, she was alone.

Perhaps, we were right. You did find your light, just like Buddha.

## Love

Husband loved Wife very much. He always remembered to say, 'I love you,' every morning, right before Wife opened her eyes from sleep.

Each day, Wife responded only with a faint smile, as she waited to be released from Husband's tight squeeze so she could begin her daily chores – preparing freshly-cooked meals, ironing his work clothes, keeping the house clean and tidy.

As time past, exhaustion veiled Wife's love.

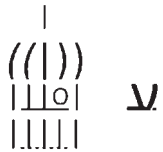
In their sixties, Husband was diagnosed with cancer. He still loved Wife dearly and made sure she heard him say those same three words every morning.

The night before he drew his last breath, all skinny and frail, for the first time in their thirty years of marriage, Wife whispered into Husband's ear. She said: 'You will always love me.'

# Nine poems

*Andrew Soye*

## Budgie



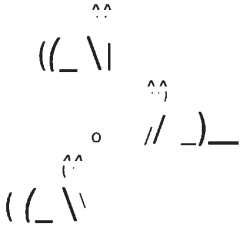
While they clean
his cage he
must fly the
room. Freedom

is being
behind bars.

His joys are
parallel
perches, bells,
ladders, swings.

He wants back
in to ask/tell
you, Mirror, who's
a pretty boy.

## Kittens



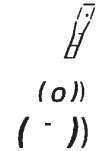
A kindle
of kittens
coiled in
a basket

on a tiled
kitchen floor.

A small child
dangles a
ball of string.

A pair of
eyes opens
– another
–another
– instinct springs.

## Guitar



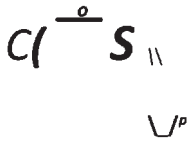
My twelve-string guitar
sits in one corner
of the room; a squat
Buddha keeping stuum.

He knows seven truths
(three universal,
four noble) and one
golden path, could tell

you that unsatis-
factoriness and
suffering are both
universally
experienced, that
once he sang the blues.

When the living-room
door slams he says *Om*

## Tea



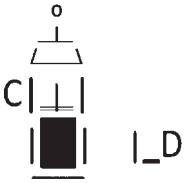
Place loose-leaf tea
in a silver
infuser (use
bags in case of
emergency).

Pre-heat the pot.

Pour gently boiled water
over
infuser. Wait
patiently. Dunk.

Serve in teacups
(preferably
fine china). Mugs
are for coffee.

## Coffee



am drinking coffee from
the thrown pottery
mug I bought in Clifden
in student days. It's rough

on the outside. The glaze
on the inside is cracked.
It is made of speckled-
brown yellow clay that was

milled by thick ice grinding
down fossiliferous
limestone deposited
millions of years ago.

It's full of black coffee.
My fist fits the handle.

## Glass

you can
see through

the glass
bottle
is half

empty
the glass
is full

emptied
the glass
will be

filled
bottle
trashed

## Running

The boy ran
everywhere

to the shops
for his mum

from A to
B when he

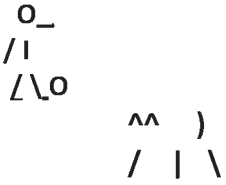
had to from
enemies.

He had friends
who ran too

they ran like
the wind like

me just for
fun. Fourteen!

## Soccer



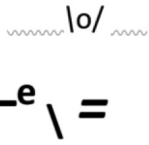
One boy
one ball
one dog
enough

for us
to play
all day
until

the pup
bit
the ball blew

time up
with its
whistle.

## Swimming



Stevie you
are waving
to me from
the far end
of the pool.

O
O
O
From below

you see me
splashing in
the shallows
pretending
to swim.

# A Melody in the Wind

*Roisin Turner*

AS THEY WALKED through the woods, Alainna thought of her dream. She was standing in a meadow surrounded by endless long grass peppered with bluebells, and the grass shuddered in the wind. Alainna tilted her head upwards, letting the breeze lift her hair around her. She glanced over her shoulder to find treetops sprinkling the distance, and the faint lilt of a birdsong floated to her, a song of farewell. Where she should have felt afraid, vulnerable in the open space, she found relief. And then her name was called. Alainna smiled at the voice. She turned to find a man with thin braids twisted among the mass of long brown hair that framed his high cheekbones, suggestive of a lingering smile. She reached out a hand, almost touching him.

'Alainna.'

She lifted her head, and pulled back to the woods. Her sister, Guennola, was watching her with a raised eyebrow. 'You have that look again,' she said quietly. Alainna glanced around, trying to steady her heartbeat before she spoke. A gentle breeze wove its way through the trees, and the leaves twisted amongst the branches like spectators trying to get a better look at the crowd beneath them. Long, wild grass and twigs pulled at her dress as she followed the large group through the sunlight splintered by the elm trees. Conversation mumbled through them, with bursts of laughter puncturing the hush that usually settled through the trees.

'What look?' Alainna asked, turning back to her sister. Guennola's blonde hair was pale against the backdrop of the woods, almost out of place despite the daisies that she had crowned her head with. She normally kept her long hair in a braid but, today, her hair cascaded down her back in yellow waves against the sea-blue of her dress. It struck Alainna how much like their mother she looked. Alainna had inherited their father's wavy brown hair, blue eyes streaked with green, and the rough hands of a blacksmith.

'That faraway look,' Guennola said. 'Where did you go?'

'Nowhere,' Alainna replied, tugging at the sleeve of her green dress. Her eyes drifted around the group. Women were dressed in their best clothes, some with flowers decorating their hair, while the men had gone so far as to brush their hair. Children chased each other and pointed at grey squirrels climbing trees. It seemed like the entire hamlet was walking through the woods. Alainna never thought that there would be a day when everyone would be as happy to leave the hamlet as she was.

'I don't think I had this many people celebrate with me when I got hand fasted,' Guennola said.

Alainna tried to smile back. 'I suppose not.'

'But this isn't just any hand fasting, is it?'

'No.'

Guennola watched quietly for a moment, her eyes scanning Alainna's face. Alainna pretended not to notice.

Soon after, Alainna noticed the people in front of them were beginning to slow down. She squinted and, over their heads, glimpsed the bare white branches in the distance. They were long and twisted like crooked fingers, beckoning her closer. By the time Alainna and Guennola reached the Sacred Tree, people had already gathered around its bark, keeping just enough space free around it free. Alainna was relieved that they wouldn't be near the front of the group, finding shelter in the shadow of the burly Tomás, standing in front of her.

'This isn't a great view,' Guennola muttered.

'It's fine,' Alainna said quickly. 'It could be worse.'

'Yeah, we could be all the way back there.' Guennola glanced behind them where more people were gathering, their voices quieting now that they stood beside the Sacred Tree.

Alainna looked at the people in front of the group, who would watch the handfasting with no-one to block their view. Or to hide behind. She was they wouldn't be standing there.

Guennola knew the girl standing beside them. Alainna let their jumbled voices fade into the background as she caught sight of the druid.

Grief tightened cold fingers around her heart as she remembered when the druid arrived in the hamlet. She had heard stories about druids since she was a child, and had always wanted to see one. When he wasn't hammering in the forge and polishing armour, her father told her of how druids could heal sickness with herbs, how they guarded ancient laws, and how they had gifts of prophesy. Alainna had dreamed of these shadowy figures, singing incantations in the forest, a melody of magic calling to the gods and goddesses. She had always wanted to learn more of what they did – but when the druid Uiscias arrived in the hamlet, Alainna dreaded the occasion he was sent for. The druid Uiscias was the shadow of a brighter time, yet watching him move towards the Sacred Tree, Alainna wanted to turn around and go home. To stay far away, till this was all over. But she remained where she stood. This was something she had to do.

She looked up as a wind blew melodiously through the trees, as if Danu herself spoke to Alainna in the rustling of the leaves. Whispers of comfort enveloped her, slowly soothed the trembling in her hands. Alainna was sure that, if she just closed her eyes and stood very still, the wind would embrace her and carry her away from here. Away from these people, and from this. But she kept her eyes open, and stayed planted to the ground like the trees around her.

Murmurs spread through the group, and heads turned to the left. Alainna followed their gaze, and her breath caught in her throat.

Chief Ó Sé was approaching the Sacred Tree, his large muscular shape unmistakable.

Black hair framed his sharp jawline and pointed nose, and his sun-kissed face wrinkled when he smiled at his people gathered near the tree. Dressed in a dark, heavy leather tunic, trousers and black boots, he looked the part of a ruler. Rings decorated his hands and his golden

necklace glinted in the sunlight. With him, speaking in a strange accent Alainna faintly heard over a distant birdsong, was Chief Ó Bradáin from Dún na nGall. His greying brown hair was combed back to reveal a still-handsome face, and green eyes that cast nervous glances around the group. He was dressed in a dark green tunic with matching trousers and an added gold chain, decorated with emerald stones that sparkled across his chest.

Behind them, Chief Ó Sé's youngest son, Barra, sulked. He hid his height with his shoulders slumped forward and his head bent downwards, letting his black hair fall over his face. His steps were heavy and slow, as if he wanted to be anywhere but here. Alainna watched him longer than she wanted to, knowing that if she looked behind him, her last remaining strength might falter.

But she couldn't watch Barra forever. Emerging from the trees, Chief Ó Sé's eldest son, Níall, approached with a woman's hand laid elegantly on his arm. He was dressed in a brown leather tunic, trousers and boots. A belt hung around his waist but, where there was usually a sword glinting along his leg, the belt was empty. His brown hair was partly tied back so that his handsome face could be seen. There wasn't much of his father in his features, but they shared the same pointed nose. Níall's thin mouth was pressed into a flat line, and he kept his free hand behind his back. As he looked around at the group, sunlight reflected the golden streaks in his brown eyes.

Alainna moved her eyes to the girl on his arm. Éiru, Chief Ó Bradáin's daughter, was as she had been described. Her head reached Níall's shoulder, and a green, thin dress fell around her, the hem sweeping across the ground like soft leaves. Her long golden hair was crowned with a wreath of white and green hydrangeas, pink peonies, and a scattering of berries. Her face was slim and pale, with pink lips and pale blue eyes that smiled up at him. If she was scared, or nervous, she kept it well hidden.

As the chiefs and their children approached, Alainna felt Guennola press up against her. Her sister stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck before letting out an agitated sigh. 'We can hardly see anything,' she moaned, grabbing Alainna's hand. 'Let's try to move up a bit.'

'No, we shouldn't –' Alainna stammered. But Guennola pulled her forward, excusing herself to the people they pushed past. But all eyes were on Níall and Chief Ó Bradáin's daughter. Guennola stopped just behind the first row of spectators, partly hidden by a group of giddy girls admiring Éiru. Alainna pulled her hand free.

Uiscias moved to stand in front of the Sacred Tree as the chiefs stood a little to his left. Barra stood alone, and looked through the group, his eyes resting on girls with pretty faces. Níall and Éiru stood opposite one another, the druid between them, and the whispers faded. A hush settled through the trees, as if an enchanter had waved a wand over them. Níall looked around at the villagers, and his eyes fell on Alainna. She twisted her fingers. It seemed he paled slightly, but he turned back to Éiru when the druid spoke.

'Thank-you everyone for coming,' Uiscias began, his voice bouncing off the trees. 'And our thanks to Bel for granting us light today, begging his pardon for no work being done.' He looked to Níall and Éiru. 'It is a sign that he blesses this handfasting, so we will proceed.'

Uiscias took a stick and drew a large circle in the soil beside where Níall and Éiru stood. 'Now,' he said, 'step into the circle.'

They did as instructed. Alainna swallowed down bile.

They faced each other again, and Uiscias bonded their right hands with a thin rope.

Alainna noticed how, for a brief moment before looking down at their hands, Níall looked over his bride's shoulder to his father.

'Now, you may make your promises,' Uiscias said. Standing between them, he looked expectantly at Níall.

Alainna chewed the inside of her lip. She saw how he clenched his jaw, how he rolled his shoulders, and she could tell was uncomfortable and hesitant. She wanted to run to him, to wrap her arms around him and never let himgo.

Níall cleared his throat. 'Éiru, here today I vow to love, protect, and respect you as my life's companion from this day and for therest.'

The words echoed in Alainna's mind, barely heard over the drumming of her heart.

Éiru smiled. Her voice carried in the wind like a soft sigh. 'Níall, here today I vow to love, protect, and respect you as my life's companion, from this day and for the rest.'

Uiscias raised his hands to the sky. 'We humbly ask that you, our gods and goddesses, bless this union for life. We ask that you, Áine of Knocktaine, bless Éiru and Níall with love and fertility. We ask that you, Danú, Mother of Nature, may gift your children with children of their own. We ask that you, Macha, grant this union with peace and life.'

A subtle breeze stirred through the trees and the leaves whispered. 'The gods and goddesses have heard your vows,' Uiscias said, 'and have granted their blessings.'

He gestured to two men and they stepped forward, each holding one end of a long stick, and bent down beside the circle, holding the stick low to the ground. Alainna caught the chiefs nodding at each other, pleased with their strategic matchmaking. Uiscias untied the rope, and Níall and Eirú jumped over the stick. Everyone cheered and broke into applause. The chiefs clapped and the druid smiled proudly at the new couple. Alainna's arms hung numbly at her side as Eirú beamed at Níall.

He smiled tightly down at her, before glancing towards the people, the villagers he would one day rule.

Then his eyes met Alainna's, and she saw his jaw twitch. It seemed a breath shuddered through him, and the noises all around faded to a dull thrum. She held his gaze. Memories of whispers by the river, silver in the moonlight, and their first kiss burned in her mind. The fingers of her past reached out and tugged at her, while everything around her blurred. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away and forced a tight smile across her face. She took a deep breath and forced herself to join in the clapping. Níall saw her, and he watched her for a moment. It was a final, silent goodbye, before he turned to Eirú.

Alainna let out a slow breath that mingled with the wind. Her acceptance was a quiet, whispering melody that was carried through the woods.

# [1]India is what you make of it

*Aswin Vijayan*

Very briefly, India is a triangle.
There are temples in profusion,
forts, abandoned cities, ruins,

battlefields and monuments,
enough beaches to satisfy
the most avid sun-worshipper.

A place that somehow
gets into your blood, an assault
you will never forget.

India is as vast as it is crowded,
as luxurious as it is squalid
as dull as it is lurid.

India is not easy, you will find
yourself yearning to fly away
yet later, hankering to return.

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[1] *The following poems are derived from* India: Travel Survival Kit*, Lonely Planet, June 1987.*

# Calcutta Cops

*Aswin Vijayan*

A diverse lot in smoggy whites,
always courteous and helpful,
speaking quite softly
even as they carry
a very big stick
at all times.

# Bharatpur

*Aswin Vijayan*

A small town known for its bird sanctuary,
Bharatpur also has an 18th century
fort and mosquitoes aplenty.
Bring your own repellent.

# Tranquebar

*Aswin Vijayan*

The Danesborg Fort looks out to the sea
while by the abandoned colonial houses
children pester you to buy old Danish coins.

# Hotels on the Highway

*Aswin Vijayan*

*Barbet, Blue Jay,*
*Bulbul, Dabchick,*
*Flamingo, Kala Teetar,*
*Magpie, Mor Pankh,*
*Parakeet, Pelican,*
*Skylark, Sunbird.*

# Black Flag

*Lesley Walsh*

I FEEL THE young jihadi's knife shaking against my neck. The flat edge is pressed to my skin, over the pulse point of my right gland still swollen from the pregnancy congestion I can't shake. I feel the familiar tingle. My milk is welling up. I spy the clock and see a feed is due. I realise I've forgotten my breast pads, and I'm terrified a flow will seep through my top and anger the guard at my throat. That he'd take it as a terrible affront. That two wet stains will single me out as the first victim.

The room is silent save for the sound of a keyboard being banged noisily by the man who is obviously their leader. When they burst into the news room, he had been the one to shout the heavily-accented orders to sit or be shot. He's working at a computer on the News Editor's back bench, beside the Chief Sub. Two others stand behind him, watching the room, assault rifles held taut in readiness. Four other jihadis like the one at my throat stand guard over other *Herald* staff – knives at the necks of the sparse Sunday cover, spread evenly across the room. A reporter and two subs sit alone at their desks, free of the armed wardens, but statue-still under their glare. I'm one of only two women in the room.

My bra is filling up. I imagine my hungry baby crying, stressing her dad who is trying to call me, to find out where the hell I am. But they had already smashed our mobiles and torn the landlines from the sockets.

Had the paper ever missed a deadline before? Even during the Troubles? The knife moves, jolting me back to the blade hovering near my jugular. I hold my breath; but my jihadi is just adjusting his stance. I haven't looked at him since he came up behind me, shocking my warm skin with his weapon. I focus my eyes straight in front, toward the dusty gap between my monitor and the keyboard. I grapple for a mental image of my tiny baby, to steady myself.

Glancing sideways I look at my teapot. Inside it's fuzzy with the residue of my last pot, weeks ago, but the chrome surface gives enough of a reflection, even if a bit distorted, that I can see him behind me. He's a teenager. He has a mother somewhere. Becoming a mum has already changed my whole world view more than I ever expected. I imagine asking him what his mother would say about this. I wonder if this action of his would be enough to override maternal love.

So this has finally arrived among us. Terror is at our door. We've been so busy dealing with our own legacy issues, our fragile government, with sweeping the last dregs of the Troubles out the back door; and now, here is this new kind rapping at the front.

We wait, for whatever horror they intend. When the leader speaks to the others, I am floored to hear these dark-skinned men reply. Their accents are local. I'd have staked money they would've been English. I wonder if they've coerced the teenager at my neck into this heinous mission of theirs. He's fidgeting, like a child. His eyes are wide open, filled with something beyond panic.

A prickle ripples down my spine to my coccyx… I recognise him.

I avert my eyes quickly. I'm forever noticing people on the streets, wondering if I've interviewed them before. But I've interviewed so few Muslims. How do I know him? I plunder my memory, but another thought interrupts. A while ago I did a story about an army captain down south who had warned ISIS was scouring the West for security weak spots, and Ireland fitted the bill.

'Who is in charge?'

The shouted question punctures the heady silence, acting like a cattle prod to the staff. My youngster flinches noticeably. This is his first time, I'm sure. Perhaps he has the zeal for the worldwide caliphate they kill to achieve, but only now is realising, knife at the neck at his first victim, he doesn't quite have the stomach to match.

Maybe he is impatient to get on with the bloodletting.

'Who is in charge?' the leader repeats. We exchange looks as the duty news editor speaks up. Roy has been with the paper since his late teens. He puts his hand up, then walks to the digital desk. The leader gets out of the seat and his henchmen shove Roy into it. Then one of them reaches for his backpack and pulls something out. A black square. That chilling black emblem with the white Arabic writing. The fear that piece of cloth evokes is immense. I hear a loud gasp from my young colleague, Sarah, in front of me, and her reaction prompts her jihadist, much older than mine, to grab her hair and yank her head back abruptly.

Two jihadis go to the wall behind the digital desk and unfurl their flag. They hammer it on with nails. It covers a wall displaying framed splashes dating back a century. George V's visit in 1921, Bloody Sunday, Omagh and all the other atrocities, to Brexit and the first gay Taoiseach. And of course, Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan, Brussels and Berlin, Nice, Manchester, London. All covered by that flag.

The leader points at Sarah. My skin shivers cold. They drag her into a chair in front of the flag, silencing her with a hard slap across the face. Blood spurts from her upper lip. She's the youngest, the most attractive and the most Western-looking of us. She's wearing a short white dress showing much of her long legs. To us it's normal, but not to them. Her clothes, her free-flowing hair, the fact she can work where she wants, only fuels them. I feel a rush of gratitude that it's Sarah in the chair, and not me. I'm ashamed of feeling that my child makes my life more valuable.

Her hands are tied behind her back. She's sniffing, tears are rolling down her face, mascara is staining a kohl trail down her sculpted

cheekbones. And they've set up a webcam to film her. They're capturing her in all her indignity and subjugation, for their followers. I think of Sarah's mother, imagine her unquenchable pain if she knew what was happening to her beautiful girl.

I have a beautiful girl now.

I have to get home to her. At any cost.

The tallest of the them stands behind her and produces a balaclava. Sarah screams as he puts it over her head. He takes out a long knife, which reflects glints of the strip lighting. Finally, the *Herald* men are shaken from their silence. Roy shouts stop, while others cry out in echo. I let out a hoarse shriek. My jihadi hisses 'Be quiet'. His accent is foreign, but there's an unmistakable Belfast inflection to it too. And I know where I've heard it before. It hits me like a bullet train. He works in a shop near Central station. I see him now, hushing a younger boy to be quiet as he serves customers. His mother manages the shop. I interviewed her about a year ago about how she escaped from the war in Syria. She was lovely, her boys were so sweet. I can't reconcile the polite, smiling shop boy with the knifeman at my throat.

'For God's sake man, let the wee girl go,' Roy shouts. 'Take me instead.'

The tallest jihadi grips him roughly by the hair. 'One more word and you die,' the leader shouts, pointed his handgun at Roy from across the room.

Sarah is unbearable to watch. One moment she puts up a brave front, keeping her head raised, the next it slumps in defeat. She is being filmed enduring such personal terror, for vengeful followers to share online in this stripping down of the Western infidel.

Sarah's would-be executioner remains still, while the men exchange words in Arabic. They thrust a piece of paper at Roy, but he won't take hold of it. It drops to the floor, and as the leader picks it, he strikes Roy across the face with the muzzle of his gun, opening his eyebrow into a vivid red slice. Blood seeps into his eye.

'Do it! Do it now!' the leader screams into his face. It must be their proclamation. *Do whatever you have to Roy. Read it: do it to save your skin, save all our hides*, I want to bellow. The duty sports editor, Paddy, seated on the other side of room, has had enough.

'For the love of God, or Allah or whatever, don't do this,' Paddy begs. 'You're all one of us, we can see.'

A shot rings out. We all gasp and duck.

'Enough!' The leader's gun is raised at the ceiling where his bullet has lodged. Paddy can't be silenced.

'I've been to the Mosque up the road with my friend, a Muslim. He's lived here for twenty years. He wouldn't support this. He'd be ashamed of this.'

But Paddy is hushed when another bullet lodges somewhere in his leg. He slumps into his chair. A few *Herald* men rise from their seats, but the leader fires out a few more shots into the ceiling, silencing them.

'Read it!' cries the leader, yanking Roy by the shoulder. But when Roy opens his mouth to speak, he's interrupted. The main door swings open, and everyone turns to see Jack the photographer sling his heavy camera bag at the jihadi by the door, catching him off guard.

The handle of his bag catches the rifle and pulls it to the floor. But the jihadi quickly regains control, and points the gun at Jack. Jack turns and runs, and I hear a gunshot ricochet in the corridor, echoing with the shrill screech of rubber soles running fast on floor tiles.

'Get him,' shouts the leader. Two give chase. This gives Big Sam, the heavy-set Religious Correspondent, his chance to act. Sam jumps from his chair and grabs Paddy's guard round the neck. He holds the terrorist's own knife to his throat.

In the melee, I cease to think. Shop boy's grip on the blade has loosened as he watches their plans unravel, and I grab the knife from him. He's so stunned he finally looks at me, and his eyes widen – he knows me. He runs to the door behind me, can't know it leads only up to

the roof. No-one notices him go. Another volley of shots ring out, and it achieves the silence the leader seeks.

The leader approaches Sarah. She knows her fate now. She makes a sound; primal, beyond terror. He cracks her head with the gun and it slumps forward. He drops the pistol.

'The knife.'

My vision swims as I watch him saw at Sarah's milky neck. Our screams rise again as Roy lunges for the leader, but he's stopped by another jihadist's blade in the neck. He falls to the ground. I scrunch up my eyes as tight as I can.

Sarah's head falls, and I flinch at the thud. It's a sound no human should ever hear.

I recall reading why decapitation died out in western executions. It's because of the spectacle. The still-beating heart pumps out blood in spurts for up to thirty seconds. I keep my eyes shut tight.

I vomit over my keyboard, acrid bile spilling into the slivers of space between the letters. The purge offers me clarity, and while they rejoice in their kill I race for the door behind me. I run up the stairs to the roof, and only then remember the knife in my hand. I get to the top and force open the door. I don't even attempt to sneak up on shop boy – I'm frenzied with fear and rage, thinking of my baby and my need to get back to her.

'Why?' I scream before I find him. Sheer light stops me. Up here the afternoon sky is ablaze with bright sun. I shield my eyes till they adjust. He is cowering against some kind of flue.

'Why are you doing this?'

'You don't ask the right questions! None of you do.'

He gets up and backs away, pulling another knife out of his combats. But I don't feel threatened, like I did with the others.

'Tell me what to ask then!' Tears and snot reach my lips.

He backs away toward the low wall behind him. I scream again. When he opens his mouth, he backs up further. I shout for him to stop, but it's too late.

I peer over the edge. Shop boy is lying on the street below, his eyes open. He is nearly smiling, as he did a year before.

I hear the blast from below my feet seconds before I hear the sirens.

# Author Profiles

**ROISIN MAGUIRE** currently writes lively and entertaining Health and Safety documents for small-to-medium enterprises. She recently fulfilled a lifetime ambition to complete an MA in Creative Writing at the Seamus Heaney Centre in QUB. She has a keen interest and expertise in short fiction, and was winner of 2017 John O'Connor Festival Short Story Prize. Her studies at the Seamus Heaney Centre also allowed her to expand her range: she is currently working on her debut novel, as well as researching for an authorised biography of the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mairéad Corrigan Maguire.

*Roisin Maguire*

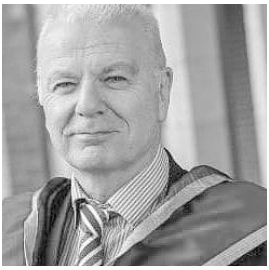
**DAWN WATSON** is a writer from Belfast. Her poetry and prose have been published in journals including *The Manchester Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Moth* and *The Tangerine*. She was selected as a 2018 *Poetry Ireland* Introductions Series poet, and supported Hera Lindsay Bird as part of the 2018 International Literary Festival Dublin. She won the 2018 Doolin Writers' Poetry Award. Dawn completed a Masters in Poetry: Creativity and Criticism at Queen's University in 2017, after winning the Ruth West Poetry Scholarship. She is currently an AHRC PhD candidate at the Seamus Heaney Centre, writing a poetic prose novel.

*Dawn Watson*

**ADAM GITTIN** started from fish-shape Paumanok, New York, where he was born. He earned his BA in English and philosophy from Oberlin College and his MA in English from the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast. He is writing a collection of poems about environmental destruction, the limitations of conventional English, and a mythical badger. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Tangerine* and *The Open Ear*. He may be reached at aegittin@gmail.com

*Adam Gittin*

**GARY HUNTER** lives in Comber and worked as a journalist before medically retiring in 2012. He writes short fiction and creative non-fiction. He's currently working on a memoir. His work has appeared in local literary journals and in an American journal of narrative medicine. He recently presented an excerpt from his memoir-in-progress at a symposium on arts and illness, facilitated by Queens University School of Medicine and the University of Florida. His favourite writers are James Ellroy, William Blake and the late Mark E Smith of The Fall.



*Gary Hunter*

**TOBY BUCKLEY** completed his MA in poetry at Queen's University Belfast as the first recipient of the Ruth West Poetry Scholarship. His work has been published in *The Tangerine*, *Poetry Ireland Review* and *The Stinging Fly*. He currently lives in Glasgow where he works as a freelance writer and runs an independent arts zine called *Bombinate*.

*Toby Buckley*

**LOUISE KENNEDY** grew up in Holywood, Co. Down and lives in Sligo. Her short stories have won awards including the John O'Connor, Listowel-Los Gatos, Ambit and Wasifiri competitions, and been shortlisted or highly commended in the Cúirt, Colm Toibín, Fish and Doolin contests. She has been published in journals such as *The Stinging Fly*, *The Tangerine* and *The Lonely Crowd*. She has read her work on 'Arena' and 'Sunday Miscellany' on RTE Radio 1. She is a PhD student at the Seamus Heaney Centre and is completing a collection of short stories with the assistance of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

*Louise Kennedy*

**CORINNE McNULTY** is an MA student at the Seamus Heaney Centre in Belfast, an American expatriate and a recovering primary school teacher. She likes to write stories about ordinary women showing courage in quiet ways, in both the past and present day. Her favorite questions are, 'What is possible?' and 'What does it mean to be a woman?'

Corrie works for an independent bookshop in Belfast, where she'll happily chat away about her favorite stories. When she's not there, she's usually sight-seeing or playing Scrabble and recording folk music with her fiancé in Ballyclare.

*Corinne McNulty*

**CLAIRE McSHERRY** is from Armagh. She received her BA from Trinity College Dublin and her MA from Queen's University Belfast. Her poetry has appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*. Her work often snapshots poignant moments, the difficulties of communicating feelings and the words that remain unspoken between people. Consequently, she takes a great interest in writing female perspectives into the traditionally male canon and revealing the inadequacies of history in painting a complete picture of one's life.

*Claire McSherry*

**JIM SIMPSON** came second in the 2013 Francis McManus Short Story Competition for his humorous story 'Dark Secret' and was subsequently long-listed for RTE's Penguin Ireland Award. His poetry has been published in the anthology of new writers, *On The Grass When I Arrive* (2016). He has been selected to participate the Irish Writers' Centre *Borders in Transition* programme 2018/9. With roots in East Belfast, he began Creative Writing with Bernie McGill, has read his reflections on Radio Ulster. He is working on his first novel, a psychological, fantastical fiction set in America. He lives in Derry and Dunseverick.

*Jim Simpson*

**BONNIE STAINES** completed an MA at the Seamus Heaney Centre in 2018. Her work is inspired by Japanese short forms and the culture of Instagram poetry. She lives in Belfast.

*Bonnie Staines*

**ADELINE HENRY** was born and bred in rural Co Armagh. She worked as a translator in Germany and now teaches German to adults and English for Speakers of Other Languages. She also teaches yoga and is interested in creative writing as a mindfulness practice. She joined the MA in Creative Writing at Queens University in 2016 and, on completion in 2019, will continue to work on her first novel and short fiction. Adeline's writing is informed by her experience growing up and living in Northern Ireland, as well as the years she spent in Scotland, England and Germany.

*Adeline Henry*

**EMILY LEE** was born in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in 1994, and studied at The University of Sunderland and Queen's University Belfast. She focuses mainly on poetry. Her work has been published by Spectral Visions Press in *Wear'd Tales*, an anthology of ghost stories originating from the North East of England. Her writing focuses on locality, memory and social issues; as well as women's unseen history, in relation to needlework and the use of thread as ink throughout the ages. She also has an interest in unheard female voices and likes to reimagine historical women from literature.

*Emily Lee*

**DAVID RILEY** was born in Blackpool in 1955. On leaving school he worked for Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance as a programmer, but following a win 'on the pools' he left this job to attend Lancaster University. He graduated with First Class honours in History, and later took an MA in Modern Social History. He became a tutor with the Open University, at Manchester University's Continuing Education Department, and at the Workers' Education Association, and spent the remainder of his life combining two passions: the history of science and ideas; and adult education.

*David Riley*

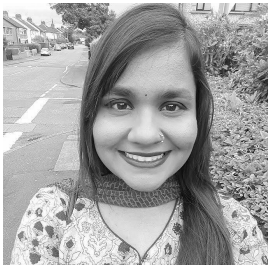
Throughout his life, David wrote. He started as a teenager, co-writing science fiction novels with his best friend, and ghost-writing his uncle's Second World War memoirs. After taking early retirement, writing became his primary focus. He won awards for his playwriting, before he found his home in the world of poetry. He also loved folk music, a passion he shared with his daughter Emily. No concert was too far to attend – with a personal best, in terms of distance, being in Texas.

In his final year David moved away from Blackpool for the first time, to study at the Seamus Heaney Centre. He spoke enthusiastically and fondly of the city and of the MA in Poetry.

David passed away in September 2018, just after completing his Masters dissertation. His last year was one of his happiest.

**MAISHA HOSSAIN** was born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her love for post colonial literature and a brief career in copywriting drove her to pursue an MA in Creative Writing from Queen's University Belfast, where she majored in prose. She enjoys writing pieces that revolve around cross- cultural narratives, particularly dealing with romance, realism, and coming-of-age themes. She has previously translated and published the children's fiction *Waiting for Russell*, written originally in her native language Bengali.

When she is not too serious, Maisha likes to crack terrible puns, craft silly jingles for advertisements and spend too much time sharpening a pencil before switching to a pen, anyway.



*Maisha Hossain*

**EVA ISHERWOOD-WALLACE** recently completed an MA in Poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre, Belfast. She was a commended prizewinner in the 2013 Tower Poetry Competition and was a participant of the 2018 Tower Poetry Summer School at Christ Church College, University of Oxford. In the future, she hopes to undertake a PhD on the relationship between language, philosophy and art in the work of neglected female modernist poets. She is an editor of *The Open Ear*, the literary journal of Queen's University Belfast, and her work has been published in *The Tangerine.*

*Eva Isherwood-Wallace*

**JO-ANNE FOSTER** loves to travel, and her writing is enriched by all the people-watching she does along the way. Jo's short stories and screenplays are often humorous glimpses of everyday life, based around quirky characters in commonplace settings. She has written and directed three short films and a documentary in her home country, Aotearoa New Zealand, and is currently working on her first novel.

*Jo-Anne Foster*

**FRANCIS HESKETH** lives on the Falls Road in Belfast. His work revolves around the cultures and sentiments of a post-ceasefire society, and the ordinary in this kind of climate. He has recently completed an MA at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, and some of his poems have appeared in *The Open Ear* journal at Queen's University.

*Francis Hesketh*

**HANNAH KING** is a 24-year-old proof-reader for a Magic Circle law firm. In the short stories that she writes, she explores themes of mental health, addiction and relationships… with a few murders thrown in for good measure. She is greatly influenced by the dark, twisting narratives of Roald Dahl's adult fiction, the intriguing storytelling style of Daphne du Maurier and the bleak observations of Ian McEwan. Having recently overcome her literary commitment issues, Hannah is working on her first full-length novel.

*A Fair Grief* is her tamest – and first published – piece of fiction.

*Hannah King*

**KATHARINE MAY** was born in Belfast in 1961, and studied English and French at Trinity College, Dublin. During the 1980s in London she wrote for an international disabled arts magazine, contributed to fanzines, and co-produced a weekly radio programme featuring women in music. Her writing is *literally* a tool for survival, a means of *staying recovered* from the Bi-Polar Disorder she lives with. Katharine has discovered that she also suffers from terminal Scribophilia and likes waking up at 5 in the morning to write poetry! A member of Fermanagh Writers she also works as a visual artist. She now lives on a famine road in County Fermanagh.

*Katharine May*

**STEPHANIE LYTTLE** attended undergrad at the University of Edinburgh before studying at Queen's. Her genres of interest include fantasy, science fiction, LGBTQ+ fiction and children's/young adult literature. She often writes about women, art, magic, robots/AI and the human body. She has won the Grierson Prize for poetry, been highly commended for the Ink Tears Short Story Prize, and shortlisted for the Bridport Prize for flash fiction. Her current project is a horror story set in the specimen storage area of a natural history museum.

*Stephanie Lyttle*

**MILENA WILLIAMSON** is an American poet living in Belfast. In 2018, she completed her MA in poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast. Also this year, she was chosen for Poetry Ireland Introductions and won the Mairtín Crawford Poetry Award. She is an editor of *The Open Ear*, the literary journal at QUB. Her poetry has been published in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The North*, *The Tangerine*, The Poetry Jukebox in Belfast, and more. She is interested in form, particularly sonnets, sestinas, and found poems. Find more of her work at milenawilliamson.com.

*Milena Williamson*

**SHAHMINEE SELVAKANNU** is from Malaysia. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and a Master's degree in World Literature; both awarded by University Putra Malaysia. Her interest in creative writing has brought her to Belfast where she completed her MA in Creative

Writing at the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University. In 2012, her first short story *Lighting the Darkness* was published in *Readings from Readings 2*: New Writing from Malaysia, Singapore and Beyond. She is looking forward to writing an anthology of short stories on the minority community of diasporic ethnic Indians in Malaysia.

*Shahminee Selvakannu*

**ANDREW SOYE'S** poems have been published in *Abridged*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Bangor Literary Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Magma* and the web anthology *Poetry Daily*. He won the 2014 Kent & Sussex Poetry Competition and was shortlisted for the 2016 Bord Gáis Irish Book Awards Poem of the Year. He recently contributed to a collection of 'poem songs' in collaboration with singer-songwriter Peter Wilson (Duke Special). His poems are typically short, many sonnet-length, with very short lines. The poems represented here are not simply ekphrastic or illustrated but reflect an interest in how keystrokes (both phonographic and non-phonographic graphemes) create meaning.
*andrewsoye@hotmail.co.uk*

*Andrew Soye*

**ROISIN TURNER** is a novelist, and recently has started to write short stories. Inspired by mythology, she writes magical realism and fantasy but with focus on human themes; love and loss, good and evil. She is interested in writing about what it is to be human amidst a fantastical, magical atmosphere. She enjoys history and undertake extensive research required for my writing as research helps me establish a world that feels real. Finding this balance between magic and real life is challenging, but one she enjoys experiencing in my writing.

*Roisin Turner*

**ASWIN VIJAYAN** has completed his MA in Poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast. His dissertation was a manuscript of poems that engaged with the lived experiences in the cities of Northern Ireland and India. Aswin's research interests lie primarily in the representation of the domestic and the urban in the contemporary Anglophone poetry in India. His poems have appeared in *The Tangerine*, *The Open Ear*, and *Coldnoon* among others.

*Aswin Vijayan*

**LESLEY WALSH** was a journalist for more than 20 years before moving into communications within the charity sector. She has completed her first novel, as yet unpublished, for children – the first in a trilogy series and is working on a novel of contemporary fiction. She is drafting a short story collection, following the success of one tale, 'Drowning' which won second prize in the Strands Publishers International Short Story Competition in 2017 and is set to appear in its *Four Elements Short Story Anthology II*. The judges described it as a 'deeply moving story of our times'. She regularly reads her work to audiences, with Women Aloud NI, a collective of local Northern Irish women writers.

*Lesley Walsh*

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We will take pride in all your many achievements, which assuredly lie ahead.

Dr. Darran McCann

*Convenor of the M.A. in Creative Writing, 2013-18.*