



the incubator

issue 2 | fiction | plays



the incubator journal

the new home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(September 2014)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 3

(due to be published in December)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories**
and **essays** (2000 words max.)*

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editorial

incubation

SINCE WE LAUNCHED IN JUNE THERE HAVE BEEN HUGE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF the short story, with writers from NI and Ireland being deservedly recognised for their expertise on the form. Bernie McGill's *Sleepwalkers* was short-listed for the Edge Hill Short Story prize while Colin Barrett won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. This leads us to ask again: what is it about the Irish and the short story?

In issue 2 we showcase plays and stories that will excite you. And Cherry Smyth talks to Claire Savage about the differences in writing (and performing) prose and poetry, and of course how her creative process works, which we always find fascinating.

Our reviews are of two books, both published by Liberties Press, Dublin, and both the works of writers from the North: Jan Carson's *Malcolm Orange Disappears* and Jason Johnson's *Sinker*. I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Cherry Smyth

poet and author of Hold Still

HOLD STILL IS YOUR FIRST PUBLISHED NOVEL AND IS A FICTIONAL ACCOUNT OF JOANNA (Jo) HIFFERNAN'S LIFE BETWEEN 1861-1866, WHEN SHE WAS MUSE TO THE ARTISTS, JAMES WHISTLER AND GUSTAVE COURBET. IT IS AN ENGROSSING READ AND A BOOK WHICH BRINGS WITH IT A WEALTH OF ARTISTIC INSIGHT BUT YET, IT DOESN'T ALIENATE THE READER WHO KNOWS LITTLE OR NOTHING ABOUT ART.

That's what people say – that there's enough cultural information that you don't have to have art historical knowledge beforehand. It opens up a world from a beginner's point of view. Jo doesn't know much either at the start of her affair with Whistler. You are led into the paintings through the characters.

Having published poetry collections in *When the Lights Go Up, One Wanted Thing and Test, Orange*, as well as numerous short stories, what made you decide to write a novel and is this your first attempt at one?

I've been trying to write a novel for about almost 20 years. I'd written two before this, but they were much more autobiographical and I couldn't find a publisher. The second was set in the 70s in the north and nobody wanted to know. They were rite of passage novels that I wanted to write, but I don't think people wanted to read them!

By the time I had finished the second one, I knew how to write a novel and that I *could* write one, but the trick was writing something that was compelling to other people... something I

could promote and stand by.

It took me about another 10 years to find a story that had to be told. In some ways, this novel is what I've been waiting my whole life to write. It combines many of my interests – creativity, art, sexual expression... Jo was the character who could embody those things.

With little or no existing information about Jo Hiffernan available, how did you research material for the novel and how did you approach creating her character – this young woman who had so much impact on two major artists, but whom no-one really knows anything about?

There were very few existing letters written by Jo and they were quite business-like, whereas Whistler left about 10,000 letters, so there was no problem in establishing his voice. It was a challenge to invent someone who could stand up to him and provide a foil. She had to be quite witty and sharp.

I found a letter that Courbet had written to Whistler, in which he remembered Jo – *'I will never forget those days... Those midnight swims, the shrimp salads, Jo singing and everything she knew about art.'* Those four things gave me a clear picture of this very clever and exuberant woman.

Did you show your work to anyone while you were writing, to get feedback as the novel progressed and what's your advice on the editing process in general?

A painter read it to check my technical knowledge. He thought, for example, that I breezed through Whistler's experience of rejection by the Royal Academy, so I went back and reworked that scene. It also gave me another chance to explore Jo's support of Jim in moments of failure.

A few painters have since said that reading the novel was completely recognisable and

familiar to them and made them want to paint, which was great!

I really think it's important you have an editor you trust. I showed my two previous novels to a couple of close friends, but this manuscript went out to about 10 people – a rather pedantic lawyer who checked names and dates and the fact that the colour 'tangerine' was used in 1862; an artist; someone who could check references on food and had lived in Paris; a playwright; novelist and poet... Then I went back and did a 15,000-word re-write. They signalled the gaps to fill in. That was really, really helpful. If you haven't got anyone like that, a writing group helps. You're always developing as a writer and always learning. Find people you can test your writing on.

And what was your writing routine like for the novel? Did you write full-time or were you still teaching poetry to your students at the University of Greenwich?

I was teaching part-time all the way through, but for three months I just wrote the novel and nothing else. That initial period for me is the most important – to really get into the characters and narrative. I was in a residency in Spain. I had done all the research and took the notes and thought, how will I start?

I started when Jo and Jim first met. Then I had the idea of having six sections in the book, to coincide with six paintings, which made it less daunting. As a poet, I'm used to much shorter bursts of work, so it gave me manageable segments and something to hang the narrative on.

How did you find the writing process of a novel as opposed to poetry-writing? Was there any aspect of creating a novel which challenged you?

The mechanisms of how you move characters about are essential to storytelling, but that was the hardest part for me – to fill in the 'doing' parts. I had no problem with the 'thinking'

parts. Because my poetry is based around a moment of insight, of illumination, there might be a sequence of action within a very short scene, but in the novel, this was extended over five years and to many more people.

How to keep the poetry alive within the prose was very important to me. It was totally different to the process of writing poetry. I'm very driven by philosophical insights in poetry – the insights in the novel were shared throughout the characters – they're there, but are more diffuse, so the emotion is less intense.

For me, poetry is like a laser beam and a novel is like a spotlight.

The language used throughout the book is beautifully poetic and richly descriptive, which makes it all the more engaging. How important was it to you to write in this way?

The sensitivity of the language and the visual vibrancy kept the novel moving. I would have felt I hadn't been true to myself or what I look for in novels otherwise (i.e. first and foremost, language, then character, then plot).

As a child, I would always be scribbling down images and metaphors I loved... that, to me, is how emotional truth is generated through a novel – through images and metaphors.

Has the experience of writing *Hold Still* inspired you to write another novel, or will you be going straight back to poetry? What are your future writing plans?

It's really about finding an idea that would compel me like Jo did. Her voice woke me up in the middle of a February night and demanded to be heard! I really loved inventing dialogue and I've considered writing a screenplay or a play. I've always wanted to write a play, since going to the Dublin theatre. Part of me wants to return to writing poetry, but things might have changed now. I think I need different genres at different times in my life.

After the novel, I was so full of words and yet, I didn't want to use language anymore. A.R. Ammons' poem called 'Giving Up Words with Words' sums this up. It's awkward when you must use your creative medium day-in day-out, so I didn't write, and curated a painting show last year instead. Now, I'm ready to approach writing again.

Over the summer, you were judge for Hungry Hill Writing's *Poet Meet Painters Competition 2014*, where entrants were asked to write a poem inspired by a piece of artwork. What did you look for in the work submitted and have you ever done the same when writing poetry?

I love that competition. It's fascinating looking at the process and how different poets write about the same paintings. What am I looking for in a poem about a painting? Something that mirrors that mood the artist was in when the work was being produced – those moments of intense concentration. When I look at a piece of work, I ask – what was behind that that made that work happen?

My poem *Presence of Mind* was based on a painting by Carol Rhodes. It was just after the July 7th bombing in London and I was staring at this very flat, aerial view and trying to not think about the bomb, but the composition, the colours... Then it ended up being about how our view of each other changed after this attack and land and territory and how you think about that is changed by violence. It ended up being all the things I was trying to avoid.

I've written about photography and film as well, so visual culture has always inspired my work, especially the use of colour and form and abstraction. I have postcards of paintings on my desk to inspire me, for example, Philip Guston, Susan Rothenberg and Gerhard Richter.

Aside from your compelling interest in writing about Jo Hiffernan, was there anything else behind your novel in terms of themes or highlighting particular issues, which drew you to write *Hold Still*?

I wanted also to present the debates around art for art's sake versus realism and the lack of female representation that continues today. Could I explore current issues through an historical context? The things that hold artists back – poverty and doubt – are exactly the same over a century later – as is the relative absence of female painters.

The primary thing that helped me to think of the particularly feminine energy required to sustain writing the long form was the image of the new-born. Jo realises that to keep her own artistic drive alive, she has to act like it's a baby, which must be fed, clothed and comforted or it will wither. That's how I felt when I was writing – not reading the paper, not seeing friends, ignoring the housework...complete focus. I then realised that, ironically, for many women to fulfil their creativity it requires an act of degendering – not seeing or doing 'as a woman'.

Comparing your experiences with writing poetry to novel-writing, what are your conclusions about each, now that you can compare being a writer of both, and do you prefer one over the other?

I've discovered that when I read my prose in public I feel clothed, whereas when I read my poetry, I'm much more naked. That's an interesting thing – how much you choose to expose – how close you are to the material. I would feel quite happy if actors read from my novel, but would hate that for my poetry. I embody my voice more closely in my poetry.

Yet I had become very tired of the solitude that poetry demands. Writing the novel was like being 'peopled' – like being in a movie for several years, which was wonderful. Jonathan Franzen calls it 'deliberate dreaming' and that fuelled my process. When it was over, I missed it. It's about accompaniment. Poetry's a different kind of relationship where the muse is often the lover, while in prose, the muse draws from friendships. They're both really valuable, but they give different things.

Which writers have influenced you throughout your writing career and would you describe yourself still as an Irish writer, being from Portstewart originally, but having lived in London now for many years?

The Irish short story has been hugely influential on my writing – people like Eugene McCabe, Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Lavin. Irish writers like Samuel Beckett, Colm Toibin, Padriac Fiacc and Sinéad Morrissey have always sustained me and supported my belief that I could write.

My identity was so split by growing up in the north that studying in Trinity helped to reconcile what felt like a stolen sense of Irishness. Irish writing was the necessary salve. It was Jo Hiffernan's Irish identity that sparked my interest in her. Like her, I've become an Irish-Londoner, but I still identify as an Irish writer through and through.

Cherry was interviewed by Claire Savage

Hold Still is published by Holland Park Press

plays

Paula Matthews

Wet Paper Dolls

*LATE 1930's. AMERICA. THE STAGE IS SET WITH TWO TABLES IN THE CENTRE. ONE IS Zelda's dressing table and one is Scott's writing desk. The two are moving about and talking in their own parts of the stage, not directly communicating, but their thoughts are deeply connected to each other. They are lonely, trying to make sense of their story and thus talking to themselves. In the mid-point between the desks is the large frame of a dressing table mirror. Scott's desk has a typewriter and a glass of whisky. There is torn paper on the floor and Scott, looking unkempt, sits at the desk tearing up a manuscript. Zelda's dressing table has paper and pens on it and there are a number of folded paper dolls on it and strewn around her side of the stage. Zelda is dressed in her nightdress and dressing gown. She has a glass of water on the table and is pacing around. She walks to the other side of the stage and puts on music. Scott pauses, stops tearing the manuscript and takes a book out of his desk drawer (*The Beautiful and the Damned*). There is a lock of hair tied with a blue ribbon inside. Scott holds it momentarily, then opens the book and reads the inscription to himself:*

Characters:

Scott F Fitzgerald

Zelda Fitzgerald

Scott: For my darling wife, my dearest sweetest

baboo, without whose love and aid

neither this book nor any other

would ever have been possible.

From me, who loves her more

every day, with a heartfelt of

worship for her lovely self.

Zelda: *(Lifting a letter from the desk and folding it into a doll)*

The good things and the first years will stay with me forever.

Scott: *(Still reading)* Scott. February sixth 1922. *(Setting the book down)*. You were a document in youthful melancholy. I was a romantic egoist.

Zelda: I didn't want to live – I wanted to love first and live incidentally.

Scott: I declared everything glorious in this world was a game and while I was sure of your love everything was possible. It was a land of ambition and success.

(Takes the manuscript again and resumes tearing)

Zelda: I drifted into school...

Scott: I told you that my heroine resembled you in more ways than one. I'm sure I told you that.

Zelda: I delivered a most enlightening talk on Browning. I was well qualified, having read, approximately, two poems.

Scott: I told you that. When we were apart, waiting to be married. I found us a knockout apartment...

Zelda: Your letters made things seem so close. But I wished we'd hurry and I'd be yours –

and when you came everything seemed so smooth and restful, (*looking out, as if out a window*) like this yellow dusk.

Scott: You told me off for writing that I wondered why they kept princesses in towers. If only I'd had a tower...

Zelda: A restful, yellow dusk... (*Stretching, as if for a ballet performance. Zelda seems lost in this state.*)

Scott: Would you have wanted that? A tower...

Zelda: I couldn't keep up.

Scott: (*Sad remembrance. Tender.*) You couldn't keep up...

Zelda: Couldn't keep up the frantic writing. Always waiting to marry, always apart, writing letters. There was no skin on my lips, I lapsed into a nervous stupor. It felt like going crazy, always knowing everything you did – in a *letter*.

Scott: You were troubled with your nerves. I knew you were troubled with the waiting. In the end I sent you my manuscript first, before anyone saw it. Then I followed.

Zelda: (*Holding the paper doll again.*) You followed. I knew you would, because I thought God – or something – always made it right. I thought this would be too. (*Still moving around, like a dancer.*)

Scott: Marriage, Zelda. And triumph, *This Side of Paradise*. 49,000 copies sold – and counting. The papers were full of us. We were like children in the great, bright unexplored. And you asked me should you keep writing? A writer, or a dancer. You didn't know which you were, so you were dancing and writing ...

Zelda: It was the broadsheets, my column, the gossip rags, your novel and stories – I was Mrs F Scott Fitzgerald. A writer, a dancer, but all they saw was the man. A woman is what men see in her, I think. They saw your wife... Oh, but it was London, dinner with James Joyce, the Churchill's, Galsworthy. And all the while writing; and dancing. And a baby.

Scott: ...and then you were a mother. The mother of my baby. Scottie...

Zelda: I was flying high, Scott. *(Comes to stand stock-still)*. I started to...

Scott: ...at twenty-eight.

Zelda: break.

(A pause as they are each in silence.)

Scott: They noticed.

Zelda: Did people notice me slipping?

Scott: They noticed my drinking. The neighbours, I mean. I was a success in Paris and a drinker at home. We were fighting.

Zelda: We moved to 59th Street. We quarrelled and you broke the bathroom mirror and hurt my eye.

Scott: *(Remorseful.)* I broke the bathroom mirror and hurt your eye. *(Taking a drink.)*

Zelda: Your drinking and drinking. And my breaking... *(Back to moving around, lifting paper dolls, shuffling her papers)*. You didn't care, so I went on and on, dancing alone. *(Making the doll she is holding dance.)*

Scott: *(Lifting a doll from his desk.)* My wife, dancing alone...

Zelda: I still know in my heart that it is a Godless and dirty game. That love is bitter – and all there is.

Scott: You needed something to take away the bitterness. That's why I stayed away, working to pay for doctors.

Zelda: You said that I might write when I needed you. I was so infinitely sorry that I was ungrateful for your attempts to help me.

Scott: I had to work to help you.

Zelda: Living was cold and technical without you.

Scott: How could I help you? I didn't know how...

Zelda: I made paper dolls for Scottie, it cheered her and she missed you so...

(Walks over to her dressing table, holding the doll and sits down, looking in the mirror. Scott and Zelda are now facing each other, looking in the mirror at each other, locked eyes.)

We were like wet paper dolls without you. *(Puts the doll in the glass of water.)*

Scott: Is there not an idea in your head sometimes that you must live close to the borders of mental trouble in order to create at your best? *(Taking a drink.)*

Zelda: At times my sole desire was for death.

Scott: If a sick person sacrificed some of their health to their work is that within their human rights? *(Another drink.)*

Zelda: *(Angry.)* We were lonely without you...

Scott: Were you in delicate health?

Zelda: Like wet paper dolls!

Scott: Who pays for illness? Who pays for suffering? Does only the sick person suffer?

Zelda: Your letters made me feel self-condemnatory.

Scott: Is this logical?

What does logic mean?

Is it important to be logical?

If not, is it important to be dramatic?

Zelda: Still I love you...

Scott: How does it differ in an artistic person and a mentally ill person?

Zelda: I Love you...

Scott: Are you normal sexually?

Are you reticent about sex?

Are you satisfied sexually with your husband?

Zelda: Scott...

Scott: *(Leaning in to the mirror, softer now, the slightest bit hopeful.)*

Are you an exceptional person who will be cured differently from anyone else?

(Zelda reaches through the mirror frame and kisses Scott, they pull apart, shocked.)

Scott sits down and takes a drink. Zelda walks around, changes her music.)

Zelda: *(Moved by the incident of the kiss, like someone who has been touched by a memory.)*

Taking the paper doll out of the water and trying to dry it with a handkerchief.)

I am always grateful for all the loyalties you gave me, to the concepts that held us together so long; the belief that life is tragic. I love, always, your generosity – your tolerance and generosity. No one could have survived our love.

Scott: *(Lifts the paper doll on his desk and looks at it, thoughtful, for a while.)* So we beat on.

Zelda: *(Clutching the doll to her chest.)* Forget the past ...

Scott: ...boats against the current....

Zelda: ...turn about and swim back home to me...

Scott: ...drawn back...

Zelda: ...to your haven forever and ever...

Scott: ...ceaselessly...

Zelda: ...it may seem dark at times and lit with torches of fury; but it is the best place for you...

Scott: ...into the past.

Zelda: ...turn gently in the waters through which you move, and sail back.

Drawn from the love letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, *Wet Paper Dolls* is a dramatic portrayal of a couple who experienced the painful confusion of dealing with significant mental health problems during a period of time when there was little understanding of what it really means to have an enduring mental health issue. Zelda was probably among the earliest generation of women with schizophrenia who received a formal diagnosis from a psychiatrist rather than being labelled as suffering from hysteria. Scott, it is widely reported, suffered for many years from alcohol dependency, dying suddenly in 1940 whilst in the employment of MGM Studios as a scriptwriter. Scott died believing his writing career to have been a flop. Zelda lived for a further seven years, having been too ill to attend Scott's funeral. She died as the result of a fire in Highland Hospital, where she lived.

Zelda was characterised in her early life as a vivacious and articulate young woman, but she went on to experience episodes of not being able to function day to day. At these times she often wrote complex epistolary warnings to friends about the second coming. Zelda also experienced periods of lucidity, writing articles for *Esquire Magazine* and the novel 'Save Me the Waltz'. A debate existed in the letters about the plagiarism of work; each of the Fitzgeralds thinking their material had been used for the other's writing. This is hardly surprising as they exchanged literally thousands of letters during their relationship, many of which were eloquent and poetic.

Eleanor Lanaghan, Scott and Zelda's granddaughter, wrote in 2003 that;
"The Fitzgerald's lives were unduly short; and they were tragic, but tragic in the best sense – in the sense that the human heart possesses hopes, dreams, aspirations and infinite longings that cannot be fulfilled, but the great souls among us continue to desire and strive and work for these things despite all obstacles and failures." (p. 387).

Jamie Guiney

The Couch

"HE'S WATCHIN' ME."

"How so?"

"What do you mean how so? His eyes are open and he's watchin' me."

"Let me ask it another way then, do you know *why* he might be watching you?"

"Damned if I know."

"Have a guess."

"A guess? I tell you what, if he don't stop watchin' me, I'll go over there and bust his head open."

"How do you know he's watching you?"

"Cause I see him!"

"Are you watching him?"

"No, I'm lookin'. He's the one doin' the watchin'."

"Maybe he's thinking the same thing about you...why is that man watching me? Why won't he stop? I'm going to bust his head open..."

"It's obvious you don't come from the street doc, trust me, he is watchin' me and there's only so many reasons why somebody would want to watch you. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"Tell me. What are the reasons?"

“You make me laugh doc, you know that?”

“Please, enlighten me. Tell me the reasons why someone might want to watch you?”

“For one, he might be keepin’ lookout on me.”

“Lookout? Sorry I don’t understand. Can you explain?”

“Lookout! He is watchin’ me, then reportin’ back to someone, you know? He’s a lookout for someone else.”

“Alright, give me another reason.”

“He knows me from somewhere and wants revenge for somethin’ I did to him.”

“What else?”

“He sees my muscles a ripplin’ and wants to take off my shirt, you know what I’m sayin’?”

“I see. Anything else?”

“Nope, that’s about it.”

“How long would a person be permitted to watch another person without causing offence?”

“See that’s hard, cause if you look at someone the *wrong way*, that’s enough.”

“Let’s come back to the wrong way in a second, just for now, how long, purely in terms of time.”

“Well...let’s see, I suppose you could look at someone for three, maybe four seconds before they get mad.”

“I see. And how do you look at someone the wrong way?”

“The wrong way is any way I don’t like, you get me?”

“Let’s forget about you for a second. Let’s just say it’s one person in the street, just a general, everyday person and another the same. What would be the wrong way to look at each other?”

“For one – lookin’ down your nose at someone, like you’re better than them. Screwin’ your face up like there’s a bad smell around – for two. And for three – eyeballin’ someone like you wanna fight. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Let’s get back to you. Are you being watched for too long...or in the wrong way?”

“Too damn long! That’s the worst kind, when you can see them watchin’, but their expression gives nothin’ away...could be any reason.”

“So you’ve just said it yourself, could be any reason. They don’t appear to be angry, they don’t appear to be looking down their nose at you and they don’t appear to be experiencing a bad smell. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Alright. You can open your eyes and sit up now. If you’ll permit me, I’d like to tell you three stories, all true.”

“Shoot.”

“One. Many years ago in Japan a famous Samurai known and revered for protecting his people and his town, was sought by an enemy. Now the enemy had trained hard and killed many men during his lifetime and was also revered in his own town, and by his own people. The enemy samurai, was younger, stronger and had learned secret skills taught to him by his master, that he knew, when used just at the right time, would allow him to defeat the famous samurai.”

“What happened.?”

“Early, one misty morning, when the sun had barely risen out of the horizon, the enemy came seeking the famous samurai. Now at this time the famous samurai had injured his hand and could barely wield his sword. But no-one knew this. Along a deserted road, the enemy confronted the famous samurai and they faced each other, ready to fight.

The enemy drew his sword and stood for attack whilst the famous samurai kept his sword sheathed. The famous samurai stared deep into his opponents eyes, into his very soul and held his gaze firm. Suddenly the enemy tried to attack, but found he couldn't. His body would not move. He willed it to, anger boiling inside him – but still, his body would not move. The famous samurai simply stood there, continuing to stare.”

“He went and super-glued that mother to the ground or somethin’!”

“Let me finish. So the enemy breaks one of the fundamental rules of combat – never turn your back on your opponent. He pulls away and draws back to regather himself. But, rather than attack, the famous samurai stands his ground, his sword still sheathed. The enemy, regaining his composure, draws in near and faces his opponent with a renewed vigor. Again the famous samurai stares deep into his eyes, saturating his gaze. Suddenly, with all his might, the enemy tries rushing an attack – but yet again, his body will not move. Completely rooted to the ground, he begins to feel exhausted. Eventually he re-sheathes his sword, turns around and leaves.”

“How'd he do it doc, what was the trick?”

“No trick. The famous samurai defeated him with his stare.”

“Get outta town.”

“You see, the stare is a very powerful thing. It can have an enormous psychological effect on someone. In this case the enemy couldn't understand what was happening to him, only that his body would not respond and he began to feel defeated.”

“I'll be damned.”

“Second story. A deaf and blind girl walks along a quiet country road near her home. She knows it like the back of her hand, counts the steps, feels various markers along the way to guide her. She is carrying a fishing pole and two freshly caught fish.”

“You makin' me hungry now.”

“She stops at a speed-limit sign, this is her place to cross the road. She has a routine, takes one step into the road, then waits a few moments, then crosses. She figures that

approaching cars will see her begin to cross and slow down, then realise she is blind and allow her to cross. A car suddenly comes racing around the corner. Instead of slowing down, the driver begins to sound the horn and flash the lights at the girl in the road. Obviously she is blind and deaf, so can neither see nor hear, the approaching car."

"What happens?"

"The car crashes into her, killing her instantly."

"Why didn't it swerve?"

"Narrow road."

"Why didn't it stop?"

"The driver presumed the girl could both see and hear him and would quickly get out of the way."

"That's some sorry shit."

"Third story. A gambling addict spends all of his and his wife's money. He cannot help it. Their daughter needs some new shoes, I mean she really needs some new shoes. Her only pair are full of holes and the soles are falling off..."

"That's some more sorry shit."

"The mother sets aside some money, not very much, to buy the daughter some shoes and instructs the father not to touch it."

"What'd he do?"

"First, the father spends all his own money gambling, then finds himself at home, broke, not being able to gamble anymore and agitated. He spies the daughter's shoe money and takes it to go gambling."

"Man he took it?"

"As he walks up the street, he toils with himself knowing his daughter will have no

shoes now, but maybe, just maybe, he will have a big win and she can have all the shoes she wants. Tears start to roll down his face as he tries to decide putting the money back or to gamble it.”

“What does he do?”

“He loses all of it.”

“You makin’ me depressed now, doc.”

“Sometimes people make bad decisions. Which is better to you, temporary discomfort or permanent anger?”

“I see what you’re getting at doc.”

“Do you?”

“I do. Being angry all the time ain’t a good thing, you know?”

“Can you do me a favour?”

“Shoot.”

“I want you to go away retell the three stories I just told you to someone else, doesn’t matter who.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m asking you to and it will help with the anger.”

“Who am I gonna tell them to?”

“I already said, doesn’t matter who.”

“I’m gonna have problems findin’ somebody to listen to this...”

“You’ll find someone, I believe in you.”

“We doin’ this again?”

“Yes, same time next week.”

“Alright doc, thank you.”

“You are welcome, until next week.”

“Peace.”

“Don’t kill anyone.”

flash fiction

Marie Gethíns

Pygmalion

YOU MOVED SOUTH TO SHAKE OFF THE SOOEY, SLIGO MUCK. WHEN YOU TOLD ME, I laughed. 'American farmers use suey to call pigs,' I said. What U2 song was playing? I wonder if you remember. We both had the album. I hummed, tapped out the beat on the table. You said *banbh* is the Irish for a young pig; that maybe it was Bono's in-joke. I quoted his wiki profile: that he got the name from a Dublin hearing aid shop – Bonavox. 'It means good voice in Latin.' You pulled on your cigarette and nodded.

We met at a meat-market pub in an over-touristed town. A cloudburst flooded the bar with dripping travellers. Seeking shelter, embarrassed into buying a drink. I went in with an Australian girl I met on the train. We made an odd pair, her egret to my wren. She dragged me to a table at the front. I slid along the bench across from her, shuffling into a shadowy corner. When I offered to get the first round, she shook her head. 'No need to pay for drinks.' She pulled her red t-shirt low, black lace edging soft swells.

The first two she lured bought drinks and tried the usual lines. I stared at the worn table, sketching with drink puddles and a fingertip. Aussie girl tossed responses while she scanned the room. Our glasses empty, they disappeared; absorbed by air thick with body heat, damp coats and peat smoke. I leaned back against the wall – languid warmth radiating from my stomach. Aussie girl grabbed my wrist from across the table, her brows raised. 'Just snagged our second round.' A crew cut pair, their gym-honed pecs straining sleeves, ruddy faces like Toby Jugs. 'What can we get you ladies?'

Round two ran at an accelerated pace. Aussie girl flushed and giggling, stroked the nearest male limb. His comrade closed the distance, leg bumping mine. Supermarket cologne caught in my throat. A hand landed on my thigh. Five finger rods of sweat soaking

into my jeans. I imagined his odour penetrating the fabric, my skin. With a finger and thumb, I lifted his wrist, dropped the hand over his crotch. He grabbed his bulge. 'You don't know what you're missing.'

Another mouthful of beer, examining his overdeveloped musculature, I pictured him flayed, exposed beside me. 'Écorché,' I said, but his attention had shifted. Aussie girl squealed when he grabbed her knee under the table. She stood, linked arms, a specimen on each side. The trio left.

You passed them in the doorway, coming in as they went out. Model-thin, they barely had to shift to let you by. I studied your profile – wet black curls, straight nose, trim moustache and two-day stubble. You made me think of Vermeer – Dutch merchants, not Irish warriors. When our eyes met, I didn't look away. You smiled. I indicated a seat. We talked of pigs and music and art. I watched the smoke leave your lips, swirl and float to the ceiling.

I wanted to touch your curls. Instead I asked for a drag. You offered me the pack. Shaking my head, I reached for your cigarette. It was moist and warm. Lips lingering, savouring your taste. I handed it back and you looked up at me through long lashes. In the dim light, I wondered how your eyes could be that blue.

After another drink, we pushed fast forward. Lying in rumpled sheets together on your saggy bed, I traced your muscle outlines with my index finger: arms, chest, stomach. Thinking of sculpture, I whispered: alabaster, Carrara marble. 'Irish tan,' you said. We laughed. Five days of heady ease. Conversations and silence, natural and in sync.

You took me walking in the woods, filled me with Gráinne, Diarmiud, Fionn and magic boars. Chases through the oak trees, until we arrived at the lake edge. You hired a boat and rowed to the middle of its dark stillness. We waited for fish to jump at insects. A lightening splash, an ebbing circle the only evidence it wasn't our imagination. When the mist rolled down the mountains, creeping across the water, you rowed us back. I rested against your knees and closed my eyes. Deep breaths and exhales, oars rubbing metal oarlocks, water swishing against the boat sides. Reaching shore, your palm red from effort, folded around mine.

On the sixth morning I put my flight details next to your coffee and said, 'I have to go.' You kissed my hair and walked me to the train station. Whispered promises mixed with soot and diesel fumes. As the train pulled away, I watched you shrink; vanishing in linear perspective.

Before I reached Dublin Airport, we batted texts and emoticons. We had a few months of daily emails – mine wistful, yours teasing – then yours tapered off. I'd hit Send/Receive a hundred times a day, searching for one name. My chest tightened, eyes smarted on repeat. And you'd answer, transporting me again and again. Staring at your picture, clinging to my fantasy.

I compiled triggers, trying to inhale and hold your essence. I bought Imperial Leather soap at a speciality shop, forced myself to smoke cigarettes each day. Two weeks with no texts or emails sent me into the vortex. A last minute holiday you said, with the lads, you said. A different tale developed in my mind. I grew too frightened to call, fearing I'd hear a voice behind yours. At the nine month mark, with shaking hands I typed news of my return. End date open, but your reply gave nothing away. I didn't sleep, replaying each moment together, each communication. Creating and destroying a multitude of myths.

You stood at Dublin Arrivals apart from the crowd, something dark under your arm. I swallowed and moved towards you. Our toes touched, long fingers moved into my hair. I grabbed your arms, relishing the solidity. When we released, you gave me a plush black *banbh*.

Laura Cameron

Just Like the Real Thing

BRENDA KNEW PETER DIDN'T LIKE SECRETS. HEAVEN KNOWS HE HAD TOLD HER OFTEN enough. 'A secret is every bit as bad as a lie.' But Brenda had told herself she had no option.

She had transferred an extra £100 out of the joint account into her spending account for the past eight months to pay for it. Peter wouldn't question that. Money had never been an issue, and Peter often had to remind Brenda to count her blessings. She made sure she would be at home on her own when the courier delivered it. It had taken her ten minutes to unwrap. It lay now, exposed on the blue and beige quilt she had made last year at one of her classes. Feeling dizzy, she sat down on the edge of the bed.

It had come with a separate plastic package containing tiny pink clothes and a pink and white knitted blanket. Trembling, she reached out and stroked an arm with her forefinger, and then the head. She had ordered one with swarthy skin and black hair, to look like the only baby photo they had of Peter. Gaining courage, she lifted it, clumsily at first, before realising she had to support its head. Just like the real thing.

Brenda had seen a documentary where American women had taken dolls like this out in prams for walks, or to the supermarket. But she knew she would never do that. She wasn't crazy.

Beginning to relax, she decided to dress the doll, doing everything as gently as when she used to dress her niece, Ellie, when she was a baby. She smiled at the tiny fake blemishes on the doll's skin. Brenda's sister Mary was ten years younger, and she freely admitted that Ellie was 'a wee accident'. Although she never voiced it, Brenda couldn't come to terms

with the injustice. She had been 29 when the doctor told Peter he could never father a child. They had both assumed the problem was hers. At 40, she still replayed that scene in her mind. Peter had said nothing, marching out of the doctor's surgery and driving off, leaving Brenda to walk the two miles home alone. She'd been thankful for her comfortable shoes. It was around that time that the hand washing had started.

Brenda knew she could hide the secret in her wardrobe. Peter had no reason to go in there, and if he ever did find it, she would lie and say it was a present for Ellie. He would never know the difference.

Checking the clock, she lay on top of the bed, lifting the doll onto her front. She would start the tea at 4.30. Thursday – chicken casserole. Feeling the pleasing weight on her tummy, Brenda breathed deeply, in and out. Silent tears slipped off her cheeks and under her chin. The relief brought sleep with it.

She jumped up when she heard his footsteps on the stairs. She blinked at the clock, but it was still only ten past four. He never came home before 5.30.

'Brenda! Guess what!' Peter bounced through the door before she had a chance to hide the doll. It had fallen on the cream carpet and lay face down, one of its legs twisted at an awkward angle. Peter looked from the sprawling doll to the neatly piled up packaging in the corner. He took in Brenda's upset hair and makeup, and the dented bedclothes. Brenda held the baby blanket in front of her like a shield. Her face said something he didn't understand. She couldn't find the lie in time.

His footsteps were heavy now. Brenda flinched as the front door closed noisily behind him. She rescued the doll and caressed its sleeping face before pressing it to her chest. She moved to the window, peeping out through the tilted vertical blind. Peter stood with his back against the car door, catching his breath. He turned his head towards the house and for a second she thought he would come back in. She watched him drive off.

Wrapping the doll neatly in its blanket, Brenda hid it at the back of her wardrobe. Possible names were running through her head. She straightened the bedclothes, then combed her hair and fixed her eye make-up. She took the packaging down to the green recycling bin in

the back yard and slid it under last week's newspapers.

She scrubbed her stinging hands for a count of thirty. Flexing her fingers, she watched the blood creep into the cracks in her knuckles. If Peter saw them he would scold again.

Opening the fridge, she took out the raw chicken thighs.

At 5.34 she heard his key turn and the front door close softly. 'Something smells good! You'll never guess what happened at work today.' Anyone else would have missed it, but Brenda found the slightest quiver in her husband's voice.

As she listened, making the right noises in the right places, her mind floated upstairs to the swaddled doll in her wardrobe, silent and waiting.

James Meredith

Flying

WE SAY GOODBYE BEFORE YOU MOVE THROUGH TO THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE. I HOLD YOU tight, bury my face in your hair, breathe deeply your scent: shampoo and perfume blended with the warm bread smell of your skin. I feel your hands on my waist, the fingers pressing and pinching as if to double-check the reality of my body, the substance of my shape. I keep my tears within. You let yours flow free, dampening the side of my face. Finally, we break apart and repeat the words we've grown used to saying these past few months. And then you're walking away, glancing once over your shoulder. A plastic carrier bag containing a magazine and a packet of boiled sweets swings gently from your wrist. If all goes to plan we will meet again in three months time. I pray that you do not grow too much in my absence, that I will not be too small for you when we reunite.

A branch of a tree

Barren, brittle, winter bare ~

The swallow flies east

Aoibheann McCann

Premium Line

SHE RINGS HIM AT WORK. IT IS TOO EARLY IN THE DAY FOR THERE NOT TO BE ANYTHING wrong.

‘What’s up, Mum?’ he sighs.

‘It’s your brother again,’ she says.

He rolls his eyes.

He is alone in the office so he indulges her for once. His colleagues are out at a meeting. It was his turn to stay and answer the phones, though there had only been one call and this was it.

‘What’s he done now?’ he asks reluctantly.

It’s been one thing after another with his brother. He is the youngest, still living at home with his parents, taking the piss. The rest of them had done the decent thing and got out at eighteen.

‘It’s the phone bill,’ she says, ‘it was €800 this month.’

‘What? For what?’ He is genuinely angry now. He hasn’t even had his coffee yet. He only allows himself one cup a day.

‘Well I looked and there’s numbers I don’t recognise....well one number in particular.’

‘Have you got the bill there?’

‘Yes,’ she says haltingly.

‘Read it out then.’

‘Em.. let me see now, where are my glasses.. FRANK...HAVE YOU SEEN MY GLASSES?’

He holds the phone away from his ear. The phone clunks down at the other end.

He taps his keyboard, scanning emails until she returns.

'Your father is at it again,' she says. 'Saying the rosary in the sitting room by himself. That's why I'm on the mobile. I'm not in the mood for it these days.'

'You're on the mobile, Jesus, Ma, I told you before! It costs a fortune. Listen I'll ring you back.'

'OK, love,' she says forlornly.

He rings her back from his mobile straight away. The landline is engaged. He tries her mobile, she answers after the first ring.

'Hi, love, ok, I have the number here. 1-8-9-8-6-8-6-8-6-8.'

'Dirty little bastard, that's a sex line, Ma. I'll kill him.'

'There's no need for that language,' she huffs.

'Do you want me to ring the little fucker?' he says, ignoring her outrage. Christ, the little pervert was ringing sex lines and he was being given out to.

'No, I want you to ring the number,' she says, 'maybe he's into something weird, maybe he needs help,' she simpers.

Typical, he thought, she's the one that'll be delving into her funeral savings and she's worried about a twenty five year old's sexual leanings.

'Fine, I'll do it but not from here. I'll lose my job. Give me the number again, I'll write it down.'

'Thanks, love,' she says when he had written it onto the pad in front of him.

Jane comes over from the Compliance department and stops by his desk.

'Hey, Francis. What cha dowan?' she says in her fake flirty American accent. It isn't very convincing but he knows she fancies him so he plays along.

'Hey, gurl.'

'All alone?' she asks.

Then she spots the number. Written down in his own hand. Her eyebrows lower quickly. He starts to explain but she is gone. He hates the little bastard even more. He'd been working on Jane for weeks and had planned to make his move on Friday after a few drinks. Now she probably thinks he's a sex pest and won't let her guard down.

He doesn't hear his phone on the bus but there is a message from his ma when he gets home. Checking if he's called yet. Asking if he's working late again.

He's left the sex-line number at the office. He switches on the TV and falls asleep. He

wakes to a blonde girl lolling across the screen in white sheets. She promises friendship through an 1898 number. He wonders if she is the culprit, the pension stealer.

The next day at the office he detects sniggering. People are avoiding him.

He has to ring the number, they obviously have. It must be some really weird shit, he thinks, judging by how people's eyes widen as he bustles past them in the tiny kitchenette at eleven. When the coffee is in the mug he goes outside to where the smokers are.

He walks about ten feet toward the boiler house to make the call. Bracing himself for the answer, he hears a man's voice.

He breathes a sigh of relief, ah, he's gay, he thinks, I can live with that; big family like ours, there's bound to be one. His Dad won't like it but his Mother will be fine. He listens for the options.

'Dial one for the rosary.'

His forehead scrunches in disbelief. He presses 'one' to find himself half way through a Hail Mary and then hears a pause presumably so some ejjit can add in the 'Holy Mary Mother of God' part themselves for 50 cent per minute. He cuts it off, laughing, and rings his Mother.

'It's Dad,' he says.

'What?'

'It's him that's been ringing the line.'

'Your father?' she says. 'Sure he never even liked sex.'

Tony O'Connell

The Procession

THEY WERE SITTING AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE HAVING THEIR EVENING MEAL WHEN the row started.

"Can we have the front of the house painted?"

His mother was puzzled but his father barked, 'No'.

"Why not, Dad? Timmy's is just finished and now they have started on Val's."

"When we need to have it painted, we will have it painted."

"Sarah's was painted last week."

His father slammed his teacup in its saucer so quickly that George was startled.

"Listen son, it's all for the procession. Roman Catholics do it every June. We don't. Now please drop the subject."

George said no more. His father left the table, pushing his chair back so far that it toppled over. When he had gone George asked his mother, "What's wrong with Dad?"

'Look son, sometimes it's not easy to be one of the few Church of Ireland families in the village. We must continue to do things our way, don't you understand?"

He said yes. But he didn't. He was about to say, "I like processions," but thought it unwise.

The village was prettier than at any other time of the year, with flags hung from windows, yellow and white and green, white and orange. Rhododendrons were attached to railings and displayed on windowsills, holy pictures brought from interior walls to exterior windows. George was fascinated by the transformation. Shops were even more elaborate, with yellow and white bunting, doors all closed.

His father snorted but was careful to hide his distaste. His mother was quiet, not to add to her husband's irritation. Theirs was the only house on the Main Street which was

unchanged. Soon the footpaths were lined with people and the procession passed the house on the way to the square, the host in its monstrance carried by the parish priest, shielded by a canopy carried by four elderly men with yellow sashes.

Then the other priests, followed by nuns with swan-like bonnets, then schoolgirls – many in their first communion dresses. Bringing up the rear were the schoolboys. Last of all was George. He marched happily and with a big grin he waved at the window of his house. His mother had been watching through the lace curtain. She was shocked. Luckily her husband was in the back garden, weeding. She didn't know what to do.

The procession made its solemn way to the altar at the Market Square for prayers and benediction before winding its way back to the Catholic church for closing prayers.

Two days later there was a loud knock the door. She opened it. Two unsmiling men stood there. Smith the publican and McCarthy from the post office. She invited them in. Her husband joined them in the parlour.

"What was George doing in the procession?"

This was news to her husband. "What are you talking about?"

"You know well. The whole village is annoyed. Walking and smiling at everyone on the footpath."

Her husband looked at her. "Is this true?"

"Yes."

"You had better apologise to the parish priest. This is a shocking state of affairs," said Smith.

"He had no right to be in our possession trying to make fun of it," said McCarthy.

George was in his bedroom. He could hear every word.

"I'm quite sure he meant no disrespect," said his mother.

"It's not good enough," said Smith, his face red with anger and waving his fat little fingers

about, the buttons on his waistcoat straining to hold in his stomach.

"No respect. No respect at all." McCarthy was calmer but keen to back up his companion.

George's father looked at them. "It's a free country gentlemen. We have the right to walk the bloody streets you know." His voice was cold. Already he could sense trouble.

"Now kindly leave my house. I will talk to my son and that will be the end of it."

"You will apologise to the parish priest."

"I will not. Out. Now. Please."

Within days George's father and mother noticed changes in the behaviour of the majority.

The story grew, bits were added on. Things that had never happened were whispered as gospel truth. The family felt increasingly isolated. His mother was refused in one grocery shop.

"We don't want your money." She left silently.

His father went for a pint and the men at the bar moved away from him.

George was taunted even by his friends. His parents sadly made plans to sell up and move to Cork City or even England. The majority heard of these plans and felt vindicated.

The rain pelted relentlessly and the wind howled around the grey Presbytery. Father Sweeney was making himself a cup of tea when the doorbell rang. It was Cannon McWilliams from the Church of Ireland. He didn't really know him but asked him in and served him tea. He was puzzled but glad of the company. Better than a sick call at least in this weather.

"I think we should discuss the situation that the Anderson family find themselves in," said Cannon McWilliams.

"Yes, it's on my conscience to be honest."

And they spoke and felt closer to each other's point of view than either would have thought possible.

That evening they got to know and like each other. They carefully prepared their sermons for Sunday's mass and service. The congregations were stunned. They both appeared on

each other's altars and they both spoke.

They broke new ground. One theme was 'what would Jesus do?' The second 'suffer the little children to come unto me'.

There was applause in both churches. That afternoon people called into Anderson's. Most were sheepish. All were treated with courtesy and relief.

The Andersons are still in the village respected by all and well integrated.

But although a vase of flowers appears on the windowsill on procession day, George watches proceedings with his mother from behind the lace curtain. His mother holds him very tightly.

Deirdre McClay

Only Words

SHE ORDERED THE LEATHER BOUND VERSION BECAUSE HE COULD NOT AFFORD IT.

This was his dream present, the 'if you won the lottery' gift.

On further reading of the spec, it turned out to be goatskin leather, shrunken no less. Apparently only the best bits were used for smoothness of texture – the balls, she wondered? Hmm, she would fucking well hope so at that price. Yet the goat thing pleased her. How wonderfully appropriate – an Oxford Blue, gold embossed, bleater, keeping safe every wonderful word: yes, 291,500 little darlings in 20 volumes.

She had some idea what to do, but the plan was in no way settled as she paid the bill on *his* credit card. He was always so careful to keep credit manageable, but this would swing him to the limit. And she simply knew, as she knew him, that if she spent enough time with the precious artefact, she would come to know what to do next, and how to do it. So when the order came, she devoted herself to it.

The gilt edged pages were velvety substantial and razor sharp she discovered. Each dictionary was heavy in her hands; it seemed to her worthy of all the knowledge it imparted in discrete and standard clumps. The little silk ribbons would mark her place as she dipped in and out, night after night, alone. She could equally flick and spot words that she'd never heard of, or look up dirt she couldn't believe would appear in any classy book. And, best of all, every volume smelled expensive: wafting the perfume of a first class education. Yet, as she perused, each one seemed to issue its own special variation on that aroma. Volume 19, which started with 'unemancipated', pleased her most.

She had thought that she would rip out and post each page to him, day after day, from a variety of locations. She imagined him in desperation over this body of words. For fuck's sake, he'd even involved himself in a recent call for citations – then called himself a WordHunter. But, she hadn't realised the bulk of these books. On arrival of the 21,750 pages, she was faced with having to fester a different plot. Any posting would have to involve selected passages, and these would be targeted missives, loaded with meaning. Already the whole business was becoming more complicated than she'd anticipated. This was so like Brian – he just spawned disorder. By the time she was ready to go with a plan, he'd actually married the slut he was seeing.

At first, she sat poised with a knife, but after much grief, she decided on the raw rip of a single page. The quality paper left a feathery edge like a white bird shot through in flight.

That's all it would take, one blot on the corpus, a gap in the 'L' volume, the one that started with 'look'. Not the page with the word 'love', because that would be crass.

David Braziel

Death by Water

I'VE KNOWN HOW I WILL DIE SINCE I WAS TWELVE AND RUTH SIMMONS TURNED OVER THE tarot cards, pointed her long black fingernail at me and said: "Beware of death by water". We were best friends then, both outsiders; we had joined forces against the rest of the school.

Ruth had sat herself next to me in English one day and just started talking. She was a bit of a Goth, or as much as she could be in the limits of the school uniform. The black nails should have been against the rules but Ruth found that if she kept out of serious trouble then the teachers would ignore the odd bit of individuality.

Then Ruth brought in the Tarot cards and that began the end of our friendship. It wasn't her predicting my death that did it, I didn't take much notice of that, but she started to become more popular, more interesting. Suddenly she wasn't on the outside anymore, it was just me. Stories circulated about Ruth, of séances and Ouija boards, curses and other weird stuff. I knew it was all nonsense and so did she but she loved the attention it gave her, the power and the mystery. I could have tagged along, gained some popularity out of just being her friend but I decided I wasn't that shallow so we drifted apart.

Although I didn't believe in the Tarot cards the phrase "Death by Water" stuck in my head. I was at that age when you start to lie awake at nights thinking about death, about the fact that one day you will die. It seemed so far away and yet so solidly there in my future. I remember picturing myself attached to a long rope being pulled slowly but surely towards an enormous black pit. The edge was a long way off in the distance but the rope never stopped pulling, winding me in. This was when I first started to write poetry, long obsessive pieces full of clumsy dark imagery.

I didn't show anyone my writing, just kept it all in an exercise book in my desk. I found that book when I went home after university to clear out my old bedroom. I was so ashamed of the contents that I burned it. I wish I hadn't now.

I left school to study English at university and never saw Ruth again but it was there that something convinced me of the truth of her prophecy. It was the first week of term and I was sitting in the lecture theatre feeling lonely, an outsider again and I suddenly thought of Ruth, I thought about how I needed someone like her to sit beside me now, to be a friend in this bewildering place.

The lecturer was passing around handouts, students were chatting and I was just sitting alone thinking back on how that friendship had so quickly grown and then died. At that moment a bundle of notes was pushed along the desk to me and I began to focus again. I was really excited to be doing proper lectures. We had a reading list, we had notes with quotations from big important poems. This felt like grown-up stuff.

Looking at the paper in front of me a phrase leapt out and stopped my heart: "Fear Death by Water". Of course you could say it was a pure coincidence that those words from the Wasteland should appear as I thought about Ruth but something clicked in my head that day and I decided that the universe was sending me this message.

The strangest thing was that after the initial shock I found that I was comforted by this idea. It was just as if I suddenly knew what the end would be so I could stop worrying about it and get on with life. I have carried this thought like a certainty ever since, I have known that whenever my death would come it would be in water.

I also decided that there was no point trying to run away from my fate so instead I decided to run headlong at it and see what it would do. The next day I went out and joined the swimming, scuba diving and canoeing clubs. I made new friends through these clubs and began to grow up, to gain some confidence. I met my husband, Jack, a few years later at a sailing club dance. Boats and sailing were my life for more than sixty years.

I did live in the desert for a while, or on the edge of the desert, after Jack died, the children had all left home and I felt alone again. I went to Africa as a volunteer for three months. Three months away from the sea, without seeing even a raindrop in all that time I was lost and had to come home.

It's been a few years now since I could even go for a swim. The pit that I dreaded as a child is well within sight now, the rope will soon run out and while I don't seek the end it certainly doesn't frighten me anymore. My body is getting weaker and the doctors are mostly concentrating on making me comfortable.

I'm told that the most likely cause of death for me now is something called pulmonary oedema. A doctor tried to explain it to me but I didn't really understand the details. Put simply my heart is failing and is less and less able to pump blood efficiently. As the blood pressure in my lungs drops the doctor said that more and more fluid is pushed into the air spaces. My body being too weak to fight I will succumb and my lungs will finally fill with water.

review: Orla McAinden

on Malcolm Orange Disappears

by Jan Carson

IRISH WRITING ABOUNDS IN MYSTICISM AND FAIRYTALE. YEATS, SYNGE, SILE DE VALERA, Lady Gregory conjured up magical worlds of heroes, of legend, magical wells, strange doings at the fairy fort. We do myth and legend really well, building huge complicated Celtic middle earths for our creations to inhabit. As for gritty nail-on-the-head realism, we've got Dubliners, O'Casey, Banville, right up to Donal Ryan. Yet try to put the words "Irish writer" and "magical realism" into the same sentence. Try adding the words, Northern Irish, Protestant, theology graduate and the sentence seems absurd in the extreme.

Magical realism is the purview of the South Americans, right? Up in the Northern hemisphere we can claim Salman Rushdie and Yann Martel. Irish magical realism? Erm... And yet no other genre could possibly be employed to describe Jan Carson's debut novel, 'Malcolm Orange Disappears'. From the opening sentence to the admission on page three, that twin winged baby girls push Malcolm's chicken pox off the front page of the local newspaper, the magical gauntlet is first displayed for inspection and then flung, unapologetically.

Malcolm's story plays out against a backdrop of small-town, rural North American cities and suburbs, coming to rest in Portland, Oregon. The realism is so complete, the superb description of small town life, its flea-pit motels, its transient populations, its twitching windows and bursting mega-churches so gently, so unobtrusively executed that it comes as

no surprise to learn that the author spent several years immersed in this culture, working as an arts development officer in a faith-based Christian community, and in fact scribbled out her first attempts at fiction under Oregon's big skies.

Into the mix of Malcolm's mayhem we add a missing, derelict father, a collection of dead and decaying grandparents abandoned to the *John/Jane Doe* drawers of county morgues all over the country, and finally, the inhabitants of the Baptist retirement village in Portland where Malcolm, his mother and infant brother finally find a permanent berth through an act of God (who turns out to be a short, grizzled black man, and a Baptist. So now we know.)

The language throughout, is calm and prosaic. The magical happenings slip in so quietly in such a matter-of-fact prose that the reader sometimes needs a double take, to re-read a line with a sensation of *did that really say what I thought it said?* Reading Malcolm Orange does not require a suspension of disbelief, and such a suspension is not possible. At no point does the reader lose touch with the sensation of being a reader, in the same way that at a screening of *The Matrix* one does not think, "Gosh, I must try that at home." The book revels in its glorious improbability and layers miracle after miracle, fraud after friendship, sorrow upon joy, continually.

No novel about small-town rural life in the United States of America could neglect to mention Christianity, God and his (or her) all-pervasive influence on the peoples. The book abounds with pastors, faith healers, preachers' widows, and is full of references to faith; its continuance and, frequently, its loss. Carson has a theology and culture Masters degree from St Andrew's University, in effect a Masters in Literature focused on the Bible, no less; and the presence of God, as a bargaining tool, as a port in a storm, as a first refuge and a last resort, pervades the novel. Malcolm's theological education is understandably stunted in relation to Carson's, as he has spent almost all his life criss-crossing America in a Volvo, and he is frequently heard to double check "Ours is the Jesus God, right?" before sending his desperate prayer skyward.

At the heart of the book is the eternal and recognisable conflict between parental desire for freedom and the realities of responsibility, and the child's search for a responsible human adult upon whom to rely. The eccentric elderly residents of the Baptist retirement village

are portrayed with tenderness and love, their foibles and their slipping away into the recesses of frailty, and dementia, is delicately drawn, their gradual disappearance being mirrored in Malcolm's own physical disintegration. The sinister Dr Blue is a thinly veiled metaphor for dementia and his plans for the eradication of music from the village give the residents a focal point for resistance and togetherness.

A novel dealing with the hackneyed themes of paternal dereliction and maternal emotional absence and dysfunction could be expected to inspire sympathy and fear such as in Mark Cousins's '15 Days Without a Head'; a novel about growing up, reaching the bewildering uncharted territory of puberty and finding selfhood in adverse circumstances could produce 'Angela's Ashes', but to start with those premises and to end up with 'Malcolm Orange Disappears' is a truly startling direction for an Irish writer. The only Irish novel with which I can draw any kind of comparison is JG Farrell's wonderful, anarchic, crazy 'Troubles', winner of the Lost Man Booker Prize for 1970.

This is Carson's first novel, but she is no stranger to the world of literature. She is outreach and Arts Development Officer at the Ulster Hall, runs a monthly literary salon, has read (and written) widely in Ireland, Britain and the US. Malcolm Orange was five years in the gestating, squeezed (as so many first novels are) into the spaces around the author's "real life". It certainly wasn't a waste of five years; the book definitely rewards reading and is redemptive and joyful. Carson is a busy woman, writing in what she calls "the margins" of her hectic schedule and she freely admits that she feels Malcolm Orange is not the best book she is capable of writing, in which case, I eagerly await her next offering. This is a wonderful, warm and brave first novel, proving that magical realism is no longer the sole property of *exotic* authors, but in the right hands can be universal in appeal.

Malcolm Orange Disappears is published by Liberties Press.

review: Jonathan O'Brien

on Sinker

by Jason Johnson

SET IN AN ALTERNATE PRESENT DAY, WHEN DRINKING ALCOHOL TO EXCESS IS A professional sport, *Sinker* drops us head first into the life of Derry born law dropout, Baker Forley, a new recruit into this reviled and controversial sport. He's not an alcoholic though, he doesn't even like to drink socially, he's just there to make some money and do something with his empty life. He teams up with an arse-groping American drinking coach called Ratface and heads to sunny Mallorca for the infamous Bullfight drinking battle.

It's all going to plan until the heat gets to Baker and he stares at the wrong woman in the crowd, a mysterious Arabian beauty called Crystal and is knocked out by her Saudi oil-baron husband's heavy, a bodyguard called Nap.

Afterwards the alcoholic Saudi feels guilty about Baker losing out in the Bullfight and to make amends he invites Baker and Ratface to his Gaudi-designed home so they can teach him how to drink like a professional. And he's willing to pay handsomely for their services. But this is not the real reason they are invited over. Others in the background are conspiring to use Baker for more than his drinking skills. As he drinks to excess in the hot sun hidden lust surfaces, Baker learns the truth about why he's been invited and must escape before he loses everything.

This novel is described as, 'inspired by the power and complexity of addiction, *Sinker* is a thrilling, irreverent yet often joyful take on a hopeless but changing male drinking culture.' The story opens strongly and hooks you in. At the start of the novel Johnson builds

his world well; we get the history and rules of the sport of Professional Drinking. You can sense he really enjoyed creating this aspect of the story. We hear the commentary on it from a liberal media which hates the sport and wants it banned.

‘Sink has been called ‘the most disturbing so-called sport on the face of the earth and the one which prove most concisely that mankind is mad, self-destructive and, worse, likes being that way.’

‘Protesters wave placards calling for a ban and shout statistics about the sport and the lifespan of livers and the empty, endless void of death, and stuff like that.’

An interesting aspect of Sinker is the way it explores drinking and modern masculinity by pushing it to its most extreme. It’s a hyper-real version of the way thousands of people behave every weekend in pubs throughout Ireland and Britain. The first half of the novel is explores this deformed male drinking culture really well. For example, when Ratface gives Baker advice on how to perform at the Bullfight: ‘He says, ‘Besides, you’re a man, M-A-N. Tough and mean and dick muscle and rising to the occasion. Alpha it up, okay? Control your environment, got it?’ To be a real alpha male, with a big dick, you must drink. Sex and drinking are here exposed as intertwined. It exposes the pressure on men to drink hard to show how manly they are.

Johnson is also a good at continually creating fresh and unusual images. The house where the Saudi lives is an absurdist, Dali-esque nightmare. It’s so odd one character even dies by water fountain. Another example is at the end of the novel when they are on the run from danger and head deep underground, ‘It’s like we’re stuck now, nowhere, in the middle of zero, dark as the inside of a horse, right on the edge of some sort of hell.’ The house is a warped labyrinth of danger.

The narrator and protagonist Baker Forley is utterly unlikeable, with not one redeemable feature. He is a cynical, self-obsessed loser who punctuates every idea with an expletive or ‘some shite’. He is the modern anti-hero, he’s laconic, laid back, to use his own words he doesn’t give a shite. But the problem with this is at times he feels so laid back he’s not even interested in the story he’s telling or his own life.

His coach is a man called Ratface. He is an American expert of the sport of Professional Drinking. A sort of alcoholic Mr. Miyagi. He has a nasty habit of grabbing Baker's arse without permission. This is supposed to be funny but is overused. Ratface is his nickname because he looks like a rat. I have a problem with this way naming of a character. It's too reductive. It seems a cool thing to do for a generation raised on Tarantino movies; and while it can work on screen where we see the character not just the name, on the page of a book it becomes repetitive and reduces the character to a simple idea: this character is a rat, he cannot be trusted.

Baker and Ratface are the two most developed characters and their relationship exposes a truth typical to many male relationships. They constantly argue and insult each other; they never permit themselves to get along. But the other characters and relationships are underdeveloped. Women in particular don't fare well. The only real female character is Crystal, whose only role in the story appears is to be an object of Baker's desire and to deceive him. She is the ice-cold femme fatale. We learn very little about her and why she acts as she does. The only other women in the story stand around looking sexy and serving beer. The Saudi oil-baron and Nap the Bodyguard are even more undeveloped. The Saudi is a rich alcoholic while Nap is a bodyguard with a heart of gold who can't hold his drink.

Overall *Sinker*, to use a sporting cliché, is a novel of two halves. When I first started to read the novel it read as an interesting comment on the male drinking culture, but this aspect disappears. It could have done a lot more with this idea. Midway during the novel the story shifts and transforms into a warped revenge thriller when a crazy ex-associate of Ratface's shows up and starts killing characters at with his ice-cold femme fatale at his side. By the end it feels like a missed opportunity.

Sinker is published by Liberties Press.

short story

Lynda Tavakoli

An Appropriate Act of Love

I WAS NOT A QUIET CHILD I'M TOLD, THE PENALTY FOR BEING THE YOUNGEST OF SEVEN children necessitating a degree of forthrightness on my part, but still my candour did little to gain my mother's attention. I was, in short, her nonentity. And so it happened that from the age of five or six I set out to find a way through the seemingly impenetrable wall of her indifference.

From the vantage point of a high stool I'd often watch the back of mother's head while she stood at work by our kitchen sink, black curls springing erratically up and down the contour of her neck while the froth of dishwater fizzed between her fingers. I couldn't say if she was beautiful then (although she probably was, I think now) but she had that look of someone long ago frayed around her edges. Such detachedness was a source of fascination to many I imagine but to a child it begot only frustration and annoyance; emotions that like some virulent staphylococcus virus seemed to invade my own psyche from a very early age.

My mother's eyes were as grey as the dawning of a flat Irish day, and emotionless to all her children, but especially to me. It was because I was her final straw, her last sprog to contaminate an already worn-out womb and by virtue of that fact, I suppose, I became her nemesis. Something I accepted with begrudging antagonism.

"Stuart," she'd snarl through some invisible mouth in the back of her head, "Get on with your effing homework", or "Stuart, get up them stairs and tidy up that shithole you call a bedroom", and on and on without ever bothering to screw her neck round far enough to have eye contact with me, that final straw of hers. It was a verbal, grossly immature game she played, with me responding in kind and inevitably ending the loser to her far superior

source of colourful language.

On the day of 'the event' as it later became known, my father had abandoned his fractious offspring to their regular after-meal skirmishes and escaped with the daily paper to the lavatory. Inevitably my mother wasted little time and like some dummiless ventriloquist embarked upon her favourite sport of Stuart-baiting in her husband's absence.

"Stuart, fetch that drying cloth right now or I'll scalp the legs off you," she threatened just as the crust I was sucking on was finding itself momentarily lodged in the vicinity of my larynx. Fearful of spluttering breaded spit over my siblings and like a trout cautious of some wriggling underwater ambush, I closed my mouth and coughed the offending irritation slowly back towards my waiting stomach. My attention, however, remained on the agitated stiffening of my mother's shoulders as she waited for a retort that for the first time did not come and it was at that moment I knew I had her. As her head rotated the full one hundred and eighty degrees it needed to fix me in her sights I felt the slow grind of teeth as my jaw clamped shut. This was a game I had won before even I knew the rules and if it had an aim then, the final outcome had surely been achieved at the very beginning. Suddenly I had my mother's complete attention without speaking so much as a single word.

"What did you say?" She hurled the words over at me across the linoleum, her denial at my silence oddly touching and unexpected. "What did you fucking say?"

My mouth smiled the smile of an obdurate clam sealing in words that might earlier have shrieked their way out but trapped inside my head their muteness confirmed my sudden authority. I had unwittingly discovered something wonderful; that the power of silence was infinitely more effective than the power of speech and even at that early stage of the game I knew that it was probably too late for turning back. So there you have it – the beginning. In the kitchen of an ordinary house in some common or garden council estate I was then to become an extraordinary boy.

When, after a fortnight of insults, bribes and finally serious personal threats to my well-being no one had elicited a single murmur from my lips, my mother dragged me mutely to the doctor.

“He won’t talk doctor,” she told him while systematically stabbing me in the shoulders with a stiletto-pointed forefinger. Then angrily to me, “Will you?”

He asked me to open my mouth for examination and I readily obliged. In truth it was a relief to finally allow even some of the unspoken words to escape albeit noiselessly into the air for it had started to seem like they had begun to clog up my mind. *You have the control* they were saying, *as long as you can keep them in*. But it was hard in those early days when at six years old it would have been easier to renege than not. Had it not been for the doctor’s slightly patronising response that day I think I may have succumbed to the pressure to co-operate but as it was he merely confirmed a diagnosis I had made myself.

“Mrs Chapman, there is nothing physically wrong with your son,” he told my mother, smiling. “This is a power thing. Stuart has embarked upon a game with you and right now he’s winning it hands down.”

My feet suddenly lost contact with the floor as I found myself hauled from the surgery and I never saw the offending doctor again. Later I would hear my mother saying to our next door neighbour, “Fucking doctors, they think they know it all.”

At school the other children regarded me at first, with not some small degree of suspicion. After all, my behaviour attracted the undivided attention of a great many adults but this ultimately stood in my favour because it often detracted from the misdemeanours of others. Consequently I departed primary school with an overflow of friendships for all the wrong reasons and even those that had not been verbally consummated.

Meanwhile at home, the siblings who had stuck it out had come to accept my strange behaviour over time, treating me with embarrassed indifference that served only to fuel my mother’s on-going frustrations. In the end she had been forced to seek help from the professionals for my ‘condition’ as she called it, when my father told her in front of me (it was always a source of amazement to me that because I wouldn’t speak he also thought I couldn’t hear), that “Stuart needed help because he was obviously a bloody retard and people at work had started to talk.” I felt the indignant objections hammering against my skull in an attempted break out and nearly relented then but he patted my head like I was the family pet and disappeared off to watch the match on telly. It was as close as I ever

came to losing control.

But if my father had a casual attitude towards his seemingly retarded son then the same could not be said of his wife. Increasingly trapped inside her continued resentment she became ever more desperate to assert her authority and dragged me from one specialist to another.

“Stuart has a psychological disorder affecting his cognitive abilities,” said one.

“Stuart suffers from a condition not unlike autism and needs very specific emotional support,” offered another.

And, “I’m very sorry, Mrs Chapman, but your son needs a course of medication to help remedy his obviously complicated mental problems.”

But the one I most enjoyed, “Stuart is a little shit whose fucking case I intend to crack before I die,” this last always from my mother on the way home from every futile appointment.

By the time I left school at sixteen the specialists had all but given up on me having devoted a decade to probing my subconscious without success. I was disappointed, my mother now remaining the only adversary to play the game out with, but it changed nothing at home. Or perhaps it did. One evening my father failed to return from work. The house had been, as usual, quiet during the day, my elder siblings having by then dispersed to lead more normal lives elsewhere and I now wonder how I never noticed their leaving or indeed how long it had been since I was the only child remaining. The food was on the table; bacon, sausages, tomatoes, potato bread and two eggs – all fried as he liked it and now coagulating on my dad’s plate. Mother sat across from me at the table, hands tidily on her lap; mine stuffed in the pocket of my sweatshirt making bigger the hole already there. *Where is he?*

For an hour, maybe two, we sat like dead fish frozen into an icy lake and still he did not come. Beyond the window of the kitchen light was being sucked slowly out of the day and finally the grey gloom of evening started to invade the room. A fear was beginning to gnaw at me and although my mother had moved not an inch during that time I regarded the

subtle change in her manner with growing panic. The eyes that for so long had scorched her resentment into my soul had taken on the look of a hibernating tortoise reluctant to accept the onset of its awakening. They were dead eyes to match the dead words that finally slunk out from in between her teeth, “Now are you happy?”

My father never did come back to his wife or to me. One of my sisters said afterwards that he could no longer play the gooseberry in his marriage and I asked her, on a piece of paper, what she meant. All she did was to tear it up and slap me hard across the face, while seeping through the walls of the next room I could hear my mother’s breath like an old clock ticking out the remainder of its time.

She won the game in the end, of course, as I always guessed that she would. The mystery to me was how it had taken so long for her to figure the solution out. From then on she never spoke to me again and right up until her death some years later the silent retribution she exacted upon me was fitting to my crime finally proving her worth as an adversary after all. When I returned to our wordless house after the funeral I knew that this last silence would probably see the end of me too for after all there was no sport in continuing to play the game on my own. Earlier that same day one of the family had been clearing out the kitchen drawers and cupboards unearthing a deluge of obsolete paperwork that lay discarded in a corner waiting for final eviction to the bin. Among the pile was a dog-eared, faded blue file with my name scribbled across the front in mother’s childish handwriting and curious, I had picked it up. Inside, carefully organised by date, were several hundred official documents concerning my case including appointment letters and professional correspondences offering varied and diverse diagnoses on my condition.

It was in some ways touching how she’d kept those indictments for all that time and I store them now inside a box in her room where these days I seem to spend most of my time. The letters are a comfort in this soundless world of mine and sometimes I will take them out just to smell her soaped fingers lingering there with the memory of her touch. But every now and then you might find me press my lips to the paper secretly whispering my regrets in a voice gravelled from lack of use, the sound strangely hostile to my ears. In a funny sort of way I suppose, I owe her that much.

Paul McCaffrey

Breathe

WHEN I AM NERVOUS, I NOTICE MY EYELASHES AND THE TIP OF MY NOSE. THIS IS ONE OF those evenings. I can smell the body-warmed air, a mix of perfume and aftershave. A school hand bell is rung in the still evening, as one thousand guests lean in and watch from behind a line of columns, looking at the spectacle laid out before them, on a cobbled Dublin courtyard. Three hundred souls, dressed in white, their eyes covered with red blindfolds, are lying between white sheets on beds of straw.

Four men, dressed as undertakers, walk slowly among the bodies towards a central plinth and then outwards to the audience. They wring their hands, their heads bowed as if in prayer.

The bell rings and the supine bodies begin to move. Each one lifting their right arm very slowly until it is vertical then bringing the arm down to rest across their chests. A palpable tension is created among the on-looking crowd. The bell rings again and the actors return their right arms to their sides to rest.

What is this about? I know this is some kind of installation art, part theatre, part concert. 'A *one off, site-specific, piece of art*' as the brochure says. Other than that I am in total ignorance. Like everyone, I have come for the party afterwards. We are in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, a former British military hospital. It is a grey granite two-storeyed building surrounding a central quad, a bit like the Oxford college buildings.

The undertakers walk up and down and the bell rings once more.

'Breathe' they chant in unison, 'breathe'. The word is elongated as the actors are slightly out of time. Like a Mexican wave it reaches a peak and fades away. 'Breathe' like a breath it expands and fades.

I slip into an open wound in my mind. My brother Jim meets me at Perth WA Airport. He is slow on his feet and his daughters greet me first. Finally he draws level and I shake his hand. We are both trying to hide something, for me, it is my shock and for Jim, his breathlessness.

The bell rings 'breathe'. The actors lift their arms again. Cameras flash and the reporter in front of me flicks open his notepad and jots a few lines. The undertakers turn and walk back towards the plinth.

'Breathe.'

James is in his cot, my firstborn. I will him to breathe out loud, or move so I know he is still alive. I need a sign. He sighs and I lie back in bed and go to sleep.

Jim is in the hospice bed, my Dad's first born. I will him to stop breathing, to be still. He is still, except for his breathing, like a runner. Step step breathe. Step step breathe.

I am running over the Drumragh Bridge in the quiet Omagh countryside. The shadows on the tar are red. There is a taste of salt in my mouth and my lungs burn. My legs are pumping independently of my mind. The air doesn't have enough oxygen and I struggle not to gasp. Step step breathe. Don't panic, don't break the rhythm.

The cross country race saves me from the Gaelic football pitch, because I am a dreamer not a player. I am always the last picked, the left back defence, the last chance. I stand on the snow-covered all weather pitch and think of the infinite number of games of Gaelic football that can be played, just by the choices each boy makes. Each one alters the rest of the game and my choices always seem to be for the worse.

I am stunned, and for a moment confused, stumbling backwards as pain begins to engulf my consciousness. My face stings and sings for attention, like I have been strapped by the teacher, except this time I have been disciplined by the random force of the leather ball. The ball has been saved from going out by the soft skin of my dreamer face, and the opposition

scores. That is why I run the cross country races every sports period; it is the dreamer's choice.

The bell rings again. A boy dressed in white walks between the souls. The chorus calls 'breathe' a slow exhalation. He climbs the plinth and stands. The undertakers reach the plinth and the bell rings. They turn and walk away and the boy begins to sing.

Jim still breathes little shallow gasps, each one as precious to him, as a cold drink in a desert. I hold his hand. Mary Black sings 'Mo Ghile Mear' on his laptop in the corner. A small bedside lamp casts a soothing light over the souls gathered here; his children Siobhan, Brendan and Adrienne, his wife Liz, my sister Frances and myself. We all hug his body. He is on a morphine-induced journey, a long distance run, in his mind. You can see by the way his back is arched, and his breathing: step, step, breathe.

The bell rings one last time and it is over. There is a short ripple of applause and the party begins. We file out to the Museum gardens, fetching bottles of wine and beer from the cars. The talk is about the damp straw the actors had to lie on and the €90,000 the artist was rumoured to have been paid and we wonder in our heads if it was good art, or just another example of the Emperor's new clothes. I find out that the actors were actually chanting *greed* but *breathe* seems so right that it stays in my memory.

I join a knot of friends. Kate tells me the Beeb will run her new play on radio four and Sean mentions how he is going to Oxford for a month to act in Macbeth. Ray reminds us all of the last time we got together for a champagne breakfast in St Stephens Green. Well actually, the uneaten nibbles and one bottle of champagne that were left over from the previous night's exhibition opening, at the gallery where Ray works. Oh, and a couple of bottles of Cava and Rioja we bought from the local Euro Spar.

We all laugh as we remember a drunk coming up to us, all matey and confidential; telling us

the park wardens would confiscate the drink and ban us if we were caught.

‘Ye know what to do, Bud? You wrap the bottles in paper bags, righ? Hide them there, in the bushes. Ye’re smiling; ye don’t believe me, do ye? I know Bud, I’ve been chucked out before, believe me. You know what I’m saying, righ?’

We believed him alright. But no one did see us and we left a corkscrew buried at the base of a tree as a reminder of that day.

No alarm bells ring as Jim finally slips. A long space between two breaths and then he relaxes flattening onto the bed. Cara Dillon is singing ‘Black is The Colour’ and we hug and cry, and we are relieved. It is over, his struggle and our struggle. We have been with him this far. Now he is beyond us. We quietly sup tea, call friends and talk in low tones. Yet, there is relief above all else. His race is over and so is our watch.

The Museum gardens are now dark. There have been too many glasses of wine, ten or twelve? Did I smoke from the Cuban cigar Ray passed round? It is a blur. The park bench, I am leaning on, is beginning to move, as I rely on it more for support. I pull myself upright as Sean says, ‘I think he needs to go home.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I am all right. I am just tired’.

I walk towards the cars like a wounded soldier, a ghost from the old military hospital. I go down some steps to a lower garden area behind a wall for a pee. My good friend Paul waits for me above and I am vaguely aware of him talking to an elderly lady, who is intent on going down the steps.

I stumble into the car and mumble, ‘I’m OK, Paul. I’m OK, don’t worry.’ He keeps asking me am I alright, as he drives through the South Dublin streets towards Harold’s Cross. But I am not alright. I can feel a surge coming up from deep inside.

I can no longer hold it in. As Paul pulls away from a set of lights, I jump out of the car and

run between the lines of traffic, to a small park area. There, I heave up the whole night.

After Australia, I cannot paint. I find work in a factory. It is a place for hard licks, not dreamers. I do not catch their first words, the time it takes to wrench me away from the open wound to the past. *Marijuana Man* they call me. I suppose, in a way, they are right. It will pass. I prefer their puzzlement to pity.

Looking out through my eyes today, I can see the soles of James' shoes. He sends a shower of scree skittering down Errigal towards me, as we climb together. The wound is healing; I breathe deeply and regret nothing.

D. Joyce-Ahearne

Handle

THE SOUND OF DIAL UP DIED WITH US. THOSE ALIEN TONES OF DISCONNECT THAT separated us from the internet petered out somewhere around bebo, swallowed up by the limitless space they heralded.

“...as of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality...”

The lecturer droned information he could get online later, or tomorrow, or fifty years from now if he wanted to. Rob genuinely had no idea why he had bothered coming. He had more pressing concerns. For fifty minutes he would craft this tweet.

He threw down a notepad and pen to give the impression of paying attention, the slap of bound paper on the desk made some people look up. He took out his laptop.

Important tweets came from the laptop. This was beyond his phone with its cracked screen, he couldn't trust it. The photo was on the phone though so he'd have to transfer it but it was grand, he had all lecture.

“...the distinguishing traits of existence in late capitalist society... do not represent... dehumanisation, but instead gesture towards...”

I fucking hate these new profiles. Everyone hates change I suppose, nothing new. I don't even know why I took those out I can type faster.
Rob opened Word, flicking it up now and again to take a note.

“...air-conditioned, muffled silences in which computers work...”

I can type faster than he can fucking talk. I'd nearly put the headphones in. Probably a bit much though.

The lecturer flicked through slides on the projector that looked down on the room and Rob took the photo from his phone and put it on his laptop. He had sat in this same room the week before for some talk and the projector had been a twitter wall.

It was probably the most interesting thing I've ever sat through in here. At least it was relevant.

He looked over the shoulder of the girl in front of him, her phone resting on her thigh, her thumb and middle finger holding it in place as she slowly drew her finger down the screen. She gently passed over his face as she swept back in time through yesterday's tweets. He would have got her up on Facebook then and there only the people behind him would see.

I should tweet her put down that phone, that'd be gas. You'd want the twitter wall back up for that one though so they'd all see it. I don't even know if there's etiquette for flirting on twitter. Flittering. That sounds shit. Fleeting. Social Mediation – what exists between two people who have a relationship online.

Rob brought the photo up on the laptop and heard whoever was behind him stifle a laugh. He had to rotate it the right way up and caught under breath laughter from at least two people behind him.

Actually if I get this one up soon she'll probably see it. If I see her looking at it I'll kick her chair, that's what I'll do. She'd get a kick out of that. She's fucking *always* on twitter.

She said she had spent the weekend working on her presence as she calls it. She got ten new followers over the three days. She fucking mainlines trends though that one. I'd say she'll laugh at this. She might be more likely to retweet it if she knows I can see her.

So it didn't really happen but you wouldn't know by the picture. I mean it's the picture that makes it look like it *did* happen. Anyone who knows me will know it didn't happen and then anyone who doesn't know me will laugh, hopefully retweet it. Favouriting really isn't worth a fuck to me.

I've been promised retweets, at least five of them. There were five of us there when it happened, or when the picture was taken at least. Maybe it's too late now to bother, maybe it's gone. But if the five of them retweet it you wouldn't know.

Not much I can do if they renege, I know them all too well to unfollow them, it'd just be sad. Fuck it, we'll see. I've to make up for that underperforming makeup selfie.

Nobody was speaking in the lecture. For every one person with a pen there were two with laptops. If you were writing the lecturer assumed you were writing about whatever he was talking about. If you were typing he assumed it was Facebook.

It was gas because if you were on a laptop and you *were* on Facebook you'd still have Word open and would be taking the odd note. Half the people with paper were just fucking doodling and the other half were writing poems.

Bring the teacher an Apple.

People in the room came up in Rob's feed.

I've forty-six followers in this room. But I follow all of them too, though there are maybe five that I'd actually interact with. I'll unfollow a few and see if they notice. If they do the same, fuck it, no real loss I suppose.

"...virtual reality, that is to say, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our physiological and social functions... gradually become useless..."

I could think if he'd just shut the fuck up for a second. He's eyeing someone up down the front there on their phone. I wonder is he on twitter himself? Would I even bother following him? Would he follow me though? Is that something they do? Could be worth looking into. What are they into?

Rob started to compose. The white box greyed the screen. How best to handle it? It always made him smile to start something with a full stop. It was like post-writing. It was meant for one person but this was more than a conversation, you could never call it dialogue.

Full stop. @ him. That's how he'd handle it. He'd told the lad in the photo that he was going to tweet it but that had been last week. It was probably still alright. Fuck it, it was going up.

Add photo. You couldn't really make it out from the thumbnail. The little grey box in the corner of it with the white x in it was the most eye-catching part.

Who's in this photo? Search and tag up to 10 people. He put in the handle and your man came up. What the fuck is the difference between tagging him and just mentioning him

in the tweet? Wasn't the time to experiment. He'd try it this evening with some night out photo.

The photo is fairly self-explanatory, I dunno what to add really. I could put the location but I don't think it really matters, where it is really isn't the point. I mean there's an argument for not even mentioning his handle, who it is really isn't the point either. It actually might make people I don't know less likely to retweet it.

Rob backspaced the handle until he just had the white box on grey with a full stop in it. But then the benefit of mentioning him is that at least one person would probably retweet it.

He retyped @ and the first letter and up he popped. He clicked him. His profile picture floated below the photo of him, the photo with the little grey box in the corner with the white x in it.

104 characters left. Something witty. Rob had a few ideas. Too long, fuck it. Whatever about ampersands, 2 for to is obscene, we're not *that* post-writing. No.

It fits but it's not that funny and I don't want to be relying on hashtags for humour; brevity not hashtags, is the soul of wit. No. What else?

Would your man down there have any ideas? Put it to the room. He was still shiting on about something, history or the other one.

Rob tried another. That'd do it, yeah, that was gas. It looked well in the little white box, suspended in grey. If your man down there said that now to a group of first years they'd all fucking clap.

Is there anything else though? Is there anything going on now that I could tie it into, stick a hashtag on the end of it. Ireland is trending whatever the fuck that means. I suppose it's relevant. Not really for this though. I'd look desperate.

Fuck it, tweet.

Your tweet was posted. As if it's gone, like it's something else now, as if it's still not mine to delete. I suppose it is gone though.

Would it be liked? The sad thing is now is after all the talk, all the effort, it's just twitter if someone, anyone, says so.

Rob hadn't heard a word the lecturer had said for the last half-hour. He was absorbed in his own intellectual property. He had no business with whatever was being taught. He heard the words history a lot, and reality.

Well he had his own history to make and whatever your man was talking about wasn't his reality. The century was unfolding on twitter, on his phone, on the lecture screen, disconnected. He was after his 140 characters of fame.

"...identity is a dream pathetic in its absurdity. You dream of being yourself when you've nothing better to do..."

The lecturer let them go. His phone vibrated.

Eve-Marie Power

Notes from the Farm

DINNER OF BOILED SPUDS, BOILED BROCCOLI AND BOILED HAM. NEVER BUTTER OR salt and especially no sauce of any description. I long gave up even offering my dad anything with his meat-and-two-veg, gave up years ago. Dad supervised and made sure nothing gloopy reached his plate as he eyed dinner from the kitchen door. He still wore his work coat, which added manure to the aroma of boiled broccoli. He set a shoulder to the wall and his hand ripped open the coat's Velcro.

"Twins today. On the farm."

"Twins?" I filled his water glass then paused at the empty space beside the plate. "Do you want a spoon or your all-in-one spork-thingy?"

"Two bulls. Two boys. The all-in-one."

Supposedly the future of cutlery, the spork on a folded square of kitchen roll beside his glass from a closed hotel... it could have been a scene from the 60's.

"Had to pull them out with my hands. Hand."

"The twins?"

"Aye." He rubbed his stump against the wall, hissing and cursing a cold front that would not be forecasted for days. After some rumbling and more cursing, he checked again to make sure there was only meat and vegetables on his plate.

Dad sucked his teeth. "Is The Fugitive on tonight?"

"They stopped showing that years ago. Go wash up and I'll carry the tray down."

His 6 foot 4 inch height shuffled ahead of me, his leg never quite the same since his third stroke.

“Can you get The Fugitive on one of your DVD discs?”

“I’m sure I can download it.” I watched the tray while navigating the disabled-friendly steps with their thick, rubber treads and day-glow handrail that led down to dad’s extension.

“Will that work in my DVD player?”

Through the wheelchair-wide door I saw him discard his work coat over the headboard of his single bed. Dad cursed at his wellies until they stamped off his feet. In the en-suite he swore at the tap until hot water came out.

“Should do,” I added The Fugitive to his long list of requests. Piracy and copyright law entirely lost in this room. “I can burn the series onto discs for you. Then you can watch it whenever you like.”

“I love that show,” his voice sounded over the strangest noise. A one-armed man washes his hand by rubbing it against the tap, creating friction and lather. “Big John says I’m just like –“

“Doctor Richard Kimble?” I laughed. As he tucked into boiled spud, broccoli and ham, I blinked and felt the odd realisation that he would always be taller than me. And I smiled through the odd prickle of threatening tears as he tapped the spork off his waiting dessert. A coffee swiss roll, a €2 special in SuperValu. I then received the usual pressure to have a slice after dinner.

“Did both bulls survive?” I changed the subject.

Dad shook his head.

“Oh. Well, at least the farm still has –“

“Lost the mother too. A big milker. I didn’t wake you this morning when I left?”

Dad always woke me at half past six when he got up. He always woke me again at

half past seven when the front door closed and he made the 15 mile drive to his family farm.

“Not at all,” I answered.

I wanted to ask. But the gap of 34 years between then and now halted my question of how he could return every day to the place of his accident.

Dad began his usual bragging about being a disabled driver and how he gets free pass over the motorway toll bridge. Each way. Before he could shake his head, set down his spork and grow wistful over ‘it’s funny how everything can change in that one instant’, I took the swiss roll.

“I’ll slice it for you and leave some out on the worktop.”

“Ah no, I’ll be up after this.”

“Tis grand,” I said. “Tis grand. I need to make my own dinner now anyway.”

“I’ll get you to try some of that swiss roll one of these days!” he declared with a glint in his eye.

I smiled and escaped to the kitchen, pretty sure he will.

* * *

“Well frig it anyhow, may the divil roast ya! How is it they do it? Right when we come along? How is it? As if they knew we were coming!”

“Dad,” I turned off the Micra’s engine as the barricades dropped at Fiddown rail crossing, “This happens every year we go to the show. I’m surprised you keep getting upset.”

“Well fuck it and frig it!” he continued in the long minutes before the train passed.

“We could have come by the motorway,” I pointed out. “Then there’d be none of this waiting around.”

“I like taking the old road,” his voice softened and I didn’t argue. He caught my glance in the rear-view mirror at the long string of cars.

“Half the friggin’ county will be behind us.”

“Behind us, though. Behind. We’ll be at the show in good time.”

“I should have left earlier and gone by myself.”

“The show opened at 10 o’clock. It’s 10:15 now.”

“Up and head off early. That’s what I always do. Be waiting when they open.”

“Your idea of ‘early’ is heading off at half seven in the morning.”

“They never should have stopped doing the Waterford Show. Look how big it gets every year, in Piltown, of all places!”

Whenever my dad pronounces Piltown Show it comes out more like ‘*Pil-toh-shoh*’ – spat by a life-long Waterford farmer, perpetually grieved that he must ‘cross the border’ to attend an agricultural show. As the train glides by and barriers raise, his ranting makes the Waterford-Kilkenny boundary sound like the Khyber Pass.

As we passed by cars discarded on verges, Dad pointed out every sign tacked to streetlights and hammered into roadsides. With great pride, we turned from the string of traffic just before the gates. He flashed a disabled driver’s card at the man who wrangled parking and entrance payment. A man that wore the clashing yellows of a black-and-amber Kilkenny jersey beneath a high-viz vest. “It’s one of them new cards,” Dad leant over me as he tried to hang out the window, “With a hologram on the back. To prevent terrorism. Not terrorism. The other one. Forgeries. People using it and they shouldn’t be using it at all. And there’s my photo on the front? I might have a bit less hair now! It’s one of them *laminated* cards. Took me months ringing The Association in Ballindine before they’d send it

out. That's up near Claremorris.

"Far enough away, isn't it? For a bit of plastic."

Dad kept talking; soon we're waved in without paying.

"Works every time." He smirked and sucked what was left of his teeth.

It is customary to do one full round of the show, then split up. He headed for the vintage section and I checked out the food hall, then any craft displays. You can discern the patterns and stitches in crochet if you are experienced. The women at the ICA tent, they did not ask if I was married, or if I had children. Instead, when I expressed interest in their lace, they said aloud: "And do your husband and children *allow* you time to crochet?"

I made excuses and returned to knobbly fields, blasts of country from a stand selling cassettes, the hang of chips and vinegar against political party tents and the sprawl of drinkers on benches.

At six foot four, it was easy to find Dad amongst the vintage tractors and I watched for a few moments. He stood before an old threshing machine and bragged of long-gone summers, the use of both hands, his mother's currney bread.

Before we leave, we must have ice-cream. I joined the queue and he handed me a warm fifty cent piece – nowhere near enough, but I always made up the difference.

"With syrup?" I ask and his scowl makes me laugh.

Dad pushed through a peg-and-twine barrier and we sat on the enormous mudguards of a new Massey. Nobody shooed us away. The mudguards felt warm, but the ice-cream tasted so cold. I watch young women pass as we eat – in svelte jodhpurs and riding boots, helmets hanging from the crook of their elbows, a blur of rosettes, privilege and starched white shirts.

"I don't want my Flake," Dad laments.

"I'll take it so." I know it is tricky for him to eat a cone, not let it melt everywhere and manage the stick of chocolate. I pressed it into my ice-cream and considered it my gain.

He threw away his cone once its head of white disappeared.

"Now. I feel refreshed," Dad declared to the fields as he stood. "Let's go."

We paused by the dog show on the way out and the same conversation played:

"It's a pity Ben isn't here. He'd win first prize."

"Ben is ancient." I watched children with bouncing puppies and ladies of a certain age who take the show too seriously. "He's blind. Diabetic. It wouldn't be fair to bring a dog like him to a show like this."

"Ah he'd love it. He's a little survivor."

"He is."

"It's a pity your mother wouldn't ever come with us."

I had no answer. Or, at least, the answer would take up the entire show. I wondered if he would ever stop hoping.

On the drive home, of course the gates at Fiddown dropped as we approached. The air in the sky-blue Micra turned blue again, fuelled by a belly of ice-cream and sights of childhood tractors.

"Well, frig it all, anyhow!"

I watched the radio as the Deise welcomed us home for another year, as KCLR 96 changed over to WLR FM.

Chris McLaughlin

Spare Parts: The Ignatius Sweeney Story

I DON'T HAVE TO EDUCATE YOU ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF IRELAND, I'M SURE. But it's my personal belief that geography played a big role in the happenings of this story. Ireland drifting off the west coast of Europe like a parentless child at the swimming pool and England the bigger boy from school, holding our head under water and generally acting the bully. That kind of geography can cause people to go a bit funny. Too much isolation, resentment and boredom, it can be a lethal cocktail. Especially in my village in County Donegal. A train track was never laid anywhere near my village and the buses only run by special request. The men folk of our village sit all day leering out at the vast Atlantic Ocean, the imagined bright lights of America and its steady stream of easy lays and no consequences, just out of reach. All the while the wind is blowing salt into our squinty, red, anvil jawed exteriors. How could you blame us for being stark raving mad? The only people that could match us for isolation are those crazy bastards in Iceland; there is a lot of strange goings on in that place too. Just one consonant of separation you see. We have plenty of bored morons who have always been intent on making trouble right here in our village. Maybe if we had an actual enemy we wouldn't be so inclined to making them up. You see, the bullied very often become bullies themselves. They know they're quite far down the food chain, but there is always someone a little further down that you can vent on.

My village is full of freaks, but there is always someone who is a bigger freak than everyone else. Something must always be done about the biggest freak and when something is done, something then must be done about the new biggest freak, who has emerged to take the old freak's place.

When I was a child the biggest freak by far was Ignatius Sweeny. Ignatius was a bizarre looking fella all right. If you were to imagine your garden variety paedophile, Ignatius would fit the profile. He would've been a tall man if he ever stood up straight, but as it was he was

always walking all stooped over, like a man that was trying not to be noticed. If that was what he was looking for, then he had no hope. How could you not notice a man whose hair and moustache was dyed yellow with cigarette smoke, and who devoted a bedroom in his two room bungalow purely to the collection of broken TV sets? I'll never forget seeing that room for the first time, broken TVs piled from floor to ceiling; it was like coming across the sight of a massacre. When I imagine those broken TVs now I can so easily transpose them for dead bodies. A graveyard for electrical equipment, no decent burial provided, each one just tossed in on top of the pile. Ignatius, odd job man and village dump! You would've thought the villagers would've cut him some slack for the services he provided, but they were eternally ungrateful. They only ever paid him in cigarettes for any jobs he did, that's what accounted for his stained hair and moustache. Perhaps they were right to pay him that way. Nothing he fixed ever stayed fixed. If he repaired a puncture on your bike tyre, it was sure to blow within a few days again. And obviously the TV cemetery indicated that not many he received were ever restored to working order.

Something my da said always sticks in my head. It was the day we got a new TV because Ignatius couldn't fix our old one. He was watching 'CrimeCall' at the time. There was a photo fit of a man on the screen who was wanted for a string of rapes around the country. My da said it looked like Ignatius, but it didn't really, it looked more like Paddy O'Neill, the landlord of the local pub. I think my da just said it looked like Ignatius because he wanted to talk about him. "I don't know why I gave that fucking tele over to him," he said. "I've never known him to actually fix one the whole time he's lived in this village, and he only half fixes the kids' bikes so that they have to keep coming back to his door." He was on a roll now. "And how the fuck did he get that bungalow? Half the village was on the list for that wee house, including your sister who was pregnant at the time and that bastard walks into it from out of nowhere. For all we know the cunt floated in from the middle of the Atlantic on a piece of driftwood." That was the main problem with Ignatius, the fact that nobody knew where he came from, nobody could tell you a tale about his great grandfather and how he'd once been a mad bastard on the drink, or how his father was once a very promising footballer before he broke his leg falling down an open manhole. Everyone in our village needs a back story like that and Ignatius didn't have one. Like my da says he just blew in

from nowhere. The fact that he looked and acted funny wouldn't have set him apart had he been a fourth generation villager. Sure most of us looked and acted funny. It was the fact that he just blew in. That was the problem.

As you have probably already surmised, I'm a good one for pointing the fingers. I think however, that overall that would be a harsh assessment of me. Having never left, I've just had a long time to think about the nature of my village and the people in it. I may point the finger, but I accept that I am complicit in any badness that may be present in this village, and in fact the crux of this story centres on me and the badness of my own actions. As teenagers, my friends and I spent an inordinate amount of time feeling bored and restless. There was very little for us to do, except stare out at the ocean and wait until we reached drinking age. We did our best to make up games. One of my favourites was 'Castlereagh', named after an RUC interrogation centre in East Belfast. If you had four people in your team, each one would get a letter and the four letters together made up a word. All team members would run off and hide in different places. The opposing team would have to find the members of the other team and extract their letter from them by any means necessary. Whenever I was caught I generally didn't hold out that long, a few kicks to the groin and I gave my letter right up. Once the opposing team had all the letters, they had to try and work out what the word was. This generally wasn't that hard, we tended to fluctuate between either 'shit' or 'fuck'. Vocabulary and imagination were not the strong suit of our village's children.

'Castlereagh' might have been violent, but where I'm from violence reaps rewards. If we had more players perhaps we could've thought of longer words and the game would've taken on a more intellectual tone, but there are not that many kids in our village. Our games ended quicker than we wanted them to and we would be back to being bored again. We would resolve this by running through people's gardens, or throwing pebbles at their windows and running away. It just so happened that Ignatius' bungalow was one of very few detached properties in our village, so he was even more of a prime target for abuse. One summer we tortured him every day for a fortnight. We threw bricks at the side of his house, shone laser pens in his windows, ordered takeaways to his door, all the usual nonsense. In between times, if the chain happened to come off my BMX, I would take it straight to Ignatius and he

would fix it without so much as a bad word against me. Later on I would tell my dad that Ignatius fixed my bike and he would grumble, "Let's hope it stays fixed this time," and send me over with a packet of fags as payment. It was Ignatius' role as bike fixer that gave me the idea for a big prank.

My idea was not overly intelligent, but then again neither was I. It didn't take long to relate the plan to four of my friends.

"I'm going to pretend to take my BMX to Ignatius," I declared proudly. They looked at me like it was the craziest thing they'd ever heard in their life. The plan however, was very simple; I would knock on Ignatius' door and stand there like I was leaning on my bike. When he answered I would ask him if he could fix my bike and when he asked where it was I would make out it was right in front of him. So that was exactly what he did. I remember he didn't come to the door for ages and I was left staring through his bare windows. He had three TVs hooked up in the living room in addition to the TV graveyard in his spare room. The house was a complete mess, the furniture so old and worn. All the windows were bare except for one, which had a simple net curtain on it. It was so stained it looked like he had used it to wipe his arse.

I was in the middle of feeling sorry for him when he answered the door. He stood there all stooped over, looking at me with his head tilted to the side, right cheek leaning on right shoulder. Fag in his right hand, with a grotesque amount of ash hanging from it, like some burnt up version of the leaning tower of Pisa. I was nervous now and could hear my friends giggling from behind Ignatius' wall.

"Wwwould you fix my bike for me?" I stuttered, hands held out in front of me like I was holding on to a pair of handlebars. "The bloody chain's come off again," I lied while pointing in the direction of where the chain would be.

Ignatius stood there puzzled, scratching his yellow head, bottom lip protruding over his top one.

"I'll fix it surely," he said, "but where is it?"

“It’s right here,” I said and flipped my middle finger in his face. Flipped him the bird as they say in America. This was the cue for all my friends to jump up from behind the wall and pelt him with eggs. The first two hit him around the torso and the first smashed directly into his face. I stood there looking at the bits of shell on his cheek, gloppy egg-white hanging from his chin. From that egg a monster was born. Ignatius reached for me and pulled me to him and the last thing is his horrible stench wafting up my nostrils and his face, right up against mine, contorted in anger. Ignatius choked me until I passed out before he let me go and went back into the house. My friends tentatively crept into his garden to retrieve me and carried me across the street to my own home.

Ignatius was even more hated in our village after the choking incident. He wasn’t seen out of his front door for weeks, but everywhere I’d go people would see me and say “I heard what that bastard did to you and it’s just not right.” I would just nod and say as little as possible. Everyone had heard about what I was doing at the time of the incident, but that was just harmless horseplay according to them, and I certainly didn’t deserve to be choked for it. Once I was sent to John O’Neill’s pub to tell my da to come home for his dinner, and as soon as I walked in the pub door I could hear the name Ignatius being spat back and forth between the landlord and my da, who was nursing a nearly empty pint of Smithwick’s at the bar. I hated how eager they all were to pounce on him. I wanted to put them all straight and tell them that I deserved what I got, but I never did. I even wanted to knock on Ignatius’ door and apologise, but I never got the chance.

There was a fire at his bungalow about three weeks after the choking incident. They found his charred remains on the armchair in the sitting room. The guards never investigated that much, Ignatius had no family calling for an enquiry, and without that pressure it’s easy to just shut the case before it even gets opened. The house fire was the talk of the village and everybody agreed that there were only two possibilities as to what had happened; either he had fallen asleep on the armchair with a lit cigarette in his hand or there had been an electrical fire from all that crap he had plugged in around the house. The village newspaper went for the former version of events and that was the official end to the story of Ignatius Sweeney.

contributors

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Deirdre McClay has published stories in Ireland and the UK including in the Irish Times, Sunday Tribune, Crannog, Wordlegs, Boyne Berries, Friction and Number Eleven. She was nominated for a Hennessy First Fiction Award, and has had a number of competition successes. She blogs with Garden Room Writers.
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Cherry Smyth is a poet, novelist, critic and curator, born in Ireland, based in London. Her debut novel *Hold Still* was published by Holland Park Press in October 2013. *Test, Orange*, 2012, her latest poetry collection is available from Pindrop Press. Her previous collection *One Wanted Thing* is available from Lagan Press. <http://www.cherrysmyth.com/>

Lynda Tavakoli has tried her hand at writing poetry, novels, short stories, travel articles, journalistic pieces, letters, song lyrics and much else with varying success. She hopes that one day she will eventually write a play as it's about the only thing left she hasn't yet attempted.

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interview: Cherry Smyth, interviewed by Claire Savage.

reviews: Jonathan O'Brien on Sinker, by Jason Johnson.

Orla McAlinden on Malcolm Orange Disappears, by Jan Carson.

plays: Paula Matthews. Jamie Guiney.

fiction: Marie Gethins. Laura Cameron. James Meredith.

Aoibheann McCann. Tom O'Connell. Deirdre McClay. David Braziel.

Lynda Tavakoli. Paul McCaffrey. D. Joyce-Ahearne. Eve-Marie Power.

Chris McLaughlin.