the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

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Cover artwork: The Audience, oil on canvas by Mia Funk
issue 3
call for submissions

Our reading period is now open
(December 2014)
for new Irish writing.

For Issue 4
(due to be published in March 2015)
we are seeking flash fiction, short stories
and poems (4 max.)

Guidelines are at
theincubatorjournal.com

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Please send any reviews or queries to
editor.theincubator@gmail.com
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WE ARE PROUD TO BRING TO YOU THE THIRD ISSUE OF THE INCUBATOR, FEATURING NEW writing from NI and Ireland. This instalment, in particular, has a very distinctive Belfast feel to it, kicked off by an interview with Michael Nolan whom I was delighted to talk to about his novella, The Blame, as well as what he thinks of life, writing and studying in the city.

There is stunning new fiction as always; some set close to home, like Heather Richardson’s Sparta, Jason O’Rourke’s You are my Sunshine, and AJ Black’s My Ma Vs the RA. While other fiction takes us much further afield. As usual we are happy to find new voices which we will unquestionably be looking out for in the future with great interest.

Our nominations for the 2015 Pushcart Prize are Sean Garvey’s Poseidon on the Trimogue, from issue 2 is Marie Gethins’ Pygmalion, and from issue 1 Phil Young’s memoir Rosemary for Remembrance. Good luck to all!

We have reviews of two short story collections: SaltWater, a debut collection by Lane Ashfeldt, and Deadly Confederacies and other stories, by novelist and widely published short story writer Martin Malone.

I have selected three essays for your perusal; coincidentally they all relate to poetry. In her essay, Christine Murray passionately asks us to place more importance on national audiobanking of our poets’ work while Amos Greig compares the poetic styles of Medbh McGuckian and Sylvia Plath. Geraldine O’Kane shares her insightful essay about the Belfast Group and the legacy they have left to writers and to writing in the North.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton
Editor

theincubatorjournal.com
IN INTERVIEW: MICHAEL NOLAN

AUTHOR OF THE BLAME

IT’S FANTASTIC TO READ A BOOK SET SO CLOSE TO HOME WHEREBY YOU FEEL YOU KNOW THE CHARACTERS ALREADY. READERS WHO DON’T KNOW BELFAST WILL GET A GREAT FEEL FOR THE PLACE.

How important to you is anchoring a story to a place?

That’s nice of you to say so. And yes, very important. I’m interested in Belfast and its stagnancy, its hard stubborn antipathy and what it does to people like Donal. People who are depraved and overlooked, who have been in trouble and out of trouble. I was looking at Belfast almost as the antagonist. The phrase, ‘I need out of this place,’ follows me around. I hear it all the time from mates and strangers, people in the back seats of black taxis and buses. I’ve felt it myself even, that agitating itch to go, but I can never pinpoint why, and I’m not sure I can. It’s just this place. There’s something about it that gets under your skin and niggles and makes you want to get as far away from it as possible. Donal suffers from this affliction. He hates and loves Belfast because Belfast is all he knows, and despite its danger, the violence he’s threatened with and hopelessness he’s suffered, it is secure to him. That’s essentially what the novel is about, the conflict of him being forced to go and his inclination to stay where he feels is the only place he truly belongs.

Donal is the protagonist and despite his faults the reader is lead to care about him. We want him to find peace after the death of his friend Pearce, from taking Green Rolex ecstasy pills. I love that the story is set in that time between Christmas and New Year which is a reflective time outside itself.

It is. Those few days between the 27th and 31st are an interesting lull. The book itself has a lot to do with time. Donal has got a time limit, yet he’s stuck. It’s an interesting friction, and
I guess that’s what makes him sympathetic. There’s a feeling that being in a bad situation is familiar to him. If Pearce hadn’t died, if it wasn’t Donal that had given him the pill, and he wasn’t getting the blame, ‘this place’ would inevitably throw something else at him. He’s almost unsurprised, and that’s a sad reality. Those few days between Christmas and the New Year give the impression that this is how it is for him all the time, that he is constantly stuck between one thing and another. Nothing and nothing. He does have his faults though, but they are what make him human, and stubborn and unrelenting in what he feels is right, despite the consequences.

The dialogue is particularly fresh and authentic. There’s a great deal of humour and warmth brought through the language, it tells its own story alongside the grittier elements. Have you, or would you, ever write a play?

I haven’t and I’m not sure. Maybe. The thought of seeing characters I’ve made up on a stage appeals to me. I like writing dialogue though. I’m fascinated with accents and the way people speak. When I lived in Liverpool I was surrounded by it. Welsh, geordie, Irish, cockney, brummie. I soaked it all up. It was fascinating to me. I like the rhythms, the lilt and slang of the things people say. Belfast is full of it. I didn’t realise the extent until I lived over there and people looked at me like I was a madman when I spoke. I embrace it now. It’s engrained in me, and I try to make it sound as authentic on the page as I can.

You won the Avalon Prize for Poetry in 2011. How often do you write poetry? And how important is it to you to write in different genres?

I don’t write it at all anymore. I thought it was what I wanted to do once. I even enrolled to do the Creative Writing MA in poetry when I started at the Heaney Centre. I went to the first workshop with Medbh McGuckian, listened to some staggeringly good stuff from people like Stephen Sexton and Emma Must and Matt Shelton, and my arse hit the floor. Never went back again. I still read poems. I go to The Lifeboat and attend poetry events probably more often than I would fiction, but no. None of that caper anymore.

What is your favourite short story? Do you have a favourite Irish short story?
I’ve no idea. There are so many stories knocking about. Chekhov’s The Duel is one of them. Not many stories linger with me the way that does. And another one of his called The Black Monk. And Ward Number 6, The Darling, The Lady with the Dog. Denis Johnson’s Jesus’ Son. All of Carver’s What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. Eudora Welty and Alice Munro. I could go on and on. Favourite Irish short story is impossible. You can’t ignore Joyce’s The Dead. But Frank O’Connor really does it for me. All of him really. And Kevin Barry and Colin Barrett. Barrett is something else. Young Skin’s is one of the best books I’ve read in a long time. But then there’s Trevor and Bernard MacLaverty. His story, My Dear Palestrina is stunning, and The Clinic. I’ve seen him read that out a few times and it’s something else.

Which writers inspired you to study your creative writing MA at Queens University in Belfast? And are there any new voices that inspire you now?

I didn’t even know there was a Creative Writing MA at Queen’s until my final year in Liverpool. I’ve my dear friend Alicia Stubbersfield to thank for that. She writes poems too, just so you know. But aye, I was looking around to do an MA and Queen’s cropped up. I saw Carson was there and that did it for me. His writing has always been important to. And there are a lot of voices here inspiring me. Jan Carson for one. She’s the real deal. Being her mate is enough to make you want to do better. And Bernie McGill. Her Sleepwalkers book is a belter. And there’s a lot of poets here I think are great. I won’t name them though. I’d be here all day.

How and where do you gather your inspiration?

I’m not sure. I distrust the idea of inspiration, or the idea of sitting around waiting for it. I’m not one of those people who carry a notebook about all day or wake up in the middle of the night to scribble things down. I can hardly even write with a pen anymore I do it so rarely. Any ideas that come to me tend to lodge themselves somewhere in the back of my mind. Sometimes I use them, sometimes I don’t. My feeling is that if I have an idea and forget about it, it wasn’t worth remembering in the first place. And if I do remember it and get the
impulse to write it, I know it’s something worth pursuing. It usually comes in a situation, a ‘what if?’ type thing. ‘What if’ a fella’s friend drops dead in front of him at a party? What if it was him who gave his friend the pill? And it all unravels from there. But it can come from anywhere. Watching the news or overhearing something on the bus. It’s all material and if you listen enough and watch enough it just comes. Sometimes it works sometimes it doesn’t, but that’s the interesting part, the finding out if it’s any good.

**What is your writing routine at the moment?**

I’m working at the moment and my shift’s usually 7am until 2pm, so I go to Linen Hall after and do some writing there. Most days I fall asleep. Now and then I get something half decent done and go home around dinner time feeling good about myself. On my days off I get up early in the morning and write all day. I’m working on a novel so I need those days. Novels require a level of perseverance that stories don’t. You have to keep at it and every now and then you need to feel like you’re getting somewhere, that work is getting done, otherwise you’d lose hope, throw your laptop out the window, weep.

**How has The Blame inspired what comes after it, in both its success and feedback you’ve received, and the work you’ve created since you finished writing the book?**

I guess it has given me a bit of assurance. Someone thinks what I’m doing is worth putting out there. That’s a great comfort for a writer. At the same time, I’ve changed a lot since *The Blame*. It’s hard to believe it’s almost a year since I wrote it. Looking back, there’s a lot I’d want to change and edit and rewrite, but that’s always the way. The important thing is that I’m still writing things I want to write and that I’m pushing myself. There’s no point doing this if you’re not going to push yourself and try new things. I think that’s what makes good writing. Taking risks and not thinking about the consequences and what who is going to say about what. Writing what you want to write, not what you think you should. That’s when interesting things start happening.

*The Blame* is published by Salt.
short story
I WAS CLOSE TO LONGFORD WHEN IT BEGAN TO SNOW. FLAKES DROVE AT ME LIKE A
horde of moths, driven mad by my headlights. I had tried to beat the weather home and
failed. Wet snow made me wary of the rental they had given me, bald tires and loose
steering. Still, it would be an hour or so before it began to stick and I’d be off the road by
then. Traffic slowed to a crawl in acknowledgement of the change in weather and so we
trundled onwards. Outside of Strokestown there were fewer cars on the road and the pace
quickened a little, but still the weather was worsening.

A flash of headlights in my mirror caught my eye. He was going too fast surely, and I
saw his tail began to weave. “Driving Home for Christmas” was playing on the radio and it
reminded me of that awful ad.

* 

"Turn off that torch," he said. I fumbled with the heavy switch before I managed to quench
its yellow beam. The low rumble of a diesel engine growled in the distance and soon a set of
headlights topped the crest of Jack’s Hill. The car bounced along the rutted track that ran
parallel to the river, lighting up the laneway like a film projector. Its beams splashed across
the landscape, picking out the hedgerows and dying trees that lined the roadside. I knew
there was no hope of it spotting us in the black of night, yet still I curled up as small as I
could in the tall grass beside the river.

It was cold and I could see my breath frosting before me. I tried to catch it in my
hand but it weaved around my gloved fingers. I felt something lying next to me, cold and
yielding, and I ran my hand across its flank. A small dog I thought, and frozen. “Okay, let’s
keep going,” my uncle called as the headlights died away into the night. I switched on the torch once more and focussed its beam on the grassy bank. A dead, black eye stared back at me. The red fur of a small fox was turning white with frost and it looked half a part of the twisted reeds that surrounded it. I thought perhaps the river was reclaiming it.

I swung the beam towards my uncle and he grinned in the torch light. In his hand he held a trident with it sharpened tines glinting. His shadow was a giant on the riverbank. “Keep the light on the river,” he said, and turned back downstream. He waded carefully forward, with his spear poised at the ready. His hands were three feet apart along its shaft and the three sharpened prongs were held a foot above the surface. My father was further upriver, with his own torch focussed on the swift-flowing water. Ice nipped at the river’s edges and I was beginning to feel the cold despite the many layers I wore.

“Left,” my father roared, and my uncle moved towards me on the riverbank.

I swung the beam awkwardly in front of him and saw a silver flash, a muscled mirror in the deep. My uncle drove the spear down in front of it. The silver muscle flexed and disappeared into the shadows.

“No good,” my uncle said, and onwards we went.

“You missed it well.”

“You have to adjust for the distortion; the light plays tricks on you when it hits the water.” He held the spear against the riverbed. “See how it bends?” he asked. I nodded in return. The wooden handle seemed to change direction where it met the surface of the water. “The fish is further forward than he looks,” he said. They had been hunting this way for years, as their father had before them, and I shouldn’t doubt them.

“Why do we only fish at night?” I asked.

He seemed to consider the question while he waded forward. “Sometimes you find the fish asleep, easier to spear.” He rested the trident against his shoulder for a moment. “We’re not exactly supposed to be out here either,” he said and grinned again. “I don’t know, sometimes I think it’s just for the sake of it.”
It was the first time my father had allowed me to join them. Each winter they took to the Trimogue to catch salmon migrating upstream. The salmon returned here each winter to lay their eggs and each year we had fresh fish for our dinner. I can’t say I ever took to the flavour, but the hunt always captivated me: two men in waders and heavy jumpers striding off into the night with only a bucket, a torch and a three-pronged spear. It was primeval.

The once familiar fields had taken on a different slant at night. Each ditch and hill and hollow was a stranger in the low-hanging fog and spreading frost. A blanket of stars hung above us and oftentimes I tripped on clumps of grass as I craned my neck to watch them twinkle. Once I stood and watched a shooting star streak across the heavens and had to run to catch-up with my father and my uncle as they disappeared ahead of me.

We cut across the fields of our neighbours and into the bogland around Derrycashel. We saved the turf here, and I thought I knew the place. But I couldn’t tell you where we had descended upon the Trimogue. We slowly stalked upriver as the night deepened. I don’t recall ever staying up this late. The only noise was water breaking around the two brothers’ feet.

I played the torchlight across the surface of the water and watched the ripples shimmer. A silver flash hovered near the surface. It took me a moment to recognise the shape before I whistled to my uncle. He looked to me and I pointed frantically to his left. With two long strides he was on the fish and he swung one great boot at the floating salmon. It sailed clean out of the water and flopped onto the riverbank. “Fuck,” I said as I rose from my crouch, hands still held about my head for protection. I stared at two foot salmon thrashing amidst the high reeds and my uncle began to laugh.

* 

I awoke in a hospital bed two days later, with my parents by my side. The first thing I asked my father was if he remembered that night and he knit his brow in confusion. “Of course,” he said, “though I still don’t believe the pair of ye. You know you had an accident?” I nodded and slipped back into a sleep.
They brought me home on Stephen’s day. No wrenboys this year, though I walked those well-worn roads as we would on days of old. I descended on the Trimogue and looked down along the frozen river. Snow remained in the shadows beneath the walls and underneath clumps of bushes. The river cut a white swathe through the landscape, devoid of life, and the day was breathless.

I’m drawn to this place though soon I must leave again. No life for the likes of me here, no sons to show how a spear bends at the water’s surface. We were Poseidon on the Trimogue, the last spearmen of Derrycashel, and this place will never see the likes again.
MOST OF THE TIME MARK WAS THE ONLY VISITOR IN THE WARD. JUST HIM, AND SOME old ladies who were hanging on to life. He looked at his mother, crumpled on the hospital bed with a nebuliser mask strapped to her face.

The woman in the bed opposite had been dying a bright-eyed death for days. She sat propped up, attached to one of those monitoring machines that flickered a cryptic digital display of numbers. Sometimes the numbers went up, and sometimes they went down. None of the nurses seemed to pay any attention to it. There had been a priest in to her yesterday, giving her the Last Rites, Mark assumed. That couldn't have been too encouraging. Maybe they should move her to the bed beside the window. Everyone who stayed in it died quickly. There had been two go already, in the time his mother had been in here. It had a nice view, right enough. Especially at dusk, when the city was turning that pinky-grey colour, and the street lights were coming on. It made Belfast look like a suburb of heaven. There was a house down there that was covered in Christmas lights. Literally up to the chimney pots.

Today there was a new patient in the unlucky bed. She didn't look in bad shape, compared to the rest of them. Give it time.

The bell on his mother's infusion pump started chiming. He knew now that it didn't signify anything ominous. Either the drip was empty, or there was a blockage somewhere in the tubing. The first couple of days she'd been here he'd leapt up every time it started ringing. Now he just ignored it.

Up the corridor the doors banged open. Mark heard the clatter of the tea trolley and straightened up in his seat. There were two catering assistants who seemed to take it in turns doing this round. One was a sweet girl who looked as if she might be short of a chromosome or two. And the other was the boy. Mark touched his hair briefly. He needed a haircut.
The rattle of the tea trolley came closer and then stopped. Whoever it was - the girl or the boy - must be serving Bay E first. Mark took off his glasses and polished them with the corner of his mother’s bed-sheet. He was paranoid about having smeary finger-marks on his lenses. *Stupid*, he thought, *as if he’d even notice*.

The trolley rattled up towards Bay D and Mark held his breath. It was the boy. He felt his stomach give that stupid flip.

The boy was beautiful. Dark hair, cut short, but not a number one, thank God, and not one of those awful styles slicked down flat with styling product. Just a proper bloke’s haircut. And pale skin. Mark always thought of it as the true Irish colouring. Not all that red hair and freckles business - that was probably the Vikings' fault. The lad's uniform was white trousers and a matching white tunic. The trousers were a bit on the baggy side, but the tunic fitted him perfectly.

The lad strolled around from bed to bed, throwing menu cards down on each table. One of the other old ladies had a sign pinned on the wall behind her bed that said *Fasting*, but he left a menu card for her anyway. He went back to his trolley and pushed it slowly through the bay, stopping at any bed where the patient was showing signs of life and asking them if they wanted a cup of tea. When he rolled past Mark’s mother he glanced at her, then at him. 'Do you want a cup?'

'Yes please.' *Yes please.* What did he sound like? Pathetic.

'Take sugar?'

Mark shook his head, not trusting himself to say anything this time, just in case he came out with something really terrible. *I’m sweet enough.* The boy handed over the tea. It was in a plastic cup. The patients got real Health Service crockery, but it seemed the visitors got the disposable. Maybe the real cups were rationed, like everything else.

When he got home he gave his sister a call. She sounded annoyed when she answered. 'Well? What’s the latest?’ Her TV was burbling quietly in the background.

'It’s not great. There's no change.'

'That's good, isn't it?'

'Not really.'

'Tell her I was asking for her.'
'She's unconscious.' He waited for a moment, thinking she would say something to that, but she didn’t. 'You might want to think about coming home.'

Fiona made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a curse. 'At this time of year? Are you kidding? The flight would cost a fortune. Anyway, there's the kids. It wouldn't be very Christmassy, would it, if I wasn’t there. I mean, Mum's not actually dying, is she?'

The next day, once again, he was the only visitor. Afternoon visiting was even less popular than evenings. He sat down beside his mother's bed, and reached over to touch her hand. The sheets were soaking. Cautiously he lifted his fingers to his nose and sniffed. No smell at all. When he looked now he saw that the tube from the drip had come loose from the cannula. The IV bag was half-empty. He wondered how much of it had got into her before it had started flooding the damn bed.

There was no one at the nurses' station. An open box of Dairy Milk was sitting on top of some patient's notes. The phone was ringing. Mark walked down to the next bay. The curtains were closed around one bed. They billowed out every few seconds, as if there was a party going on in there. Eventually a nurse came out, holding a huge folded incontinence pad. She went to walk past Mark, not making any eye contact. He reached out to her, trying to flag her down. 'My mother...' he started.

'With you in a minute,' she said, waving the incontinence pad at him.

He retreated back to the entrance of Bay D, and waited for the nurse. The ward doors creaked open and two junior doctors came through. 'Excuse me,' Mark said. They looked at him as if he was a timeshare salesman. 'It's my mother. Her drip has come out. I'm worried she won’t have got her medication.'

The woman doctor looked at her male colleague. Her make-up was perfect. 'Shall I?'

'No,' the young man said. 'I'll do it.' Mark pointed out his mother's bed. The doctor turned a little plastic tap at the base of the IV drip, and looped the leaking tube up around the top of the stand. He picked up Mark's mother's hand and examined the cannula. 'I'm going to have to get a new one put in,' he said. He had his shirtsleeves rolled up. His forearms were tanned. It was the real thing, not a sun-bed job. Mark could imagine that in the right light the hairs on his arms would have that golden glint that came from sea and sun. Sun-kissed. Jesus, what was wrong with him?
'What about the antibiotics?' Mark said, forcing his mind away from the young doctor's arms. 'I mean, she probably hasn't had the proper dose, has she?'

'We'll catch up. Don't worry.'

The way he said *Don't worry* wasn't reassuring. It sounded more like *Doesn't matter*. Or *Won't make a damn bit of difference*. 'Right,' Mark said. 'Shall I get out of your way while you...?'

'I can't do it right now. But we'll get it done as soon as we can. Don't worry.'

*Don't worry.*

When he went back for evening visiting the cannula still hadn't been sorted out. He went looking for a nurse again. 'We've paged the doctor three times,' she said.

'Isn't this important?' Mark said.

The nurse shrugged. 'We're really short staffed. One SHO for three floors.'

He sat by his mother's bedside. Sometimes he couldn't stop himself staring at her. It was hard to see any trace of who she'd been. The weight of it all was crushing him down. He covered his face with his hands and realised he was crying. There was a box of tissues on his mother's bedside cabinet. He helped himself until he'd calmed down.

'Are you feeling better now?' The voice was so faint he thought at first he was hallucinating. He glanced up at his mother, but she was in the same slumped position as before. There was a slight movement from the other side of the ward. It was the dying lady opposite who hadn't died yet. She was smiling sadly at him from under her oxygen mask.

'Yes. Thanks.'

'I need the nurse.'

'Okay. I'll see if I can get someone.' Mark walked back round to the nurses' station. One of the nurses was on the phone. The other one was looking at a computer screen. She wasn't a nurse, strictly speaking. Her uniform was pale green, not blue. She was one of the auxiliaries. The wipers of bottoms. The emptiers of commodes.

She looked up at him. 'You all right there?'

'One of the other ladies in Bay D, she says she wants a nurse.' He felt foolish saying it, imagined the staff talking to each other. *If we jumped every time one of them called 'Nurse!' we'd wear ourselves out, so we would.*
'Okay then,' the auxiliary said. 'Let's see what she's after.' She followed Mark back to Bay D and walked over to the bright-eyed woman. 'Hello, Nancy!' she bellowed. 'Are you alright love?'

'No,' said Nancy. 'I want... I want...'

'Let me give you a wee check over,' the auxiliary shouted, and pulled the curtains closed around the bed.

Mark settled himself into the chair beside his mother's bed. As he looked over at her she opened her eyes. She seemed to see him. The eyes widened a fraction, and then closed again.

Across the ward the woman who had the sign that said *Fasting* pinned above her bed stirred. She struggled to pull one arm out from under the sheet. The arm was thin - it really was skin and bone - and was a strange flushed colour. What were they making her fast for? She obviously wasn't having surgery, or she'd have had it by now. She'd been here for days, and always fasting. Surely a frail old thing like her needed some kind of nutrition?

The auxiliary opened the curtains around Nancy-with-the-bright-eyes. 'All sorted,' she said to Mark, and walked over to the end of his mother's bed. 'Any change?'

'No.'

'At least you're here for her, eh? She'll know that. You mightn't think so, but she'll know it.'

The ward doors creaked open, and Mark heard the tea trolley rattle in.

Mark was waiting for the lift when the boy came out of the ward, typing a text message into his phone. He sent the message and made a call. 'Can I get a taxi to Glenalina Crescent? Aye. City Hospital. Aye.' He rang off.

Glenalina Crescent. Where was that? West Belfast? North Belfast? Probably west. Most of the ones that worked here were westies. Still the lift didn't come. 'They're very slow, aren't they?' Mark said. His voice sounded ridiculous.

'Aye,' the boy said. 'There's them other lifts over there, but they're only for the doctors.' He pronounced it *dacters*.

The lift arrived and they both got in. Mark watched the display count down the floors. He could offer the boy a lift home. Not in the hope of getting anything - the lad was straight as
could be - but just to... Hell, he didn't know why. 'I could run you home,' he said. 'Save you waiting for the taxi.'

The boy looked sharply at him, smiling the way people do when they're embarrassed. 'You're okay mate. I'm grand.'

The lift doors opened onto the ground floor and they both stepped out. The boy didn't run, but it seemed to Mark that he walked more quickly than he needed to. He felt the humiliation burn on his face, and ducked into the toilets to avoid having to walk past the boy as he stood outside waiting for his taxi.

There was a cleaner's cart parked outside the Gents' toilet. Mark went inside. The cleaner was working at the sinks, and jumped when she heard him. She pushed past him and went out. Mark ran the cold tap and splashed water over his face. There was a leaflet on the shelf below the mirror. *Why not believe in God?* Mark went into the cubicle to get some paper to dry his face. There was another identical leaflet on the cistern. The cleaning lady must have been putting them out when Mark had come in. Perhaps she thought she was doing God's work. Saving souls and changing the bog roll. He found a pen in his jacket pocket and started writing on the leaflet on the shelf. Underneath *Why not believe in God?* he wrote, *Because there is no convincing evidence for his/her existence.* He looked at what he'd written for a moment, then lifted the two leaflets and threw them into the bin.

After he'd paid for his car park ticket he walked out the front doors of the hospital. The boy had gone.

On Christmas Eve the staff on Bay D were lively. One big nurse chased the tea boy along the corridor demanding a Christmas kiss. He ran away laughing. 'Leave us alone, will you?'

'One wee kiss!' the nurse called after him. Rigor vitae again, Mark supposed.

His mother looked worse to him, but when he went looking for someone to ask they'd all disappeared. The fasting woman was still fasting. Bright-eyed Nancy was not yet dead. The rain beat so hard against the window that it wasn't possible to see the individual drops. It was just a sheet of wetness that distorted the city lights beyond. The unlucky bed beside the window was empty, stripped down to its bald plastic mattress.

The boy was waiting at the front door of the hospital, looking out at the rain. 'Alright, mate?' he said.
Mark nodded, and fed coins into the ticket machine.
The boy shuffled from foot to foot. 'Any chance of that lift? My taxi hasn't turned up see.'

Mark drove slowly, the windscreen wipers whipping backwards and forwards at top speed. They'd both been drenched in their run to the car park.

'You'll have to give me directions,' Mark said.
'Aye, alright.'
They drove along in silence for a mile or so. 'Are you working tomorrow?' Mark said.
'Earlies. Then I'll go to my ma's for my dinner.' He looked out the window as the car hissed through the surface water. 'This is good of you, mate. Saved me a soaking.'

'Well, season of goodwill and all that.'
The boy laughed, and then was quiet again, only speaking to tell Mark where to turn.
After a few minutes he spoke. 'You see last night, when you offered me a lift?'
'Yes?' Mark felt a tightening in his gut.
'I thought you were, you know, one of them holy rollers, like.'
Mark didn't understand. 'What?' he said.
'You know, one of them Born Again ones.'
'Me?' Mark laughed too loudly. It was the relief. 'No, not me.'
'It's just, there's been all these what-ya-ma-call-its turning up in the bogs.'
'Born Again Christians?'
Now the boy laughed. 'No. Leaflets.'
'Religious tracts?'
'Aye, that's it. Some looper's been leaving them in the bogs. Like, even the patients' bogs, you know what I mean? Like, some of them ones are on their last legs, right, and then they go to the bogs and there's this fucking leaflet saying Where will you spend eternity? Fucking cheek, isn't it? Fucking... what-ya-ma-call-it... no feelings, you know what I mean?'
'Insensitive?'
'Aye.'
'Tactless.'
'Aye. Fucking tactless.' The lad looked over at him. 'Sorry about all the swearing, like. My ma says I swear too much.' He stopped talking for just a second. 'Is it your ma? Her that you’re visiting?'

'Yes.'

'Don't know what I’d do if my ma got sick. Would do my head in.'

Mark drove around for an hour after he dropped the boy off. The rain had eased. He put the car radio on, but every station was doing its own version of Christmas, so he switched it off again. The roads were almost empty, except for a few taxis. When he felt his eyelids get heavy he turned the car towards home.

The phone was ringing in the hallway of the house. He stepped inside and closed the door. The ringing continued, but he leaned against the door and tried to let the sound of it pass over him. He was starting to understand why they all acted the way they did up on the ward, ignoring the bells, the flashing monitors, the wet sheets, the dislodged cannulas, the soiled incontinence pads, the weak calls of the patients. It was all just noise. Someone else’s body. Someone else’s pain.

He remembered one day last week when he’d been sitting by the window in the hospital café on the fourth floor. It was near sunset. The sky outside was completely clear, the way it is on the coldest days. As he looked out over the city he saw a solitary gull fly high up above the church spires and tower blocks. The bird was a silhouette against the sky, but a last gleam of sunlight had caught on one of its wings, making look gold-edged. He liked the fact that the seagull couldn’t know it had been transfigured into this beautiful thing, and he liked that it was gone so quickly, and that he, Mark, had been the only person to notice it.

The phone stopped ringing. It had probably been Fiona. Or maybe the hospital. He unplugged it, and walked upstairs.
Safia Moore

No Blue Roses

THEY’VE BEATEN THE TRUTH OUT OF THIS CITY. THREE YEARS AGO, WE CHANGED everything with our chants, our banners, our coming together as one. The headcount in the square swelled, not daily, but hourly. While the world watched, our frustration manifested itself in words. We hollered, ‘No more!’, ‘Freedom’, and ‘Out with the Dictator!’ We longed for him to resign, to disappear like the thousands his regime had locked up or murdered, or worse, tortured and allowed to survive. We changed everything. But it didn’t last.

When I think about my time in the square, I remember only the good. Faces glowing in amber lamplight, songs and laughter, the comforting aroma of bread, fresh from the oven, and fluffy hot rice. Other people’s mothers fed us every night. The older women of my country have a look I’d recognise anywhere. I’ve spotted them in airports all over the world and sometimes on the streets of Toronto, their burdened gait betraying a lifetime of carrying stuff – bags of aubergines and sweet potatoes from the market, other people’s children, empty gas cylinders. There’s something in their eyes that says, ‘go on, prove to me that life’s not crap’, but a smile comes quickly when you greet them in Arabic and call them ‘Auntie’.

Michel nudges me hard, forgetting about my injured shoulder. I wince. The jarring stab of pain is welcome because it takes me back to the minute the police wrestled me to the ground. That was the last time we were part of the real world, connected. The last time we were ourselves, not shackled like vicious animals itching to pounce on anything that moves.

The show begins. Three judges and their security men appear first. The armed guards around our cage straighten their shoulders and stick out their chests, hands automatically coming to rest on the revolvers at their belts. They bark for us to stand, but we ignore them. They’re too lazy or too scared to unlock the cage and force us to our feet.

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Michel starts twitching again. His right leg bobs up and down like a silent pneumatic drill. I place my palm on his knee, hold it there, fingers splayed, until the fidgeting stops. ‘Don’t show them anything,’ I whisper. He responds by nodding, like he’s convincing himself he can get through this unscathed, come out the other side the same man he was. I avoid looking directly at him. I know too well the furrowed brow, the manic eyes, and the tiny beads of sweat on his upper lip. Inside, my guts are churning just like his, but I hide it better. I’ve had more practice, growing up here in the city where opinions were black market commodities. They’re major crimes now.

What did they teach us at school about the Prophet Muhammad and truth? I wrote it down in a small hardback notebook with other quotes I entitled ‘The Message’. I used to read them at night before sleeping, trying to memorise my favourites. I was so devout at thirteen my parents thought I’d study Islam, but nothing they said could change my mind once I discovered what a journalist was.

‘I want to discover stuff,’ I told my father. ‘Travel to exciting places, search for the truth and tell everybody about it.’ He smiled, grabbed me by the chin, and said, ‘Whatever makes you happy, son.’ My mother felt the same way. I never heard them disagree on anything, God rest their souls. They died less than a month apart.

I remember the quote now. The best jihad is a word of truth before a tyrant, a despot. I laugh aloud at the thought of me, the jihadist. My outburst startles Michel and we lock eyes. Is the fear I see his, or is it a reflection of mine? I’m the first to look away.

The door to the public gallery creaks open and our relatives file in. Michel’s mother and brother from Paris sit down in the back row, as though their legs can carry them no further. She has an emerald green scarf draped around her shoulders and it drains the colour from her face. It is the face of a sickly child on a seventy-year-old body. Michel’s brother squints and gets us in his sights. He clenches one fist for a split second and purses his lips in that Gallic way, a half kiss astray amongst the rows of empty seats in the courtroom, never reaching Michel’s damp cheek.

I stand up when my family enter. My two brothers, my uncle, and my eldest cousin. Maryam has not come. Why? They class fiancées as kin. She should be here. My heart is
heavy, my throat constricted. I consider screaming as I did at the first hearing, mainly to see
if I still can. I was all energy and outrage that day, punching the air in a ‘black pride’ gesture
of defiance, my face against the grid so everyone could see the rage as well as hear it. I
shouted, ‘Don’t shoot the messenger! Truth is our duty! Free all journalists!’ As they
bundled me out, I managed to twist my head, look at Maryam and yell, ‘I’ll be out soon,
habibti and we’ll have the best wedding this city’s ever seen!’ It kept me going for weeks,
the laughter and applause that followed. But that was then. I’m not so optimistic now and
I’ve learned rants achieve nothing. I do not raise my voice. I just sit back down and watch
my brothers settling into their seats, steadying themselves for my benefit.

Thinking of Maryam gets me through the toughest times. On the nights I can’t sleep,
most nights, I re-live the few occasions we were alone. The trip to the seaside in Alexandria,
the time she forced me to shop for gifts to take to Canada when my leaving had morphed
from a dream into a reality. But I keep returning to the day we first met. The city is like a
Monet painting in my vision – a hazy backdrop to Maryam in her gypsy skirt and white
blouse, pink headscarf trimmed with tiny sequins, or fake diamonds, or maybe crystals,
glinting in the late afternoon sun.

She was with my best friend’s sister. While those two discussed lost keys, and who
would be home first, I leaned against the nearest lamppost, dazed by the perfection of
Maryam’s profile. Behind her, those Monet flowers, huge floppy dog roses close to wilting
but colours still vibrant – pinks, mauves, lemony whites, and blues – no surely not, there are
no blue roses here. We were in front of the library, a nineteenth century French edifice
with wooden shutters, their lavender paint peeling off after too many summers of neglect.
There were iron railings around the balconies on the first floor and I imagined Maryam in a
silk, striped gown with a parasol, posing there. Her beauty demanded to be painted.

She was aware of my gaze, of course, as women always are. But she was cool,
controlled, dare I say, tough? She kept her focus on her girlfriend and only once signalled
her discomfort by rearranging the books she was clutching to her chest. They looked
serious, philosophy or maybe psychology. When Tariq and his sister finished their mundane
arrangements, Maryam finally turned her head and allowed her eyes to meet mine. A little
nood, an acknowledgement that I existed and that was all I needed. How I yearn for that nod again now. Where is she? Why hasn’t she come to hear the judgement?

The court has banned our lawyers from speaking today. Michel and I reckon they’re already preparing for the appeal. We’ll get time, we know that. The only question is, how long? The Head Judge clears his throat, reaches for his glass of water and takes a miniscule sip. He shuffles the papers in front of him, peels off the top sheet and studies it closely.

Once, in the cage, when I heard the prosecutor warp the details of our reporting, calling us spies, sympathisers, fakers of the truth, inciters of hatred and violence, I lost my self-control. I yelled at that same judge, called him a puppet of the military coup, told him his prison was a hellhole not worthy of a third world banana republic. I just managed to rave about the lack of medical attention for the injuries the thugs, disguised as policemen, had inflicted on me, before his back disappeared out the door. That was seven months ago. No doubt I’m paying for that outburst, but I have no regrets. Our only comfort is that they’ll deduct time already served from our sentence. We could be out in a matter of weeks. For the first time in, I don’t know how long, I bow my head and mouth a silent prayer to the Almighty, the One I abandoned, who hopefully, has not reciprocated.

The judge has no need to call for silence in this courtroom. No one is speaking. You could hear the proverbial pin drop. I’m aware of traffic, maybe two blocks away, taxi horns, and much closer, voices in the marketplace. Right beside me, Michel’s breathing is laboured like he’s just run up a flight of stairs. His leg is doing overtime again. His heel, tapping against the tiled floor, is rhythmic like a heart beating. It is strangely comforting. Maybe that’s why he does it. My brain gives up on trying to make some sense, some reasonable deduction, from the absolute craziness of all this, and an unfamiliar calm descends.

The judge raises his head from the pile of documents and starts to speak. His voice sounds muffled and I lean forward, straining to catch his words, and pressured by the knowledge that Michel is relying on me for an immediate translation. The judge repeats the lies, spends too much time on surreal descriptions of our hi-tech gadgets by way of evidence, and finally, pauses to deliver his verdict. Guilty. No surprise. Michel grips my hand and I feel his hot breath on my neck as he turns to me, scanning my face for a clue, any
reaction. We have kept each other sane with our stories, pop songs, and corny jokes for seven months. He is closer to me now than my own brothers ever were or will be. He calls me Brian and I call him John in honour of Keenan and McCarthy. Sometimes we sing the Paul Simon song, substituting Brian and John for Betty and Al. You can call me Brian, and Brian when you call me, you can call me John.

The judge clears his throat to deliver the sentence. In the stale, stifling air of the courtroom, it squeezes its unwelcome way through the criss-crossed wires of our cage. I hear my uncle gasp. One of my brothers shouts, ‘Bastard!’ I dare not look up because I dread seeing the confusion, the panic on Michel’s mother’s face. I put my arm around Michel and pull him closer. I whisper in his ear, ‘Sept ans, mon ami. Seven years, my friend.’

The tension slides from Michel’s shoulders and he lets his head fall back against the wall. I guess he has closed his eyes. I look straight ahead. The confining grid of the cage blurs then melts to transparency and I’m looking at a canvas. There are no shapes, nothing I recognise or admire, just splashes of colour, remnants of something better, something once solid, formed and vital, but now reduced to fragments. Red, orange, vermilion, scarlet, and magenta blobs bleed and trickle down, running off somewhere under my feet, the floor, the surface of the earth. I widen my eyes and blink hard, breathe deeper in a futile attempt to quell the turmoil within, and to interpret the wild abstract my life has become. I try, I really try, but no matter how meticulously I scrutinise the canvas, I can find no blue roses.
The girl with the dreadlocks had left sometime during the night. Caroline rubbed her eyes and reached for her money belt—it was still there. She extracted her passport and handed it to the border official. He glanced at it, and moved on to the next compartment. She would have to be more careful, especially now that Triona had abandoned her. She pulled out her guidebook, determined to stay awake for the rest of the journey.

When they finally pulled into Madrid, she trudged through the station, groggy from sixteen hours on the train. The air was thick with the smell of oil and heat, and she could already feel the sweat where her rucksack pressed against her back. She crossed through the line of taxis and searched for the metro stop. Line 10, the guidebook said, for twelve stops. She was looking forward to a long shower in the hostel, and to getting out of her Hard Rock Café t-shirt that she’d been wearing for two days. She rummaged in her money belt, separating the remaining francs from the pesetas, and caught sight of Miguel’s business card. She examined it for the twentieth time. His office was on Calle San Vicente. He’d promised to treat her to tapas.

She found her dorm down a narrow corridor, and dumped her rucksack on the floor. There were two Australian girls getting ready to visit the Prado. They volunteered their travel plans before she could ask—they were touring Spain and France before going to London on an exchange programme.

‘I worked in a hotel in Munich for the summer,’ Caroline said. ‘A gang of us from school went over together.’

‘Europeans are so lucky to have it all on their doorstep,’ the girl said. ‘Australia is so far from everything. Where else have you been?’

‘Berlin, Vienna, Paris. I have an interrail ticket.’
She didn’t say that, before this summer, she’d only been to Wales on the boat, or that she’d only stayed in Paris for twenty-four hours.

‘Wow, what’s Berlin like since the wall came down?’

‘Fascinating—a bit like walking through to the forbidden East.’

Actually she’d heard an American guy describe it like that. She found it hard to grasp the significance of it all. Besides she’d been otherwise occupied in Berlin.

Miguel’s secretary put her through.

‘Caroleena, I don’t expect you.’ Then, after a pause, ‘I think about you all week.’

‘Didn’t you say you’d take me out to eat tapas if I ever came to Madrid?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, I’m in Madrid!’

A week ago—was it really only a week?—she’d met Miguel in an Irish pub in Berlin. Triona was flirting with a German guy, and Miguel sat down beside Caroline and offered to buy her a drink. His mellifluous accent reeled her in. He was in Berlin on business. Caroline’s freckled face was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

After a couple of drinks both of the guys were able to say ‘How’s the craic?’ and ‘Soft day, thank God.’ Then Miguel leaned in and kissed her. She liked the directness, the unambiguity of his intentions, and, unlike most of her encounters with Irish guys, he wasn’t even obnoxious with drink.

‘Come with us,’ Triona said, standing up and putting her bag on her shoulder. ‘Wolfi knows a great club nearby.’

They had agreed that they’d stick together no matter what.

The club was in the basement of a grey concrete building, with flashing red lights and pictures of naked women on the walls. They joined the mass of bodies on the dance floor. After a while, she saw Wolfi leading Triona through the door of an adjoining room, and caught sight of purple walls and a heart-shaped bed in the centre. This was pretty raunchy compared to the discos in the community centre she used to go to at home, where she and her convent school friends were all as green and unsophisticated as each other.

Miguel pressed against her. She could feel the heat of his body. They danced, barely aware of the people around them. Until Triona appeared suddenly beside her.
‘Caroline,’ Triona said, ‘I think we need to go.’ She nodded a couple of times without breaking eye contact. What she meant was that Wolfi was a mistake—well of course he was with his creepy moustache.

‘I think the hostel has a curfew,’ she said, enunciating each word like she was talking to a child. ‘We’d better get back.’ It seemed that little red riding hood wanted to escape Wolfi’s big bad intentions.

‘I take flight back to Madrid tomorrow,’ Miguel said, with a note of disappointment.

Wolfi had appeared behind Triona and began to kiss the back of her neck. Caroline knew she had no choice but to leave with her.

Miguel walked with them to the nearest U-Bahn station. He looked crestfallen when he handed Caroline his business card.

‘If you ever come to Madrid...’

He hardly suspected she actually would.

She arranged to meet him at the King Philip statue in the Plaza Mayor. She had put on her short blue dress and leather sandals. Miguel looked different. She hadn’t imagined him more than four or five years older than her, but now, wearing a grey suit and a light pink shirt, she thought he was probably the wrong side of thirty. He strolled over, his hand in his pocket, and kissed her on the cheek. He was shorter than she remembered.

‘How’s the craic?’

She threw her head back and laughed.

‘The craic is mighty! Is there a festival going on or something?’

He looked around the busy plaza. ‘No, is just ordinary evening in Madrid.’

He put his hand on her waist and she caught the scent of his perfume. They moved through the crowd. There were olive-skinned people eating ice creams and a street performer making music with partially-filled bottles. Men in yellows and pinks, women in floaty dresses with throaty laughs, and boys in smart shirts playing football in the street. Everybody talking. Expressively. Incessantly.

They sat at an outdoor table and Miguel ordered a selection of tapas and a jug of Sangria.

‘Where is your friend, Triona?’

She felt a tinge of regret.
‘We split up in Paris. She took the boat home.’

His brown eyes devoured her.

‘I wonder,’ he said, running his finger from her jawbone down her neck, ‘I wonder if you kiss any boys in Paris.’

She felt a frisson as he said it, and was glad she’d been brave enough to come to Madrid on her own and not just for the free dinner.

A man in a pale blue shirt stopped to shake hands with Miguel, then continued on without glancing at Caroline. Miguel downed the rest of his drink and popped an olive into his mouth.

‘We go for coffee?’ he said.

He put his arm more firmly around her waist this time and, as they made their way down the street, she wished Triona was with her, chatting up another Spaniard. It was more fun when there was someone to compare stories with afterwards.

Miguel led her to his Mercedes and held the door open for her. She climbed in, pretending she was accustomed to such chivalry. Big car, small willy, Triona would have quipped.

He got into the driver’s seat, put on a pair of sunglasses and smiled. ‘I show you Madrid.’

He set off at speed down a winding street and out onto a wide avenue.

‘This, the royal palace,’ he said, slowing. ‘Next I show you cathedral.’

‘It’s really beautiful,’ she said. The elegant buildings were bathed in the light of the setting sun.

‘And you are really beautiful,’ he said. ‘We go to a hotel?’

His voice purred like the purr of the engine, and it resonated through her body. She pictured a luxury hotel room with fluffy bath towels and a mini-bar. She smiled, suddenly shy. Too prudish to say ‘yes,’ but not saying ‘no’ either. Why the hell wouldn’t she though? She had come all this way to see him. It must have been what she was hoping for.

Then he made a call on his mobile phone. He was probably a big shot in some company with a car and a mobile. The sound of the Spanish lulled her into a trance. She was hoping to do Arts in college—German and English—but maybe she’d take Spanish too.

‘We go my friend’s house. Is not far.’
A niggling doubt made her uneasy. Why a hotel? Why a friend’s house?

‘Why don’t we go to your house?’

He turned to her and lifted one eyebrow.

‘My wife is there. My children are sleeping.’

She turned away and looked out the window. They were passing a block of apartments, a green area, a small playground. She felt his eyes on her. She didn’t know how to respond.

Then he braked and pulled in to the bus lane. ‘We can go to a hotel if you prefer. But my friend have nice house. We have coffee. I play guitar.’

She looked at his hand on the steering wheel. He was wearing a wedding ring. It wasn’t as if he’d tried to hide it. She was just too naïve to register it until now. And she was the one who had phoned him. She had followed him all the way to Madrid.

‘Soft day, thank God,’ he said, looking out at the darkening sky, and she couldn’t help laughing. Was that tacit agreement? She could almost hear herself telling this story when she got home—how he’d seduced her in Berlin, wined and dined her in Madrid and serenaded her on the guitar.

‘So tell me where you travel since you leave Berlin,’ he said, turning the radio to a music station.

She and Triona had taken the train from Berlin to Vienna a few days after she met Miguel, and from there to Paris. Somewhere in Switzerland, a guy with oily skin and long fingers got in and sat opposite them.

‘Where you come from?’ he asked, looking them up and down. Triona was writing in her journal and didn’t even acknowledge him. Caroline smiled and said ‘Ireland, and you?’

‘You want to fuck?’

Caroline turned away, wishing she hadn’t seen the way he had put his hand on his crotch as he said it.

‘Hey, Ireland! You and me!’ She could feel him doing other obscene gestures but she closed her eyes and pretended to go to sleep. Triona dozed off after a while but Caroline was nervous of the guy. He stopped hassling them but she didn’t dare look over at him. Eventually she must have fallen asleep too. Triona woke her. She was cursing and rummaging in her rucksack, opening and closing zips.

‘What’s wrong?’ The seat opposite them was empty. It was already daylight outside.
‘My purse. It’s not here. Someone opened the zip of my bag.’

Miguel sighed when she told him that. ‘Is classic behaviour. Happens in Madrid too. He take all her money?’

She nodded. It was stupid of Triona to keep all her money in the one place, and Caroline couldn’t help telling her so.

‘Everyone knows you’re supposed to split you money up,’ she said, and Triona looked at her with cold hatred.

‘We can’t all be perfect,’ she said. ‘Anyway, you’re the one who encouraged him in the first place.’

Caroline looked out at the tree-lined road. They weren’t even in Madrid anymore.

‘So she went home to Ireland?’

‘Yeah.’

They’d wandered around Paris, tired and unable to muster up the energy to do any sightseeing. Caroline changed her second last travellers cheque and told Triona she’d give her enough money to tide her over until her parents could send her on some more. But Triona refused to take more than the price of the hostel for the night. Caroline bought a baguette and a bottle of water and they sat under the Eiffel Tower, barely speaking. The pigeons were having a feast compared to them.

Then Triona stood up and pulled her unruly mop of hair into a ponytail. She wanted to be on her own. Her face was pale, her eyes wouldn’t meet Caroline’s. She walked towards the river, leaving Caroline to wander aimlessly for the afternoon.

When they met up at the hostel as planned that evening, Triona looked like she’d been crying.

‘I’m going to get the boat home. There’s a train that goes to Cherbourg at eight o’clock in the morning.’

Caroline knew she should offer to go with her, for Triona’s sake and her own, but she didn’t want to cut her own holiday short. She had worked hard for it—she had cleaned a lot of bathrooms, made a lot of beds—and wanted to get the best value out of the expensive interrail card.

‘OK,’ she said, trying to sound unruffled. ‘I think I’ll stay on for another while though.’
Caroline walked with her as far as the metro stop the next morning. They hugged and Triona went through the barriers without looking back. Caroline waited until she had returned to her dorm bunk before she allowed herself to cry. What exactly was she going to do now that she was alone? Why hadn’t she just gone home with Triona? Then she thought of Miguel. She could go to Spain, and tick another country off her list.

Eventually the Merc turned in through the gates of a modern bungalow. Miguel hummed the song that had been playing on the radio as he located the key behind a plant and opened the door. She took in the leather sofas and a leopard skin rug, an entire wall bearing a huge CD collection and three guitars mounted on another wall. Miguel pressed a switch and the swimming pool lit up beyond the glass doors. She imagined them having a jacuzzi together, possibly sipping Champagne.

She managed to turn on some music before he put his hot mouth on hers. The order of coffee had evidently been forgotten. He slid a hand up her dress and caressed her breast. She arched her back, willing it to happen. A Latin lover—she couldn’t wait to tell Triona when she got home. No, she’d write a letter from the hostel as soon as she got back.

He pressed his groin against her and whispered things in Spanish that sounded dirty. Emboldened, she opened the first two buttons on his shirt. Then he stepped back and pulled her dress over her head roughly, catching her chain. She felt it sliding to the floor as he pushed her against the table, fixing her like a toreador eyeing the bull.

He dropped his trousers and stood there—virile, ready, married.

‘Can we just…?’

He covered her mouth with his, his invasive tongue cutting her off. Her mind switched from excitement to panic.

She wanted him to slow down.

She wanted him to stop. But how could she ask that now? She had encouraged it. She had known what he was offering at the first mention of coffee.

He pushed her knickers down, then resumed the kiss while managing to unhook her bra.

‘I don’t think I want…’

He combed his fingers through her hair. Oh, the gentle touch was back.

Well, maybe then.
He lifted her up and carried her to the bedroom, and put her down on the white duvet.

‘Is your first time?’ he said.

She nodded.

‘I will be gentle.’

Gingerly, she put her hands on his slim waist. He lay down beside her, his leg nudging hers apart. Certainly her body was crying out for it, but her mind was telling her that they were in the middle of nowhere and she didn’t know anything about him.

She turned sideways and drew her knees to her chest.

‘I don’t think I want to.’

He knelt up, his penis erect and swaying at eye-level.

‘You don’t want? You act like you want.’

She sat up, hugging her knees, looking through the open door to the mounted guitars.

‘I didn’t know you were married.’

He banged his fist on the bedside table and stormed out to the sitting room, cursing. She crossed her arms over her breasts and sat on the edge of the bed. He was pulling on his trousers. He picked up her dress and threw it into the bedroom. Without a word he took the car keys and stood at the door.

The radio played a series of love songs, incongruous during the wordless journey. She fixed her eyes on the road, seeing only what the headlights illuminated, feeling the depth and darkness of the woods around them. Nobody knew where she was. He could rape and murder her still—he looked angry enough. She didn’t even have her passport on her. If they found her mutilated body, nobody would even know who she was.

When they reached the suburbs she dared to look at him. His lips were pursed as he leaned forward over the steering wheel. He pulled over at a metro stop which was covered with a metal grille. There was a man sleeping in a nearby doorway, and black and blue graffiti on the walls.

She got out, trying to decide whether she should say ‘thanks’ or ‘sorry.’ He just stared straight ahead, then put the car into gear and drove off.
She examined the map on the wall. This was the terminus. She was on the east side of the city. The first metro was at 6 a.m. — in three hours. She sat on a window ledge and waited, uncomfortably aware that she wasn’t even wearing knickers.
You are my Sunshine

OF COURSE I MISS CHILE. WHAT A STUPID QUESTION. WHY DO THEY KEEP ASKING IT?
Whenever I meet someone new it’s always the same:

Where are you from?

Belfast, I reply. I’ve been here forty years. Long enough.

Yes, but where are you from ... originally?

It must be some kind of Irish thing, because of the mass emigration; all those people moving
to other countries to escape poverty, hunger, and war. It’s been going on for so long now
that it’s part of the national psyche – the discourse Richard would have called it. Or
something like that. So anyway, when they see someone who’s come the other way they get
all curious. But exile is different for me. Their extended overseas families write home, visit in
the summer and at Christmas, send photographs of their children (who have American,
English, Australian accents). When I tell them I have nothing to return to Chile for they are
taken aback. Faces drop, eyes are cast down, apologies muttered, conversations cut off or
swiftly changed. I don’t fit the script.

Having said that, I was one of the exotic overseas fiancées to be brought home, like so many
others, from the USA. Unlike most of them, though, I stayed in troubled Belfast to be
married; they shook off the dust and went back to peaceful, tree-lined suburban streets in
Sydney and Chicago, thanking their lucky stars they didn’t have to stay. Out of the frying pan
and into the fire I used to laugh, to pass off those awkward moments when they asked why I
left exotic South America to come here. It was for love of course, Richard. There was a man:
black-haired, blue-eyed, and full of stories, like one of his legendary Irish heroes. When he
got the job here at Queen’s University I didn’t think twice; I didn’t care if the town was full
of soldiers and crazy people and checkpoints and rubble. I’d have followed him anywhere, maybe even back to Santiago. In rare unguarded moments I still wonder if I could have faced going back with him to lean on, but the unwanted, thorn-like image of the denounced people herded into the National Stadium pops into my head, and I know I never will, no matter how different things are there now.

It wasn’t just that Richard was handsome: he had a mind. A mind with such breadth of knowledge that it could make bedfellows of the most unlikely companions, forging things like Chaos Theory, bawdy medieval poetry, Chinese agriculture, and Punk Rock into fascinating Heath-Robinson theories, just for fun. I used to give him bizarre combinations like that to play with, and was always amazed with the ingenious ways he managed to come up with something. He never failed. I loved his intellectual swordplay, the way he gave me a wee smile and a wink when he’d easily cut the legs out from under some ambitious pup of a research student who’d had one glass too many at dinner.

When we moved to the big Victorian house in Rugby Road it felt like home straight away. This wasn’t the road-blocked, burning, dusty, rubber-bulleted Belfast of the newsreels, but the leafy suburbs. Set in a cool, lime-treed avenue that stretched lazily up towards the university, the tall, wide, red-brick houses backed on to the manicured splendour of the Botanic Gardens. It was calm; far enough away from troubles and drunken students to be part of a different town, almost.

Where I come from, smaller houses than this one demand a family; ours required many children, but we were not blessed, despite my endless prayers and invocations. Books, art, and dinner parties filled up the empty spaces. It seemed to work for Richard, this ordered calm, but I missed the riotousness of the little ones. I secretly yearned for disorder, the whirlwind of play, the messy kitchen, the bedtime stories. If truth were told, this is what I miss about Santiago; never mind the mountains, parks, stately buildings, cuisine: it’s the laughter and squealing of the children I want to hear. And you don’t get that in our street, our house. In Santiago, my neighbour’s two girls were always around the place. They used to run in and out of my house all the time, and I would babysit them when their parents had Trade Union business, or whatever it was. Gap-toothed angels, the twins; incredibly, I can still picture them in my mind, even though the faces of my only family, my parents, have
long since disappeared. I was only twenty when I left for America, near enough a child myself.

Now I have a bus pass and I rattle around the empty house like a ghost. The books gather dust, and I don’t bother with company so much now that Richard has gone. I don’t have his capabilities, his charm. It doesn’t seem right. Nothing seems right without him. I built my life around him and now there’s this yawning void at the centre of my world. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not the sort to give up, it’s just that I’m in the process of adjusting to life without him. I still make coffee for two in the morning, and I know it and I can’t seem to stop it, and I’m aware that I have to develop new routines and expand my social circle and everything else they keep telling me. But I can’t see a way out of this right now. I miss his face, his words, the warmth of his hand on my arm. I would do anything to have him back.

And so it goes on, my existence, dull like the heavy grey skies outside.

Until today. It’s a spring morning; the first bright day since I lost him. I know it’s nice outside when I awake because there’s a beam of sunlight coming through a gap in the curtains. It’s probably after nine, late, but I really don’t care about the hours I keep anymore. I haul myself mechanically out of bed and begin to dress. The luminosity in the bedroom is particular to this time of year, when the sunshine strikes the front of the house through the nearly-bare branches of the budding trees outside. It gives a faint glow around the edges of the curtains, and this penetrating shaft of light. I don’t need to open the curtains, nor do I want to. Clothed now and ready to face the day, I need one final thing. I pull a scarf from the drawer, and dust particles fly up, illuminated in the radiance. They swirl: red, green, blue, and white; a miniature cosmos. It’s enthrancing, and I lose myself in it for a moment. When it subsides I give the silk another shake, and more of the tiny fibres rise, hang, and slowly drift in the still air.

Then it happens. The calm pattern changes, as if stirred up by invisible fingers.

I didn’t do this.

It’s not natural.

My heart beats faster, adrenaline pumps. It happens again; and again.
It’s surely not possible.

Richard? I cry out, is that you?

Not Richard. It looks like children’s fingers playfully circling, making impish eddies, sweeping.

Could it be?

No. It’s been forty years. But yet – it’s happening. I’m not imagining it; the patterns are made by four little hands. It’s impossible, of course, and I’m a stupid old woman, but yes – I realise that at last, at long last, my lost ones have found me. I picture their laughter: gappy smiles, bright innocent eyes. Playing along with them, I touch nothing tangible, there is no sound. We chase each other’s traces in the sunlit motes. My heart thumps with joy.

Then, all too soon, a cloud passes outside and they are gone.

Come back. Please, I implore aloud in the darkness. Am I forgiven? I didn’t know the secret police would take you too.

Nothing.

Transfixed, in limbo, I wait for the sun.
flash fiction
YOU MADE IT LOOK EASY. ‘COME ON, BRO,’ YOU SAID. THREW AN ARM AROUND MY shoulders. Smiled for the camera. Best mates, like. Then the words: perfect sound bites. You pulled them out of that D4 phrase bag you’ve always got open. ‘We’re so lucky to be alive.’ The reporter scribbled and looked at you through false lashes, her chin hanging loose. ‘Defo it’s the training, just takes over.’ But you don’t share luck and it wasn’t your training that saved you.

Leaving Cert night, you were a few beers in when Aisling and I got to the beach. Shirt off, hips rolling to the music, you rubbed up against any girl that came near. ‘Jaysus,’ I said. ‘What a fucking eejit.’ Aisling moved off to find her friends. I got a cold one and watched from the shadows. The way I’ve watched for six years. You in class, you in the pool - Glory Boy.

You did the expected. Top marks. Destiny fulfilled. So you danced around the bonfire, teasing girls into a cat fight. You’d had them all at least once or twice. Tonight was special though, wasn’t it? Last night on the beach before all of us went on separate roads. I turned away, listened to the tide.

The moon shimmered on the water when the lads told me. You and Aisling. My Aisling. I threw an empty Corona into the surf. It bobbed and glinted, pulled in and back out, a last swirl and disappeared.

I found you in the car park. The street light an orange highlighter: her shirt open, your slobber on her neck. One push and you pinned me against the bonnet, ready to punch. Aisling screamed. The lads pulled you off.

‘Let’s swim it out,’ I said and pointed to the waves. You tilted your head, stared at your feet. The crowd cheered us on. You nodded.
At the shore you sucked air through your teeth. I shook out my arms and legs. You grew up on the chlorine in your parents’ pool, while I made do with the surf. Now we waded in, two white bodies swimming into blackness.

We met each other stroke for stroke, like we’d always done in the pool, until the beer and swells got to you. You shouted for me to stop.

‘Call it a draw, yeah?’

‘It’s your problem if you can’t keep up.’

You shouted again, your voice had an edge. ‘She’s just another skank. Forget it.’ Strokes uneven now, you splashed towards where you thought the shore might be.

I followed, waiting for the crash. Panic took longer than I thought, I’ll give you that, but then you went full force: thrashed, gulped water. I stretched out on my back and floated. The stars sparkled; the moon shining a path on rippled ink.

You went under. I didn’t wait. Three years of sea rescue training, what can I say? I brought you to the surface. You sputtered and coughed, fingers dug into my arm. We floated together, trembling in the Atlantic chill.

The lifeboat found us a mile or so off shore, answering someone’s 999 call. We sat on boat benches facing each other, wrapped in blankets, cradling cups of tea. Your usual face came back with the creeping warmth. By the time we docked you had the story written, except for a footnote. That permanent asterisk: I saw you, beyond the shallow words and posing.

The reporter smiled. You punched my shoulder, our eyes met and in that second we knew maybe next time you won’t be so lucky.
THERE IS A POINT ON THE JOURNEY INTO SLEEP AT WHICH OUR BODIES BECOME incapable of artifice. It was at just such a moment that Henry Jones realised his wife no longer loved him. At 2.26 am on the morning of April 6th 2012, as sleep overtook her, Maria Jones sighed.

The sigh came hefted from a point infinitely deep within her and fundamentally altered the fabric of Henry's reality: laddered it, dislocated it, broke it. It rent apart the marital bed on which they lay, and the eighteen inches there between them became a gaping chasm greater than any on Earth. With the simple transfer of breath from Maria's body to the air of the bedroom, the tectonic plates of thirty two years of marriage shifted and released the noxious gases of long repressed, and therefore unaddressed, grievances.

That elemental sigh, and the tsunami of undammed insecurity that it released within Henry, would inexorably carry all in its path. A million tiny traumas had been triggered and no more could he avoid the excruciating conclusion that his wife no longer loved him.

Henry sat in the bed, upright and motionless, as Maria, now sleeping deeply, snorted and snurfled beside him. A broad stripe of chill blue moonlight sliced diagonally across the bed where the curtains failed to meet. It revealed a light sheen of sweat on Henry's forehead as he thought.

They would talk. In the morning. Nothing thought or felt at 2.30am should be acted upon there and then. They could talk in the morning. Or the afternoon, possibly: Maria had a doctor's appointment in the morning. Actually, Henry was at the optician's in the afternoon.

Tomorrow night it was, then. He would talk to her tomorrow night. Almost certainly.
YOU’RE TO GET YOUR HAIR CUT. GO INTO TOWN TO THE TIVOLI – SHORT BACK AND SIDES, and plenty off the top. Here’s ten bob – that’s 10p for your bus into town and back, and 40p for the haircut. Keep the change!

West Belfast 1973, a chill Saturday morning in April, and I needed my hair cut. Our local barber had been interned and my sister’s communion was that afternoon. So with the warm 50p piece from my Ma in my hand I boarded the bus into town, bought my token and sat down.

Fifteen minutes later, halfway into town, the bus came to an abrupt stop. The doors squeaked open and two men dressed in army surplus gear got on, wearing balaclavas and carrying guns, one a pistol and one a rifle. Our bus was being seized in the name of “the cause”.

There were a couple of muted cheers from the teenage boys behind me and much rolling of eyes and tutting from the adults, as everyone shuffled to the front of the bus to get off. I stayed exactly where I was. The last passenger left and I gripped the metal rail of the seat in front tightly as one of the gunmen, the one with the rifle, moved up the bus toward me.

- Off, son.

- No.

- Get off the bus, son. Anois.

- I can't.

The gunman knelt down in the aisle beside me and spoke again, more gently.
- Don’t be stupid now son, just get off the bus. You can get the next one into town.

I’d closed my eyes and was still gripping the seat in front as tightly as I could.

- I can’t.

- What?

- I can’t get off.

- Why not?

- I only have enough money to get the bus into town, get my hair cut, and get the bus back.

If I have to pay for another bus in, I won’t have enough for the bus home. And if I don’t get my hair cut and get back for my sister’s Communion my Ma’ll kill me.

There was a long silence before he spoke again.

- Wait here.

The gunman returned to the front of the bus and I opened my eyes. He was talking to the driver and waving the gun around. Not in an aggressive way, but using it to point, as he would his finger were he not carrying the rifle. I saw the driver reach under his seat for the leather pouch the drivers used to keep their cash in and closed my eyes again.

- How much do you need?

The gunman’s voice beside me made me jump and I opened my eyes to look at him, but I didn’t answer. He asked again –

- How much?

- What?

I could hear my voice sounded higher than usual and I’d begun to shake, but I wasn’t getting off that bus.

- How much do you need, son?
- I need 5p to get the next bus into town. Then I’ll have enough to get my hair cut and get home again for our Marian’s Communion.

He reached his gloved hand toward me and I flinched, unsure if he was going to strike me, or grab me, or even shoot me. Instead, he put something on my lap.

- Here’s 10p. Keep the change.
THERE WERE MANY MEN SHE WANTED TO TALK TO, SOME MEN MORE THAN OTHERS. They were the ones she wanted to have sex with, the men who went to the cafes and pubs that she did. It was easy because she knew that men loved to talk about themselves. When a man talked for a long time without a pause or an opening, she flicked her tongue around inside her mouth, from top to bottom, unseen.

She also wanted to talk to the men because she had read an article in *The Guardian* about how to ‘Think Like a Freak’ and wanted to discuss it. She had given some thought to the subject.

One day she managed to get a man from one of the cafés back to her flat, and they talked together about ‘Freakonomics’. She told him she had also heard it referred to as ‘Freakery’, like it was a trick or some kind of witchcraft and she wanted to talk about that side of it too. “Think outside the box,” the man said to her, and she frowned, her mouth tight.

From reading the article, she explained slowly, you were more likely to solve a problem if you approached it from an unexpected point of view. The article gave an example, she wiped her hand across her mouth, of a man who entered a hot dog eating contest.

There was a great deal of detail she wasn’t interested in, about the man and his wife and his lack of money. Which was why he entered the competition. The important bit was - rather than focus on how to eat hotdogs faster, the man thought about a different way to eat the hotdogs; an approach that was more efficient. He ate the sausage first, on its own, and then he dipped the bread roll in water (they were allowed water) and ate that last. He increased the competition record by 50%.
As the man in her flat changed the subject to talk about surgery he was due, she imagined how the hotdogs were stacked; the brown slippery sausage with a wiggly line of yellow mustard; the chewy, cloying bread.

She interrupted the man and told him that to think like a freak you take conventional wisdom and put it through the wringer. Could it be taught, like a counting trick? She stuck her fingers in and out. The man looked at her and she doubted herself. She decided she didn’t want sex with him after all. It was bullshit.

It was also misleading. To her, a person who thought like a freak was someone who thought about torture or decapitation, rape, or blackness without sound. How to eat hotdogs faster, she decided, took it to a new level.

After a time of testing the argument at home, she ventured out to the bars and cafes and found men it was possible to have sex with. Many, she found, were happy to discuss alternative ways of thinking, and most men had no idea they already thought like a freak. She made notes, in pencil, on a cream pad and chewed the end, which split and peeled.

A week later, she was asked to leave the cafes and the bars after complaints from customers.

She thought about this, and considered how a freak would tackle the problem. Would he burn the place down? Would he shove shit under the door?

She sat for a while. A non-freak would do as she was told, too embarrassed and ashamed to think about anything else. A freak would tackle it from a different perspective.

The problem had to do with her desire to talk to men so she could have sex with them. She thought like a freak about it.

Some time later, when her synapses were less sparked, she went back to the cafes and the bars. The men wanted to talk to her, she could see it. So she sat in silence, to spite them.
After much waiting on the men, when it had grown dark outside and shadows were long and spidery; she could be found, face to the wall, sifting through their words she had trapped around her spinning tongue.
TWO MONTHS ON FROM MY GRANDDAD’S PASSING, FOLLOWING A LONG ILLNESS, MY Nana was diagnosed with leukaemia. That afternoon she admitted sadly to my aunt, "I thought there'd be a few good years..."
'HAVEN'T I ALWAYS KNOWN WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU, MOTHER? HAVEN'T I ALWAYS TAKEN care of you?' Norma smiled as she tucked the sheet closely around her mother's shoulders. 'We don't need any doctors telling us what to do, do we?'

Gently she ran the comb through the sparse grey hair, smoothing it into a knot at the back, just the way mother liked it. She hummed as she tidied away the medicine bottles, and rubbed the sticky residues off the top of the locker. She wasn't going to have Eleanor pursing her lips in disapproval at the dirt of the place when she came around in the morning. Eleanor always thought that she could do things better. She was for ever poking her nose in where she wasn't wanted. Oh, it was easy for her! But what did she know about it? She wasn't the daughter who stayed at home. She hadn't spent the last ten years tied to a senile old woman. She couldn't possibly know what it was really like!

Norma threw a few logs on the fire, and watched them spit and hiss as they sent multi coloured flames leaping up the chimney. She rubbed her hands up and down on the front of her skirt, as she rocked gently in the chair. Mother was really very demanding. Like a baby, only heavier. She needed to be fed, and washed, and changed, and turned, and lifted. And this past year...well, she wouldn't even use the bedpan. Norma shuddered. Not that she minded cleaning up after mother...no, it was just all that laundry! All those sheets to be washed and dried. That was the hardest part. And when did she last have an unbroken night's sleep? Mother didn't know the difference between night and day any more. All that calling in the middle of the night, insisting that she hadn't had her dinner, and demanding to be fed!

Norma glanced down at her swollen ankles and her red, calloused hands. They didn't look much like the hands that Joe used to stroke so lovingly all those years ago. They were going
to be married, Joe and herself. Just as soon as she was free. But freedom eluded her...she couldn’t leave Mother, could she? Mother needed her, and imprisoned her with her needs.

‘Don’t leave me, Norma,’ she’d cry when they had tried to set a date for the wedding.

‘I’m dying. I won’t be in your way much longer. Don’t let me spend my last days among strangers!’

That was ten years ago, and Joe had got tired of waiting. He had married someone else, and now had two babies. Babies that should have been hers. A tear oozed from the corner of Norma’s eye. She would never have babies now. Never fill that emptiness that even Mother’s needs could not satisfy.

. . . . .

‘You can’t go on like this any longer Norma!’ Dr. Crotty frowned as he snapped his black bag shut, and buttoned up his coat. ‘She needs expert nursing care, and she will get that in St. Malachy’s Nursing Home. I’ll arrange everything, and we’ll have an ambulance sent for her as soon as possible.’

‘But she doesn’t want to go, Doctor. She can’t bear having anyone else look after her, only me...not even Eleanor.’

Dr. Crotty tutted impatiently. ‘Your mother is senile! How does she know what she wants? You have had ten years of it. Now it is out of your hands.’ He looked at the stricken face of the woman in front of him, and added kindly, ‘She’ll be well looked after you know, Norma. St. Malachy’s is the best, and you mustn’t be too proud to take help when it’s offered. You’re still a young woman, with many years ahead of you. And don’t you worry about your mother. Believe me - she will be in good hands.’
Norma closed the door after Dr. Crotty, and then went back upstairs to her mother. Mother’s eyes locked with hers. She looked frightened. Frightened and distressed. Could she have heard Dr. Crotty’s decision? Could she have absorbed the implications? Surely not. Mother no longer related to what was going on around her. No longer recognised people, or even knew where she was half the time. But now...those pale eyes definitely reflected an inner turmoil. Her claw like hands reached out to clutch at Norma’s skirt.

“Don’t leave me, Norma. Please, Norma...please,” her voice faded away as her head dropped back into the pillow. Two tears slid silently down her cheek. She closed her eyes, and released her grip on Norma’s skirt.

Norma stood by the bed, her heart pounding. Poor mother...how could she bear seeing her in such distress. All the love and the care which she had lavished on her - gladly lavished - now culminating in this state of terror and misery. She couldn’t bear seeing this happen.

Norma picked up the spare pillow. Gently she placed it over her now sleeping mother’s face, and held it there until the gentle snores were silent.

‘Now, Mother....you have no cause for worry any more. Now you can relax.’

Norma combed her mother’s hair, tucked the eiderdown around her shoulders, and tip-toed out of the room.
THE ROOM IS DARK. OUTSIDE, THE LIGHT OF A NEW DAY HAS NOT YET MANAGED TO penetrate through the dusty windows of the schoolroom and the shadows inside seem somehow stuck in some kind of time warp. For every day it is the same. Every day the gloomy shadows lie unmoved on the classroom floor and every day I sit on my crossed little fingers wishing I was anywhere but here. This morning I am crouched in the corner, knees hunched up near my chin waiting with the others. We have been permitted to come inside only because of the relentless freezing rain outside but it is no place of comfort. I wish with all my heart that I was wet and cold in the playground and far away from that witch they make me call ‘teacher’.

I hate her. I hate her beautiful yellow hair and her red lips and her white teeth. But most of all I hate her eyes because they have always a hard, mean look in them that big people don’t seem to see at all. Only we children seem to see it and I often wonder how that can possibly be.

She is coming now. We can all tell when she is coming. Clip, clop, clip, clop. As she advances along the corridor her high heels make a sound like one of the Billy Goats Gruff crossing the bridge. But she is not one of the greedy goats. She is the Troll underneath the bridge. A happy thought. The Troll gets itself killed and I imagine a dozen different ways for the Troll to meet its end.

“Sit!” How can a word hold such menace when it has three letters and only one meaning? It is one of the many words that she has honed to a fine art and we have learned to recognise the more dangerous ones. But it is her tone that acts like a warning siren to the inevitable eruption to come. Just a slight sharpening of the voice that builds to a crescendo of hysterical rants and accusations about how we are all savages and worthless Cretins. I think I know what a savage is but have no idea at all about the meaning of Cretin. I guess it
must be something pretty awful. I make sure that, even though I am a savage I am an unobtrusive one. That way I can get to go to the toilet in the middle of class sometimes.

Today I ask out with a look of desperation on my face and with knees squeezed together for effect. She lets me go because she does not like the thought of having her classroom messed up and I am jubilant as I escape down the corridor. It is my way of getting one over on her. Inside the toilets I go straight to the wash-hand basins. Above one of them is a peg with my name on it and hanging neatly below is my drawstring wash-bag created from the remnants of my mother’s old dress. I pick up the bag and press my nose firmly into the material to smell the familiar scent from within. I feel the outline of a little bar of soap inside and the squishy facecloth that has been cut from some old towel from around the house. It is my one and only connection with home and my only means of surviving the school day.

As I return to the classroom I notice with a heavy heart, that the rain has turned to sleet and there is no possibility of freedom now. I cannot even feign illness for I know that as much as my mother loves me, she would never allow me to miss a moment of school unless I was at death’s door. I sometimes think that being at death’s door was preferable to being in the witch’s coven. I re-enter the shadowy world that she has created for us and get through the rest of the day as best I can. There is no laughter and no fun and everything I have learned will be forgotten because it has been learned under threat and duress.

When the final bell rings we line up like soldiers on parade and are frog-marched to the school gates where we are handed over into the care of our waiting mothers. The witch stands there beaming at them, her teeth sparkling and yellow curls springing up and down on top of her shoulders. Only the eyes remain hard and unyielding in their coldness but still the big people do not see. It is a mystery to me.

My mother takes my hand and inquires about the kind of day I’ve had. If I could make her see. If I could only believe that she would understand. But because I am just a child, a savage and probably a Cretin, I remain silent and trudge wearily home. Tomorrow is another day.
Adam Trodd

In Your Shoes

THE SHOES DIDN’T SQUEAK IN THE SHOP WHEN DENTON TRIED THEM ON AND PACED UP and down in front of the low profile upward-slanting mirror and now here he was plodding up the corridor making a noise like a clown. He imagined himself in face makeup and hoop-waisted multi-coloured trousers with a bulbous car horn at the ready. Worse, he found himself counting time to the squeak lately as if it was a metronome to his bipedal progress, or making it sound like a word in his head that repeated over and over in a grating parrot voice.

Currently it said *rectitude-rectitude-rectitude* with every few steps. He noticed that if he put more force into the heel strike of that foot the squeak was eliminated but decided to stop for fear he might do something irreversible to his gait if he kept it up for the lifetime of a good quality Italian leather shoe. The students were beginning to notice it now too and he was almost certain that a nickname was doing the rounds though he hadn’t heard it clearly enough yet. His colleagues in the department could now recognise the squeak as a portent of his imminence and pipe down about new grant opportunities or ideas for journals that he might possibly compete with them for. Never much of a trainer wearer before, he changed now as soon as he got home, even before kissing his wife.

After suffering the acoustic embarrassment of a trip up to the coffee machine and back, he sat at his desk and pondered, using the rain grey campus as a backdrop. He decided to type the note rather than handwriting it. Otherwise, Boylan might recognise his widely looped scrawl. Next, he had to figure out exactly what to write. There was no easy way to state the facts, but he still felt it right that he express some kind of remorse. He stared at the blinking cursor and wished for a moment that he could be as mechanically insentient at his task. When it was done he sat back and read it over.

‘Boylan, your wife is having an affair. Sorry’
Boylan’s was the only office at the end of a corridor of laboratories. He flicked the note quickly under the door and walked away. Inside, Boylan looked up from the untidy scattering of papers on his desk at the angular white shape slipping into view. He narrowed his eyes, trying with difficulty to pick up the narrative of the unseen drama unfolding outside his door. The sound of squeaking shoe leather diminished up the corridor in an unmistakable rhythm.

‘Denton,’ he said to himself, dropping his pen and getting up to retrieve the note.
Orla McArt

Resistance

I LIVE IN THE TWENTY-SECOND SHITHOLE FROM THE BOTTOM, FOUR INDUSTRIAL SIZED communist windows from the left. You don't get many visitors 'round here. In fact, my floor has been derelict for the past five years but I like to shove my undies on the line as a big f*** you to the Council 'cos I ain't goin' easy. You see, they pushed my neighbours out of here with promises of fancy-pantsy houses and gardens and the like. Then, when a few stuck it out, they started sayin' that there was asbestos in these here walls. Now, that it's only me, they sent me a letter, tellin' me the twenty-third floor roof is gonna cave in on my head. But, guess what Council-heads, I ain't for movin'. Bring on the concrete floor... on my head be it!
IN ‘GOD MODE’, ANNA, A GREEK ISLANDER, SUGGESTS THAT “WHEN SOMETHING REALLY bad happens it can’t be fixed. But you learn to live another kind of life, around the edges.” Indeed many of the characters that populate the thirteen stories that comprise Lane Ashfeldt’s debut collection *SaltWater*, find themselves living life around the edges of trauma. While Ashfeldt bears witness to many disasters—both personal and natural—the collection celebrates the human instinct towards preservation.

*SaltWater*, as the title suggests, is inspired by the sea. While the sea is a central presence in stories such as ‘The Boat Trip’ or ‘Dancing on Canvey’, it figures tangentially in other stories such as ‘Airside’, where its absence is felt acutely by the Mauritian emigrants working at Gatwick airport: “People say here in Crawley we’re still close to the sea, is just one hour away. But England is big island: they mean one hour by car, not by foot.” In exploring the effect of the geographical environment on the individuals who inhabit coastal regions, *SaltWater* represents a kind of poetic psycho-geography. The characters’ lives are shaped by the sea which appears as both a benign and threatening force in the various locations spanning the globe, from Ireland to New Zealand.

Aside from the unifying motif of saltwater, these stories have in common what Ian McEwan calls “the underlying pull of simple narrative”. Ashfeldt crafts a series of compelling plots out of a seemingly disparate cast of characters of varying class and socio-economic backgrounds. She draws the reader in through the assuredness of her storytelling and the painterly strokes with which she describes the world of her characters. Her style is particularly strong on visual description. There are ‘wind-stretched clouds’ in the sky and ‘a
rock looms from the depths like a totem’ in ‘The Boat Trip’. In ‘Outer Banks Riptide’ Paul’s snack of churros is “a nest of fried dough snakes” while in ‘God Mode’ the narrator flees Ireland following the end of a relationship: “I step on a moving walkway and watch the airport scroll by.”

There is an economy of prose too in the way Ashfeldt suggests so much in the limited space of the short story. A mother’s devastation at the loss of her child, Elizabeth, is captured in the following tiny detail: “the door closes behind her and Nola hears her go upstairs again, back to Elizabeth’s room”. Nola reappears as an adult in the next story ‘Saltwater’ where her children struggle to understand her phobia of water. Here, the possibility of rehabilitation and healing is suggested as Nola finally faces her fear in an attempt to save her own daughter.

‘Neap Tide’ accurately pinpoints the moment in a relationship when the first flush of love finally wanes, and the characters face each other with a growing awareness of their ordinariness. Panos from Greece visits Lisa from Dublin only to discover that “all the other little Irish girls have eyes just like [hers].” This story is set in contemporary Dublin and Lisa is shocked on her return from abroad to discover the new building that has encroached upon the coastal town of Portrane. Again, Ashfeldt deftly captures the unspoken expiration of novelty in the relationship: “… the tide had turned between them. She was just treading water awhile, catching her breath for the next big wave to take her on her way”.

Historical disasters share space in the collection with personal epiphanies such as that in the aforementioned ‘Neap Tide’. ‘Dancing on Canvey’ which won the Fish Short Histories Prize, relates the horrific North Sea flood in 1953 on Canvey Island (a reclaimed island in the Thames Estuary). The story is focalized through its young female narrator and is a poignant evocation of how one family is almost destroyed by the flooding. Ashfeldt seamlessly interweaves historical facts with a touching romance, which unfolds amid the natural disaster.

The imbrication of romance and tragedy is continued in ‘Sound Waves’. The naming of the band at the centre of this story is perhaps the only misstep in what is, overall, an impressive debut collection. The warmth of young love is cut short in a scene which is made powerful by Ashfeldt’s deceptively simple style: “He does not sense the slick, cold water that opens up, takes hold and softly closes around him.”
A natural disaster informs ‘Catching the Tap-Tap to Cayes de Jacmel’ which won the Global Short Story Prize. Here the Haitian narrator is trapped in rubble beneath a collapsed cinema. He communicates with Agnes who is trapped nearby. Although they can, initially, hear another six people tapping for help, this number slowly diminishes until it is just the two of them: “Agnes doesn’t mention the ugly sweet smell that seeps in and mingles with the stale dusty air.” Tap-tap means ‘quick-quick’ and is a gaily painted bus used in Haiti. The words ‘tap-tap’ operate in the story, therefore, as a metaphor for hope and freedom.

*Saltwater* is both geographically diverse and imaginatively fluid. Ashfeldt’s writing is consistently confident and her thematic enquiry wide-ranging. Like the stars in the final story ‘Outer Banks Riptide’, Ashfeldt’s literary debut shines brightly: “making little points of light in the still water ahead of her as well as in the sky above.”

*SaltWater* is published by Liberties Press.
review: Joanne O’Sullivan

on Deadly Confederacies
and other stories

by Martin Malone

MARTIN MALONE IS AN AUTHOR WHO CLEARLY DOES NOT LIKE THE IDEA OF LIMITS. His diverse collection of novels, short story volumes, radio plays, a stage play and a memoir demonstrates his affection for several forms, while his equally impressive list of prizes and nominations is evidence of his talent. Deadly Confederacies is his second short story collection, and the volume highlights Malone’s undeniable capacity for vividly realised dialogue and characters.

However one of the less obvious pleasures of reading his work lies in his quietly impressive turn of phrase, which succeeds in lightening his frequent and difficult explorations of conflict, loss and abuse. There are several brief moments of brief yet brilliant prose; as “sadness bites” in Taming the Wolves, a minor figure in The Caulbearer’s Awakening “can’t kill the weed of a smirk” and the elderly pensioners of Doll Woman are “intent on staying put and breathing in memories”. Malone also succeeds in offering a discreetly novel approach to societal issues which could have been dealt with heavy-handedly and quite starkly. Instead, the epistolary style of The Archbishop’s Daughter offers a problematic yet interesting insight into both possible sides of a story concerning a clandestine child of a Catholic clergyman. Big Sis’s Little Trouble presents a similarly nuanced picture of teenage pregnancy, as careful dialogue and quick humour allows the story to move past the traditional taboo of illegitimate children and into a more realistic, modern day Ireland.

The title instalment, Deadly Confederacies, is a predictably impressive piece as Malone’s abilities to produce complex characters and psychologically authentic interactions...
are perfectly demonstrated by his sinister portrayal of a male friendship and its sins.

However it is not merely in moments of dark drama that the author is able to shine, and his technique is best illustrated by his most simple yet affecting pieces. A day unlike any other is a story well-suited to its lower-case title, as the restrained and thoughtful prose succeed in completely drawing the reader into the quiet yet deadly consequences of Ireland's economic downfall for one couple's marriage. A Lasting Impression is also an episode which remains true to its name, as the narrator's memories of a former work colleague illuminate the life of an ordinary man – but one which seems immediately and satisfyingly real. The acutely realised Thursday Market is similarly understated, and it is only when the audience observes the episode's concluding moment of revelation that the careful execution of the episode can be totally appreciated.

Malone's interest in human endurance and his talent for dialogue is best exemplified by, the once again thoughtfully titled, The woman who wanted to do nothing for ever and ever. The potent internal monologue of an exhausted servant woman and her unsettling fate signals a real sophistication in the author's technique, and is one of the volume's biggest testaments to his growing mastery over language and characterisation.

The book also underlines the ease with which its author can move between context, as well as form. Several of the episodes take place in conflict zones of the Middle East; the authenticity and fluency of most of these no doubt owing to Malone's extensive experience serving in the United Nations. However the author is also in command in more familiar territories, as his portrayals of domestic life in Ireland, the UK and the US sit surprisingly comfortably alongside his explorations of war and its consequences. The devastating effects of warfare are viscerally presented in Halabja, however this episode is made all the more powerful by its equally immediate depiction of family life and loss. Ritual is also an impressively disturbing illustration of life for those left behind, as a young Irish mother deals with the loss of her soldier husband. One of the final stories, Mingi Street, admirably succeeds in infusing grim circumstances and impending death with a sense of domestic warmth and hopeful affection.

This broad survey of countries and contexts is reflected in the contents page; at a total of twenty-four stories, Deadly Confederacies certainly follows Malone's prolific writing habits. However the collection could have endured a few cuts, as the decision to exclude
some of the episodes would have resulted in a more unified and fluid volume. Doll Woman is a well-crafted piece, gifted with convincing characters and a subtle venture into the realm of the Fantastic. This superiority of style makes the contrast with the following story all the more obvious, and the placement of Netanya in the volume is unfortunately unnecessary.

Wicked Games and That Time in Kurdistan attempt to explore the difficulties of war, both while serving abroad and after the return home. Although the two episodes possess many examples of the author's trademark talents for convincing conversation and emotion, both stories fail to take flight as they are weighed down by the surplus of similar scenarios in the collection.

When Malone is at his best, his stories leave an understated yet powerful impression. This curious combination is precisely why the book would have benefited from fewer instalments, as a shorter volume would exhibit more clearly his intricate skills in characterisation and conversation. While his adventures between style and setting admirably inform his work, a finer scope and more acute awareness of limits would have allowed Deadly Confederacies to better hit the mark. Many of Malone's characters and their conflicts will succeed in stepping out from the masses and remaining with reader for quite some time.
essays
I HAVE A GREAT DESIRE TO SEE OUR UNIVERSITIES IN IRELAND GIVE WEIGHT TO THE archiving of our poetry heritage. In particular, I feel that we have neglected the richness of the poet’s voice and the certain quality of music s/he brings to vocalising poetry. It would be great if we increased our auditory understanding of the poem as literary form. It seems to me remiss at the very least that Ireland has no good searchable audiobank that we can access the audio poem simply and easily.

There is a lack of searchable audio poetry here in Ireland, and while it can be difficult sourcing text also, this written piece is devoted to the music of poetry and how we hear it. Sometime ago I participated in A Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) on Modern and Contemporary Poetry at PENN State (ModPo). I have written before about how the MOOC system pulled together the connected threads of poetry in order to teach, or to simply increase awareness of poetry as literary form.

PENN uses resources like PENNSound, a massive archive of taped and mp3 recordings of poets’ work, learning modules included the use of webcam and recorded lessons/modules, as well as archives from JSTOR, The Poetry Foundation, and PENN State which being long established poetry resources bring together increased awareness of the poet’s works.

The very lovely aspect of combining resources across multiple disciplines and modes of poetry transmission is that these resources are readily and openly available to anyone. One does not have to participate in a Coursera in order to access Susan Howe’s My Emily Dickinson, or to listen to Allen Ginsberg reading A Supermarket in California. The fact is that these eminently searchable poetry resources are openly available online for everyone, that they were brought together in order to enhance the learning of poetry via a MOOC is just a boon.
In Ireland, we have a rich heritage of written and spoken work, this includes performance poetry, slam, poetry events and readings. Only recently have some indie journals tested the waters with regard to uploading the vocal aspect of the poem, that is, carried mp3 recordings of events that are centred in the reading of the poem on websites and blogs. *O Bhéal* in Cork and *The Honest Ulsterman* carry linked recordings of poet’s reading. However, this is new and unusual really. *The Seamus Heaney Centre* has an audio archive, these are small pickings.

The fact is that an audiobank is necessary in Ireland and it has not been forthcoming. One may go onto YouTube, or even access the work and lectures of Irish poets from many disparate places, but neither our national poetry resource *Poetry Ireland* nor indeed our colleges, who have poets in residence and heading up departments, have thought to create an accessible and searchable audiobank for the general and poetry reader.

Poetry is a literary form and much is slipping under the radar in terms of its distance from modern preoccupation with the buying and selling of books. It is perceived as impoverished and not a seller. While PR and media concerns may focus on established and mainstream poets in terms of providing often sparse reviews, there is actually a serious poetry reading public who are under-resourced and unsurprisingly absconding abroad to have their work published and recognised away from here.

The issue of expertise on archiving and banking poetry should give way to the idea of passion for ensuring that our literary heritage is properly respected and archived. If one should study the PENNSound methodology for retaining the spoken word of poets, one would find a website consisting of five/six pages that include simply an mp3 archive, an index of authors, an about page and external links to *UBUWEB, Jacket2, The Centre For Programs in Contemporary Writing* and *The Electronic Poetry Centre*. I would assume that the page is part-funded through the named organisations above, and possibly also privately donated. The thing is that the page exists and here one can listen to a vast array of excellent poets. Quite simply PENNSound is an exemplar of what can be achieved using cross-disciplinary respect and cooperation to enliven and enhance our understanding of poetry.

In Ireland, we seem to lack commitment to the poet’s voice; it is simply not easy to access a simple audio archive containing the voices of our contemporary and historical poets. It would be great if we could. As a simple test of the issue, I would suggest an Irish
University look at how Professor Al Filreis and his team at PENN State brought together *The Kelly Writers House*, *PENNSound*, *PoemTalk* and the online resources already mentioned so that the general reader could participate in a poetry Coursera. Is it possible for us in Ireland to use a resource like *The Seamus Heaney Centre* for broadcasting and recording poets with a view to teaching poetry and creating a necessary audio archive for general access? Do our universities upload the lectures of our poet professors and retain them in an audiobank? Can a general reader search for the voice of W.B Yeats online and arrive at an archive with information and recordings that will enhance the reader’s understanding of the work of the great poet? If not, then why not?

Multidisciplinary approaches to the enhancement of poetry as art form are required in order to show and celebrate our poetry heritage. While each poetry interest has its own unique flavour and emphasis, such as *Poetry Ireland*, *The Kavanagh Centre*, Ó Bhéal, *The Heaney Centre* - their shared resources at editorial level could increase the understanding and celebration of our poetry heritage. Our Universities have bequests, special collections, and our national archives contain poetic richness, these are generally and sadly inaccessible to the poetry lover. Isn’t it time that a mature conversation occurred on the proper retention and accessibility of decent searchable archives, both audio and text was held here?

As a coda to this essay I would reiterate that the only way to properly archive and bank a national poetic heritage is to take a multidisciplinary approach to elucidating the Poet’s Voice. I feel that small and often under-funded groups and journals should, as a matter of course, be able to upload and disseminate the links that they possess to an archive or national audiobank.

A great loss has already occurred with regard to how we view poetry; it is given little weight in terms of review and citation by a media obsessed with reviewing chick-lit and ghostwritten political biographies. Making space for poetry involves increasing its visibility and it’s accessibility to the general reader.

A singular and unsupported attempt to create an audiobank would be riven with blind spots, and as is often in Ireland, expertise is often driven by stupidity as opposed to actual relevant expertise such as possessed by poetry chairs and journalist editors. Isn’t it
time to cut the trumpeting and get down to the hands-on development of proper decent and globally accessible Irish poetry archives that are both audio and text-based, or is something as seeming simple beyond us as a nation of self-confessed poetry lovers and artists?

Isn’t it time to platform our literary heritage and do so in a way that does not seem quite mean and inaccessible for the exploring reader? I have asked many questions with regard to our national lack, I would quite simply appreciate ideas and suggestions on how small groups and universities could pool their resources and use them to the benefit of future generations.

I am unsure of answers to all of the above but I feel we are doing a disservice to a huge part of Irish cultural history, this requires remedy before poetry becomes a pastime, a toy-strewn sandbox based in a few limited reviews in media, and the production of the odd tourist-driven anthology.
Amos Greig

Plath and McGuckian: A Short Comparison of Styles

THERE EXIST MANY PITFALLS FOR THE CARELESS READER WHEN IT COMES TO ANALYSING poetic verse and form. When we look at the poems *Stillborn* by Sylvia Plath and *Mr McGregor’s Garden* by Medbh McGuckian, there are certain similarities which the reader becomes aware of. Both poems are metaphors for the difficulties that the creative process entails. Importantly though, each poet shares with us a window into different aspects of femininity. These aspects are presented to us through the use of style in the writing as well as the imagery that exists within both poems.

Starting with the form of both pieces we can see that structurally they are similar. *Stillborn* is constructed using a simple arrangement of three stanzas, each laid out in five lines, which present the standard beginning, middle and ending. *Mr McGregor’s Garden* differs slightly: whilst it follows the three stanza form, it begins with two ten line stanzas followed by a five line stanza. Both poems follow the conventional structure as established within poetry.

In each of the opening stanzas, both Plath and McGuckian present the main theme of the piece. Plath presents us with a metaphor - the image of “mother like” love which the poet has towards their “children”. The children in this case are metaphors for the poems which by extension of creativity the poet has brought to life. In *Mr McGregor’s Garden* we are shown through another metaphor several aspects of femininity and a sense of camaraderie for Beatrix Potter. McGuckian through her use of metaphor and dialogue shows us that her character is different from other women. She offers us several examples of womanhood two of which are tied to representational art for example lines two and three “*studies of my favourite rabbit’s head*, lines four and five, “*a little ladylike sketching/of my resident toad in his flannel box*” and lastly in line six “*or search for*
handsome fungi for my tropical Herbarium”. The key to understanding the poem is revealed in stanza one line two “I complicate my life” perhaps in this case as author and muse work to improve their knowledge and position in a male orientated world.

Both poets strengthen and flesh out their argument in the second stanza. In ‘Stillborn’ the image of the pickling fluid helps drive home the sense of stasis which can surround an aborted poem. McGuckian fixes on the hedgehog in the second stanza possibly as a physical manifestation of the suddenness of poetry coming into being. However as with many of McGuckian’s poems there is an element of ambiguity which lies at the heart. ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’ and the other poems which were first published in The Flower Master (1982) have been seen by some critics and poetry analysts as being ambivalent towards certain images of modern femininity.

In stanza three both poets veer into the kernel of the conflict which drives their meaning. Plath returns to the child imagery and argues in line fourteen ‘but they are dead...’ This could be interpreted in several ways including that all poems are dead once they have been created and trapped within the confines of the page. The conflict appears to be between the poet and the finished work a sense of despair that the ‘child’ which has been born from her mind ceases to be alive when the creative process is finished. There is also the possibility of awareness that once the poet is held within the public eye that they become dead to themselves and that their work becomes open to examination by the public. Meanwhile McGuckian embraces part of the bedrock of English literature, in this case Shakespeare, yet cleverly does so by immersing herself in the fantastical world of Beatrix Potter. This stanza is perhaps the most complicated to interpret due to the imagery which has gone before. The line ‘Bunny’s at my bedside...tickling me with his whiskers’ could be used to represent the natural distractions that face everyone be they a poet, student or mother and this is used here to reinforce that the author is a triumvirate of these.

In ‘Stillborn’ Plath uses everyday speech patterns, language and delivers her thoughts in an ordinary way which only helps to highlight the surreal quality of the imagery she depicts. McGuckian digresses and complicates her dialogue by exploring the imagery of Potter’s world a step backwards into early twentieth century life and a picture in which one can hide from the accepted norms of society at that time. Several critics have reflected upon certain similes’ between the ‘Flower Master’ and Hilda Doolittle’s ‘Sea Garden’. There is an
inherent problem with this analysis; H.D. as she was commonly known was a member of the Imagist movement and her writing tended to reflect this however ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’ is rooted firmly within the metaphorical world. Most of the poem is inspired by the world of Beatrix Potter, although there are elements which are hard to define or appear to have no logical connection to the rest and the reader finds themselves trying to metaphorically fit the pieces e.g. ‘unlike the cupboard-love of sleeps in the siding’.

The rhythms that Plath and McGuckian use are both stylistically opposite. Plath presents us with a variable pace and uses conventional Anglo-American diction. The combination lends a sense of urgency and dramatic emphasis to what has been presented on the page. McGuckian however does not allow for a regular flow of rhythm and we experience a sense of even pace which is at times contrary to the irregular flow of the wording.

The tone in both poems is an important part of what image both writers are trying to portray. Plath uses the tone to confer her sense of despair and frustration, she is surrounded by these works which have form and meaning but once they have left her metaphorical ‘womb’, have no life of their own. The tone shifts with the use of words and Plath brilliantly uses these to tweak the readers own emotional response even the title ‘Stillborn’ evokes an emotional response. The feminine use draws us into the difficult feelings that surround the creative process of forming the poetic form. McGuckian presents the poet in a more confident manner we see in the reflections of her writing an ability that she is quite rightly proud of. The methodology used in gathering random seeming images and tying them together in a coherent form is at once confounding and awe inspiring. There is a sense of playfulness within ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’; the use of both fantasy and realism lends itself well to providing a stark contrast to ‘Stillborn’.

By using a plain concise language and form of diction within ‘Stillborn’ Plath is capable of expressing her feelings in a clear way: we can emphasise with, and share in, her frustration. McGuckian approaches diction in a more convoluted way with multiple uses of verb, adjective and noun. This approach appears meaningless until we read the third stanza. The poem could be interpreted as poking fun at other women - the author holds herself separately from others of her gender with the apparent exception of Beatrix Potter whose world she partly plays with in ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’. The poem can also be seen as a
tribute to Beatrix especially in the way that she largely educated herself.

The imagery within these poems is of paramount importance to the message that is being shared with the reader. Plath’s use of foetus’ in a jar lends a sense of clinical detachment to something which is clearly of deep concern to her as a poet she creates a visual horror show or museum exhibit which accuses her of failing them in some way. McGuckian uses imagery in a different way there is an element of ignorance and semi bourgeois interest in everything around her mirroring perhaps Beatrix Potter’s own lack of professional education and comparing it to her own schooling. There is even a sense of underlying respect especially when considering just what Mrs Potter went on to do in later life.

In conclusion both ‘Stillborn’ and ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’ are key works which have strong feminine characters. Plath presents herself to the reader as poet and as Frankenstein - where both sought to bring life, they both fail in their own separate ways. McGuckian appears to merge with Beatrix Potter to create an amalgam of strong femininity at peace with itself and yet seemingly isolated from the real world around them. Both have managed to create an enduring piece of work ‘Stillborn’ ironically becomes alive for the reader and ‘Mr McGregor’s Garden’ enchants us with its fantasy and imaginative use of language to evoke another time and draw us into youthful fancy. What is said proves to be as important as the unspoken elements Plath delivers an unspoken sense of tiredness with the deadness within her poems. McGuckian on the other hand bombards with imagery and a sense of unspoken safety in the creation of poetry.
THE BELFAST GROUP WAS A COTERIE OF POETS AND ARTISTS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE community who shared a love for art and poetry and culture, they met once a week to discuss their passions. Creating a cultural environment in not only Belfast but for the North of Ireland at a time when culture was slowly dying on its feet. The troubles, as they became known, were starting to brew in the 1960’s, leaving many talented poets and artists leaving the country in “exile”. Though many of the Group’s members went on to become established and renowned authors and award winners in their own right, some deny that the Group had any perspective on their successful careers. Yet it is difficult to deny that the treasure trove of writers who shared discussions of their work prior to publication, under the sharp eye of the Group’s founder Philip Hobsbaum, was in some way influential on their later success and the cultural legacy the Group has left behind, inspiring generations of artists and poets 40 years on, Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt describes as:

“Joan Newmann includes an impressionistic memoir--a richly sensory evocation of childhood; a tribute to Philip Hobsbaum, the visionary professor who invited her to join the Belfast Group, a gathering of extraordinarily gifted young writers.”

There were many talented poets in Belfast and in the North of Ireland scene in the 1950’s. Outlets for publishing were practically non-existent. Thus leaving them no choice but to go to Dublin and in many cases England to get published, meaning an inability to establish themselves among their peers, their only option to leave the North. For many writers, Belfast and the surrounding areas, was all they knew, many of the poets who exiled themselves wrote passionately and accurately about Belfast from afar. When the Troubles started in earnest it was these same poets, that people deemed wrote with the most clarity
and accuracy about those times. Often finding humour and keeping balance with sharpened
eyes, which didn’t seem possible for those who stayed, and lived “bomb by bomb”,
breathing the stagnant air the troubles created.
Although the troubles had not started, there was a significant enough Catholic - Protestant
divide lingering even in artistic community, tensions were brewing in Belfast, Michael
Longley stated in the ‘dedication’ of “An Exploded View”:
“The Troubles in Belfast destroyed any notions of a vibrant inner city culture. The period has
been well-documented elsewhere, but the effect on the city was drastic and malign”
(Longley, Writing the Troubles, 2009)

One such exiled poet of the time was John Hewitt, who in the 1950’s had already become
well established as a writer, gaining an MA from Queen’s University in Belfast with his thesis
on Ulster Poets from 1800-1870, before leaving Belfast in 1957 to take up a teaching post in
Coventry, where he would remain, having the little writing of this time published in England
until his return in 1972. Louis MacNiece was another poet who grew up in Belfast until he
moved to England to be educated staying there as opportunity allowed him to work with
the BBC in London, he wrote much of Belfast and what it was becoming:
“Belfast, devout and profane and hard
Built on reclaimed mud, hammers playing in the shipyards
Time punched holes, like a steel sheet, time
Hardening faces”

The essence and vibrancy of Belfast culture was revived in abundance in the 1960’s with the
appearance of Philip Hobsbaum, an English lecturer and poet, who took up a post in at
Queens University in 1963 and promptly set about founding what is now known as the
Belfast Group, which he ran successfully for three years until he left to take up another
teaching post in Scotland. Hobsbaum who studied under and was deeply inspired by Leavis,
who was an acclaimed lecturer, artist and critic, set up a similar Group in London, where
they on a weekly basis discussed poems, prose and other art deemed appropriate, by a
close contextual reading; a direct result of Leavis’ teachings. Hobsbaum described his reason
for forming the Groups as:
“I felt then, as I feel now, that literacy is under threat and only Leavis was voicing that.”

Hobsbaum created similar Groups in the other places he lectured in; Sheffield, Glasgow and the reason he was so successful in gleaning such a “who’s who” list of writers from all over the country was that he deemed:

“The importance of discussion to any writer and the writers need for “the community” to keep him in touch with his audience.”

His theory clearly worked in practice as many of today’s renowned poets and writers attended his Groups at one stage or another, most notably in the Irish Literary world Seamus Heaney, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Iris Bull, Edna Longley, Paul Muldoon and James Simmons, founder of the North’s longest running Literary Magazine "The Honest Ulsterman". Another reason for such success was that not everyone was allowed to join Hobsbaum’s groups, you had to show some flare and talent and a hunger to become established as a writer. The one mistake Hobsbaum may have made in this regard was not allowing Sylvia Plath to join the London Group, when she applied to join at a young age. He deemed her work too girly to be successful.

The Belfast Group itself ran for nine years from 1963 to 1972, under the instruction of largely under the instruction of Heaney who took over from Hobsbaum after he left in 1963. The Group became famous and a delicacy for literary scholars and historians alike after the world became aware that many influential writers of the day had been associated with “The Group”, giving rise to the naming of the period just after the Group disbanded as The Northern Irish Literature Renaissance.

The Group met every Tuesday at Hobsbaum’s home at 8.00 p.m. with one poet every session having several new pieces read aloud to the rest of the Group by themselves, who would in turn give criticism, questions or praise for the piece’s, the responses where pre-prepared during the week before the poet was put in the spotlight, copies of all pieces were forwarded to Hobsbaum, who would have his Secretary at the University make and distribute copies to the other members of the Group, these copies have become known as
the Group Sheets and many are archived. Of the discussions themselves Jack Pakenham says:

“Woe tide any unsuspecting poet who could not stand over every single word written.”
(Cathedral Quarter Walking Tour Leaflet 2011)

Some poets who had left Belfast to study were “co-opted” into the Group, were often more used to “high Yeatsian sense of poetry”, seemed uneasy with Hobsbaum’s style of close contextual attention to even the tiniest details, some were even surprised by the ferocity of discussions. Heaney, who seemed to find his voice within his years with the Group, said of Hobsbaum and his time:

“What happened Monday night after Monday night in the Hobsbaum’s flat in Fitzwilliam Street somehow ratified the activity of writing for all of us who shared it.” (Heaney, S. page 51)

“If he drove some people mad with his absolutes and hurt others with his overbearingness, he confirmed as many with his enthusiasms.” (Heaney, S. page 53)

The Group sessions had two parts, the single poet’s discussion outlined above and then, after a short interval with coffee and biscuits, the floor was then open to anyone who wanted to read something new to the group. Bernard MacLaverty says in an interview: “No alcohol allowed was the only rule”.

Heaney read ‘Blackberry Picking’ and ‘Digging’, Longley read ‘Gathering Mushrooms’, other poets first publications were initially showcased for tightening loose ends in front of the Group. In later years, when Heaney ran the group, sessions took place in his home at Ashley Avenue in Belfast and sometimes in a bar called the ‘The Four Hands where coffee was replaced with beer.’ (Culture N. Ireland Leaflet 2011)

During their time in the group some of the members enjoyed local success with publications in literary pamphlets and magazines, but unlike Hobsbaum’s London Group they did not publish an anthology. From 1965-1969 Heaney and Longley edited the “Northern Review”,

theincubatorjournal.com
which was used to showcase many of the Group’s efforts, alongside appearing in “The Phoenix” magazine namely Longley, Heaney and Bull. Simmons founded and launched “The Honest Ulsterman”, which featured many of the Group’s works as fillers for the first few issues. Consequently related or not, it was to become one of the longest running Irish Literary magazines. Longley’s ‘Art in Ulster’ was published in 1971, providing literary relief at a time when the Troubles were becoming increasingly violent. The groups publishing endeavours no doubt helped when discussing and critiquing each other’s work during the Group meetings, they developed an eye for what editors were looking for.

In the aftermath of the Group many individuals had found their literary voices and where being recognised in their own right. Talk started to come to the fore about the associations with Hobsbaum, certain individuals wanted to be disassociated with “The Group”, rejecting any notion that their work was directly influenced by Hobsbaum or any other members that attended the meetings. We can see from the rate of publication and the wealth of success of those in the years after the Group finished, there can be no denying that the Group had a huge effect on the confidence of those who were members, as those who first joined though young were largely unpublished and unrecognised in the literary field, as shown in an interview by MacLaverty:

“He saw a short story that I’d written and brought it to Philip Hobsbaum’s attention; Hobsbaum in turn wrote to me and asked if I would like to join the Belfast Group. This was very flattering to me. At that time there was no one in the Group of any status with regard to writing.” (Russell, R. 2006)

Michael Longley is one such writer who strongly denies that he: “Altered not even a semi-colon as a result of group discussion” yet there is documentation archived in Literary Library at Queens University Belfast, and in the Special Collections Department of Emory University, containing original Group sheets showing corrections made from the copies that were distributed in advance of each meeting. Some of these sheets show that Longley did re-writes of such poems as “Elegy for Fats Waller” and “Christopher at Birth”. (Brearton, F. 2003 page 108)

Derek Mahon also denies he was ever a member of the Group, claiming only to have ever attended one meeting while in Belfast meeting Longley and his wife Edna, yet went on to
describe Hobsbaum as “a good-hearted ruffian”. He took part in a seemingly strange poetic competition, if you like, with Longley, who wrote three epistolary poems, one of these being to Mahon. In a letter to Mahon there seemed a suggestion that if he didn’t respond to the poem, he would then forfeit and have to buy Longley a bottle of Whiskey, thus proving: “These poems express the last gropings towards an idea of a coherent poetic Group in Northern Ireland; they reveal a concurrent need for these poets to find an individual voice; and these meditations on Group versus individual, on community versus poet, were a result not only of poetic maturation but of the specific--and for some poets, sudden--problematic political and cultural situation in Northern Ireland at this time.” (Russell, R. 2003)

The Belfast Group have left behind many legacies which still resound within the poetry world of Belfast today. Even though the Troubles had not begun in earnest the sectarian boundaries were transgressed by the meetings of the group, a trend which continues in cultural Belfast today. The success of the Group also illustrated the importance of being aware of contemporary peers, which again has planted itself firmly in the minds of today’s artists and writers, Heaney stated in his essay The Regional Forecast:
“I have a sense that nowadays the writers on the outskirts know more about one another than ever before and have begun to take cognizance of each other in ways that are fortifying and illuminating.” (Heaney, S. page 53)

Another testament to the Group’s legacy is the John Hewitt which was named after the earlier mentioned poet and which features in the Cathedral Quarter Walking Tour in Belfast which takes visitors to places such as 4 Fitzwilliam Street where Hobsbaum lived and held the meetings, and to Heaney’s home, where the later meetings took place. It also tours locations in which poems were either written about the place by members of the Group or where poems were written about members of the Group.

To this day the Seamus Heaney Centre, run in conjunction with Queen’s University, holds a writing session which keeps the tradition of the weekly Group meetings, which Heaney himself held in high esteem. In 2011 a new pamphlet The Open Ear was launched, which publishes writing from Queen's Students and Alumni, with an opening foreword by Queen's
then MA Creative Writing tutor Paul Maddern, which mentions the origins of the Belfast Group, showing it still has relevance: "The Belfast Group brought vibrancy, culture and hope to a city that had all but lost its identity."

**Bibliography**

contributors

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Amos Greig is a graduate from Queen's, he also studied at the John Hewitt Summer School in 2001. Amos’s artwork has been used by Lapwing Publications, provided paintings for charity, portraits and created a children’s mural. Amos’s work has appeared in several anthologies including Speech Therapy, Papergirl Belfast, The Bone Orchard, Solstice Poetry, Austrian P.E.N. He edits a literary and arts magazine called A New Ulster. @Somaticon

Rebecca Kemp was born in London and lives in Co Kerry. She has published a novel In Pursuit, won the 2013 Kerry’s Eye Short Story Competition and was selected for the 2014 Twitter Fiction Festival, the only writer from Ireland to do so. She is vice chair of the Kerry Women Writers Network. www.rebeccakemp.com @REKemp1

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Jason O’Rourke is a writer and musician based in Belfast. His short stories and poetry have been published online and in print, as well as on his blog, ‘Vernacularisms.’ Irish translations are here. Jason has recently been nominated for a ‘Best of the Net’ award and won the Fiddler’s Elbow (Rome) short story competition. new.myspace.com/jasonoruairc www.facebook.com/VernacularismsJasonORourke @jasonoruairc

Joanne O’Sullivan has recently moved back to Ireland after finishing a Masters degree in Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of York. She is living in Dublin, where she has hopefully and recklessly begun trying to become an Arts writer. She tweets about books, publishing and life in general at twitter.com/JoanneKateOS.

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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.

Adam Trodd has had flash fiction published in the *Irish Times*, the first volume of *The Powers Short Story Collection* and the online *Flash Flood Journal*. He was longlisted for the 2014 Over the Edge New Writer of the Year competition and has a short story in the Autumn 2014 issue of *Crannóg*. @A_Trodd

Phil Young is a native of Dunmanway in West Cork, and now lives in Dublin. She graduated from Trinity College, Dublin with an MPhil in Anglo-Irish literature, author of the first ever biography of children’s writer, Patricia Lynch, which was launched in Cork as part of Cork European City of Culture celebrations 2005. Her novel, IN A PLACE APART, was published in September 2009, by *Liberties Press*. Phil won the *Doolin Short Story Competition* 2013.

**Interview:** Michael Nolan

**Reviews:** Nessa Collinge on SaltWater, by Lane Ashfeldt
Joanne O’Sullivan on Deadly Confederacies and other stories, by Martin Malone

**Essays:** Christine Murray. Amos Greig. Geraldine O’Kane.