



the incubator

issue 4 | fiction | poetry



the incubator journal
the new home of the Irish short story

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call for submissions

Our reading period is now open

(March 2015)

for new Irish writing.

For Issue 5

(due to be published in June 2015)

*we are seeking **flash fiction, short stories***

*and **memoir** (3000 words max.)*

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contents

	page
editorial	7
in interview	
Danielle McLaughlin	9
short stories	
Bye Bye, Mister Beard, by Cathal McDaid	16
The Sun is Splitting the Trees, by John Lavin	21
The Emperor Penguins, by Sinéad Nolan	26
A Delayed Delivery, by David O'Neill	30
Falling, by Toirdealbhach Ó Lionáird	37
Molotov, by Brian Phelan	43
flash fiction	
Necrophilia, by Csilla Toldy	52
This is not the Story, by Claire Hennessy	54

Palpation, by Emjay Holmes	57
Sorry Mummy, by Brian Mallaghan	59
A Message, by Keeley Mansfield	60
Stranger than Fiction, by Therese Kieran	62
Best Helper, by Mari Maxwell	63
Legend, by Pat Mullan	65

book reviews

Safia Moore on Sleepwalkers, by Bernie McGill	67
Kelly Creighton on How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life, by Angela T. Carr	70

poems

Chopping Wood, by Emma McKervey	74
Canal Water, by Dave McGinn	75
We meet on Grafton Street, by James O’Leary	76
Physics Lesson, by Brian Gourley	77
Reeling, by Jean James	79
The Gambling Account, by Thomas McColl	81
Jill Jacks It In, by Kate Dempsey	82
Habeas corpus, by Peadar O’Donoghue	84
A melody, by Karl Parkinson	85

contributors	86
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editorial

IT HAS BEEN ONE YEAR SINCE WE PUT OUT THE FIRST SUBMISSION CALL AND IN THAT TIME Anne Caughey and I have watched the journal go from strength to strength; the support from both readers and contributors has been heartening. A new year, and we will continue to collate wonderful new writing, reviews and interviews.

In issue 2 journalist Claire Savage interviewed poet and author Cherry Smyth, and I am delighted that she has accepted a permanent post as features editor.

In this issue Claire speaks to Danielle McLaughlin about writing and her previous profession in law, among other things. And like Anne and I, Claire is a volunteer and fellow literature lover who strives to promote local talent. We gladly welcome her on board.

Again we have a strong array of short stories, flash fiction and poems, and soon, another public launch where our contributors will have the chance to read to an audience. It is very important to us that this continues as we believe that stories are made to be told.

As for reviews, we have Bernie McGill's short story collection 'Sleepwalkers', reviewed by Safia Moore, while I have reviewed Angela T. Carr's debut poetry collection 'How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life'.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Best wishes,

Kelly Creighton

Editor

in interview: Danielle McLaughlin

WITH STORIES PUBLISHED IN *THE NEW YORKER*, VARIOUS LITERARY ANTHOLOGIES AND publications, and broadcast on radio, it's fair to say that Danielle McLaughlin has established a name for herself. Indeed, the Cork-based writer, whose first short story collection will be published in the autumn by The Stinging Fly Press, has seemingly hit the ground running with her literary career. She'll be the first to tell you though, that it isn't as effortless as it might look...

"I could have 40 or 50 drafts on my computer by the time I finish a story, not counting the initial longhand versions," she says. "Very occasionally, a story might happen in less than 10 drafts, but that's rare. Some of the re-writes might involve huge changes, for example, losing one character and gaining another, changing the tense, changing POV. Other drafts might involve smaller, more detailed edits, like re-writing tricky paragraphs."

Some writers may balk at the idea of re-working a short story up to 50 times--others may smile knowingly--but Danielle's dedication to her craft has certainly paid off. Last year, her story, *The Dinosaurs on Other Planets*, was shortlisted for the Davy Byrnes Short Story Prize 2014 and was published in *The New Yorker*. In 2012, she also won The William Trevor/Elizabeth Bowen International Short Story Competition, the Willesden Herald Short Story Competition and the Merriman Short Story Competition, in memory of Maeve Binchy. Having always harboured a passion for writing, Danielle only picked up her pen in earnest however, five years ago, and was 40 before she had any fiction published.

"I came to writing relatively late," she says. "I worked as a solicitor for many years, before making the career move to short stories. Law was something I passionately wanted to do since I was in my late teens, and I'm glad I did it. I write full-time now, but I don't regret the law years at all."

“Very occasionally, I miss law a little. Law is all about words--using them and interpreting them with precision and clarity and creativity, and it’s also about stories and dramas. The writing began during a time when I was very ill and wasn’t able to work. I like the freedom that fiction brings--I can delete a paragraph, or even a whole page, without having to worry that somebody might sue.”

Growing up in Donoughmore in County Cork, where she still lives, Danielle was an active reader as a child, devouring everything from fairy tales to mystery adventures. Encouraged to read by her parents, she enjoyed the likes of Enid Blyton, as well as Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, Anne of Green Gables, Little Women and Treasure Island.

“My parents bought me *loads* of books as a child, and I’m very grateful for that,” she says. “All sorts of books about ghosts and about ponies--books in the Irish language as well as books in English.”

Reading is, of course, something Danielle also subsequently encourages in her own children, who are aged 12, 10 and 8.

“They all love reading--the 12-year-old has just finished *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and is now reading James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner*,” she says. “The ten-year-old is a big fan of Jacqueline Wilson and David Walliams, and the eight-year-old is currently reading *Mud Puddle Farm, Six Animal Adventures* by Michael Morpurgo.”

As the eldest of four children, Danielle’s early career took her to Dublin and Waterford, where she practised law before eventually returning to Cork. When she *did* finally begin to write, she subsequently approached it without any expectations of carving out a career as, well--she’d already had one.

“Writing, for me, was almost like the ‘anti-career’, because by committing myself to it, I was leaving behind something I’d spent years studying for, training for and establishing myself in,” she says. “My career was that thing I was rolling into a ball and flushing down the toilet

by deciding to write. I saw 'success', when viewed in professional or commercial terms, as something that was highly unlikely."

Throwing herself wholeheartedly into the creative process, Danielle's writing soon began attracting attention however, as she started entering competitions. Her advice to other writers on this front is to submit completed stories which match the criteria of a competition, rather than writing with a specific judge or contest in mind.

"I don't write specifically for particular competitions, apart from when I've written for radio," she says. "I think attempting to write something to please a particular judge is a mistake. If your heart isn't in it, that's going to show in the finished story--it will be missing the energy and it won't be interesting--not even to the writer as she or he is writing it.

"I used to enter a lot of competitions and they've been a great encouragement. I like it when there are longlists and shortlists, as it signals to the writer that the story's on the right track."

Every writer of course, also has their writing routine--that sacred schedule which always seems to intrigue would-be writers and indeed, fellow wordsmiths. Just what does the successful writer do of a day to reap such rich creative rewards? Where do they get their ideas, their literary inspiration?

For Danielle, her stories always start out handwritten and it may take a couple of weeks, she says, to pin the essence of it onto the page. Only then does she transfer her scribbles to the computer, where they'll undergo an extensive editing and re-writing process before being deemed as finished.

"I'll continue to go back and forth between longhand and computer as I re-draft," she says. "It might save me a lot of time if I could write directly onto the computer, but I can't work that way. Ideas, characters, dialogue, pretty much everything, seems to arrive to the page in a way that they won't come to a screen.

“It might have something to do with the freedom a page allows. I don’t write longhand in an orderly fashion when I’m starting a story--words get thrown all over the page--slantways, in the margins, across the top, tiny writing, big writing, random almost nonsensical stuff thrown down, and there might be squiggles and shapes, lots of arrows... It’s all part of a process to start pulling a story together.”

Part of Danielle’s writing process also involves going to “as many writing events and festivals as I can manage.” Indeed, while some may purport that writing can’t be taught, Danielle is a firm believer in the idea that a writer may learn something at a workshop that might take them years to figure out alone.

“I’ve learnt that there are a lot of things about writing that can be taught, and so I’ve attended a lot of workshops over the past few years,” she says. “If you only write by yourself, without feedback or guidance from other writers, there’s the danger that you will keep repeating the same mistakes over and over, never discovering where you’re going wrong.

“I’m a member of a writing group that meets once a fortnight. We got to know each other a few years ago when we all attended the same series of writing workshops at the Munster Literature Centre in Cork. We email our work around in advance and at the meetings we deliver the critiques and discuss the pieces. The process is invaluable. All of my stories are critiqued by the group before they are released into the world.”

As for her story ideas, well, they can be sparked by a casual remark, an overhead comment, or a chance sighting. *The Dinosaurs on Other Planets* resulted after one of her children asked Danielle, ‘are there dinosaurs on other planets?’ The appearance of a skull following a family walk was added to the mix and a story fit for *The New Yorker* was born.

“Another story arrived when, driving North one day, we passed the foulest smelling lorry ever, and my husband, rightly or wrongly, decided it was a load of fish meal destined for a mink farm,” says Danielle. “A story might arrive when something visual coincides with

something oral--something I hear on the car radio might 'link' with an image on an advertising hoarding as I drive past. The idea might ferment in my head for a while before I start putting it on paper.

"Other times, the idea might arrive so strongly formed that I'll take out a notebook and jot the bones of it down straight away. There will then follow lots of longhand scribbling. My stories often change hugely in the re-writes, so while I may be a plotter or planner, I'm not a very efficient one!"

Having penned enough critically acclaimed short stories now to have warranted her forthcoming collection with The Stinging Fly Press, Danielle's advice to other writers is of course, to read copiously.

"Read, read, read lots of great short stories," she says. "And be prepared to put the time in. I think that often a writer with a little bit of talent who is passionate and determined and works very hard, can produce better work than an extremely talented but lazy writer who can't be bothered."

She adds that in her opinion, there's no such thing as 'the perfect short story' and that trying to write one with that intention is more likely to kill it before it's begun. Working on her own stories "in batches" rather than one at a time, Danielle also plans to write her first novel in 2015, so it will be an extremely busy year for the award-winning writer.

"I'm in the very early stages of working on a novel," she says. "I'm writing it alongside a number of new short stories. I'm just finishing up the collection now, so we're still in the process of making the final selections for that. That's something Declan Meade at The Stinging Fly Press and I are working on together. I've been working towards the collection for a few years, and there'll be a mix of previously published work and more recent unpublished stories."

The collection, as yet untitled, will no doubt be snapped up eagerly by short story enthusiasts and fellow writers come the autumn. Meanwhile, as a book club member and

avid reader herself, Danielle says what spare time she has is filled with reading, writing and attending literary events. One such event is the recently launched short story and flash fiction night in Cork--The Lightning Bug (Twitter handle: @wordbugs)--which takes place once a month. Indeed, Danielle also participated as a guest author in the January meet-up, when she chatted to the group about her work.

"It's really great. I highly recommend it for writers looking for a friendly environment in which to read their work, or for anyone who likes to spend an evening listening to stories," she says. "Anyone who's near Cork should check it out."

As for her reading tastes, recently enjoyed books have included *The Lost Daughter* and *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, and Claire-Louise Bennett's "stunning short story collection", *Pond*. Favourite authors also include Anne Enright, William Trevor, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Nuala Ní Chonchúir, Lane Ashfeldt and Kevin Barry, amongst a great many others.

"I also like to read poetry, and at the moment I'm reading and loving an excellent collection called *The Truth and other stories* by Sarah Clancy," Danielle adds.

With her own literary future looking very bright indeed, 2015 is set to be another year filled with reading, writing and events, and will see Danielle end up with her very first book. After just five years, she's established herself as an Irish author worth watching--and one who knows exactly what it takes to succeed.

"I've learnt that, for me at least, there is a huge time commitment involved in getting a story to a stage where it's publishable. That said, I'm delighted at the way things have turned out!"

Interview by Claire Savage

short story

Cathal McDaid

Bye Bye, Mister Beard

THE SENSATION OF MOTION REMAINED WITH THE MAN FROM THE GREYHOUND BUS TO the terminal cafeteria. It was a feeling that clung to him for an hour after every long journey. This one from Oregon's mist and rain to the mid-west's midwinter chill, from another failed attempt to settle to this latest fresh start.

A waitress brought a local free newspaper with his coffee, but the tinsel in her ponytail failed to raise any festive cheer on Christmas Eve in Omaha, Nebraska. She seemed to know the only other customers, a father with a boy of ten and a little girl of six or seven. The girl ordered with a breezy authority she imagined a grown-up would use, saying that her dad would be happy to collect their food from the counter. The waitress turned away smiling and the man saw the little girl wink at her father, who reddened and shook his head as he got to his feet.

The man yawned and felt the muffled hum of the highway disappearing as his ears popped. Crockery rattled and the radio weatherman warned of heavy snowfall. He stretched his earlobes, wiggled his jaw, and could suddenly hear the rasp of the zipper on the boy's coat as he strummed it up and down and the tap of the girl's swinging foot on a chair leg.

"You have to stop trying to set dad up with Wendy," said the boy.

"But she's pretty, and I know he likes her," the girl protested. "And if they get married we won't have to keep going to stay with mom in Kansas."

"Her attorney says Dad had us last Christmas so it's Mom's turn this year."

"But she's always at her office. We never do anything. And how will Santa know where to come?"

"You told him the address in your letter, remember?" the boy reassured her. "Here comes dad. Just pretend to be happy."

The man feigned interest in his paper, but his attention was with the table to his

left. The boy tore open the plastic wrapping and crammed his mouth with a dark, doughy muffin. A single chocolate chip lodged at the corner of his lips and spread into a stain as his jaws worked. The girl stretched tall in her seat to reach the straw in her milkshake, and pink bubbles clung to the sides of the frosty glass as she drank. Her chubby fingers grappled with the muffin wrapper, stretching and twisting it without splitting the seal. Her brother watched her try to bite through the plastic, try to prise apart a corner with her thumbnails. He giggled and opened the package with one easy tear then flexed his bicep for her to squeeze. The father watched from across the rim of his coffee cup and offered his own muscle.

“Mmmm...” the girl said. “I think we need an arm wrestle.”

Father and son faced off with faked sneers. Rolling up their sleeves and locking hands, they grunted and grimaced to the girl’s delight. The boy slowly pushed his father’s arm down; the father recovered and came to within an inch of victory before relaxing his arm and allowing the boy to triumph. The girl cheered and clapped as she raised her brother’s arm in victory. The father made a pained face as he massaged his beaten bicep.

Watching from his own table, the man felt his heart beating a dull thud of loneliness. He could not say precisely when he had become a nomad, but he had lived in twenty-five cities in ten years. It had been three years since he had even heard the voice of a family member, and when he did, that sound on the phone line had been so painful that he hung up without speaking. An old acquaintance from his home city of Baltimore had met him in Detroit and commiserated with him on the death of his father the previous year. The man had taken the news with ghostly detachment, thanking the woman for her kind words and agreeing that, yes, time was a great healer. That night, he drank up enough Dutch courage to pick up the phone, but his mother’s voice had seized him by the throat, stifling the words he had so carefully rehearsed. Tears began at the sound of his sister in the background. The following morning he left Detroit, running west to escape their voices.

The employment pages of the Omaha Advertiser offered little, but the man knew the winter cold could not be survived unless he earned enough for food and rent. Laughter from the other table made him glance at the ragged rucksack he knew was worth mocking. He looked road-weary, but felt relatively clean after a rest-room wash, beard trim and change of shirt. A napkin wiped the corners of his mouth, a matchstick dug some grit from

underneath his thumbnail and he rubbed the toes of his boots on his jeans. He began to relax as he searched the accommodation columns, but the laughter soon started again. His eyes misted and his heart quickened as a surge of blood made his head throb. The hinge of his jaw was swollen with the pressure of clenched teeth as he began assembling an insult for the man whispering to his children about the bum with the cold coffee and the free newspaper; some cruel but satisfying query about how he intended to spend his lonely Christmas while his kids were being ignored by their mother in Kansas City. One more laugh and he was sure he would snap.

He did not believe that he had chosen this shifting, rootless lifestyle. It seemed to have come about without his consent, from beyond his control. His childhood had been safe, suburban and middle-class, with no travel beyond summer camp in Pennsylvania. After graduating high school, he spent a summer working in an orange grove in Florida before returning home to a carpentry apprenticeship that lasted until the lure of a better wage at a bakery dazzled him. After six months of nightshifts he left for San Francisco, a fabled city where he believed anything would be possible. For two years there he kept in contact with his family, often putting a fictional sheen on the low paid jobs and shared rooms that he had quickly found to be the reality of the city on the bay. Calls home dwindled to Fourth of July, Thanksgiving and Christmas after he moved to San Diego. On a whim, he quit a big-tipping job at a yacht club and headed for Mexico to live lavishly on what he had saved. He rented a room in Tijuana and lay in the sun drinking tequila, happy to spend a couple of months at leisure before returning to America.

A few days after arriving, he bought marijuana in an alleyway, walked round the corner and was punched off his feet by two policemen. They dragged him back into the alley, and he watched them sell the weed back to the grinning dealer. One cop smiled greasily as he pushed a packet of white powder into the man's shirt pocket. The other cop then searched him. They circled for five minutes, always one in front and one behind him, talking to each other about how severe local judges were with coke-dealing gringos and how affectionate lifers could be towards tight-assed white boys. One cop eventually told him that his freedom would cost every penny he had, minus his bus fare. They ransacked his rented

room for anything of value and left him with a broken nose, perforated eardrum and kidneys kicked hard enough for the man to piss blood all the way back to San Diego.

He phoned home with a well-rehearsed story of being beaten in a burglary, ready to ask for the fare back to Baltimore, but sensed that his family somehow knew about his stupidity. His father's genuine good spirits on hearing from his son for the first time in a year came across as mocking laughter, and the man blurted a lie about joining the crew for a round-the-world sailing trip. Paranoid and broke, he resorted to the opportunistic theft of an unguarded handbag. He kept the cash, but his misfiring brain worried about fingerprints, and he carried the rolled-up bag in his coat pocket until nightfall, when he filled it with rocks and dropped it off a pier. Next morning he was on a bus to Canada, convinced that he was America's most wanted. That was the last contact with his family. Since the news of his father's death and the choked phone call to his mother, all the months that passed and gathered up into years had put him further and further away.

The waitress did not ask if he had finished his coffee as she took the cup and left the bill. The man mumbled his thanks and lifted his face to force a smile, but she had already turned away. He circled the numbers of two potential jobs and was searching for quarters among a handful of loose change when more laughter brought the hot temper back to his face. They thought he was counting pennies to pay for his coffee. They thought they were better than him. He would challenge the father to insult him to his face instead of whispering about him and tell the brats they would be better off staying with their mother in Kansas. He would not be laughed at any more.

What he saw when he turned froze him in his seat. The little girl's hands with the pudgy, soft fingers that could not remove the wrapper from a muffin were fluent with signed speech directed at her father, who nodded his head, his eyes bright with wonder at what she was telling him. The son's hands spoke too, and the father signed back to his children and made small, strangled sounds of emphasis they could clearly comprehend. Embarrassment made the traveller want to run. The girl made eye contact for a split-second before looking back to her father, who turned and smiled.

"My dad says you should sit with us," the girl said.

"We're waiting for the bus," the boy added.

The father smiled again and lifted his daughter's pink backpack from the vacant seat beside him.

"Thank you," the man croaked. "But I have to make a phone call." He felt stupid when he realised his hand was by his head with the thumb and little finger extended to imitate a telephone receiver.

"Dad says you look lonely." The girl translated her father's fingers. "Have some coffee with us when you've made your call."

"Thank you. I will," the man answered. He was smiling, yet shaking with some unknown dread as he stumbled from the cafeteria.

He stood for a long time with the phone to his ear and a coin balanced against the slot. Through the departure gate he could see the first flakes of the forecast snow. An electronic board flashed Christmas Eve departures and arrivals. A janitor lazily zig-zagged his brush and a delivery man stocked a vending machine with Christmas-themed Coke. The boarding call for the Kansas City express stirred a handful of people from their seats. The father passed by, one arm round his son's shoulder, the other carrying his daughter on his hip.

"Bye-bye, Mister Beard." She giggled as she waved, then buried her face in her father's neck.

He smiled and waved back, then watched the children settle in their seats at the front of the bus. The father gave a letter to the driver, who read it and nodded before speaking to the children with a smile. The father hugged his son and daughter then hurried away before they could see the glistening in his eyes.

The man punched the ten digits that were burned into his memory.

"Hello."

Her voice was softer. Frail. Three years older.

"Hello? Is anybody there?"

"Mom?" The dam finally burst.

"David?" she gasped. "Dave? Is that you?"

"Mom... Can I come home?"

John Lavin

The Sun is Splitting the Trees

ON THE WAY BACK TO HIS ROOM IAN STOPPED TO LOOK UP AT THE WINDOW FROM

which the blonde girl had flashed at Keith the previous weekend. His friend had relayed the story in a casual, almost disdainful manner that Ian had found extremely irritating. He walked on, cursing his fate. What must it be like, he wondered dolefully, to inhabit a world where girls you barely know lift their tops up for you at seven in the morning?

He had planned on getting back into bed and masturbating himself to sleep but Keith's door had opened the very moment that he entered the corridor. Keith, as was often the case, was only wearing boxer shorts.

'Working out,' he said, by way of explanation for his sweaty appearance. 'Can I come in for a fag?'

Nodding, Ian went into his room and opened the window. He used his foot to press play on the small ghetto blaster by his bed and smiled at the sympathetically lovelorn opening chords of Suede's 'The Wild Ones' - a song whose mood was one of such desperate romanticism that it almost matched his own.

Keith looked at the clock and raised his eyebrows. 'You *went* to your lecture?'

He sat now, as always, with his legs wide apart, seemingly unconcerned that Ian could see the well-defined contours of his genitals.

Ian threw his coat down and shook his head. He picked up the kettle and went into the bathroom calling back 'Wanna coffee?'

'Love one mate. Shall we go to the Mulberry Bush for breakfast?'

'Ah,' said Ian, sitting down heavily and pulling a pouch of tobacco from his trouser pocket. 'I'm broke. I can't really afford to go out *tonight*.'

'Christ it's only the third week of term. How about Conti's then? I want to get *out*. Anyway, I was thinking we should just go to the Cwmanne tonight. I'm bored of the union.'

'Really?' Ian's pained expression relaxed into a smile. 'Thank fuck for that!'

'What? Oh... it's the girl, is it? What's her name? Sarah?'

'Sam.'

When Sam had finally replied to the text messages that Ian sent her over the holidays it had been to say that kissing him had been nothing more than a moment of drunken *joie de vivre* and that it was silly of him to keep texting her. Their kiss had been at a Christmas party on the last night of term and Ian had fallen unhesitatingly in love.

'You haven't seen her then?'

'She only came back Monday. Skiing.'

'Poor Ian. Come on I'll get breakfast.'

They walked out under the creaking pines that surrounded their halls of residence and began to cross campus. It had snowed heavily the previous week and there was still some leftover, piled up and hardened by the side of the paths, marking their way at intervals like arctic cairns.

'You were up early then,' said Keith.

'I walked to the lake. I just seem to feel so unhealthy all the time.'

'I think you might need to cut down on the booze a tiny bit mate.'

'Yeah, yeah, *I know*,' Ian said sharply. 'What the fuck is *that*?'

Keith followed Ian's line of vision. A rudimentary crucifix bearing a Guy Faulkes-esque effigy had been mounted on top of the grassy mound above the entrance to the old part of

the university. By the time they reached the base of the mound there could be no doubt concerning whom the effigy was intended to represent. The likeness was basic at best but the word 'PAEDO' had been scrawled across the torso in what appeared to be actual blood.

'Christ this is going too far,' said Keith in a voice that betrayed a lack of any real concern.

'*Too far...?*' Ian trailed off. He was experiencing one of those rare moments of genuine shock that can make a person realise just how rarely they actually have been shocked during the entire course of their lives. It felt as though a sluice gate had opened in his skull and that ice-cold water was now gushing through it. He looked fiercely at his friend, feeling that the mild indignation in his tone was considerably less than sufficient. '*Too far?*' he repeated angrily. 'For God's sake it's like something out of the fucking *Wicker Man*! What are they going to do next? *Lynch* him?'

The effigy was clearly intended to represent a first-year student who had been interviewed by police at the start of term. The rumour that he was suspected of downloading child pornography had spread across the university with deadly speed.

'It's right outside his window too,' said Keith, popping a Marlboro in his mouth and turning to gaze up at the first year halls of residence.

*

The student in question was called Matthew. He sat now by the waters of the small lake that lay about a mile and a half out of town. He had been there when Ian came earlier that morning and had hidden in the trees to avoid meeting him. He felt vulnerable being alone in such a quiet spot - but what did it matter now? Everything had changed after last night. The threats and abuse being hurled outside his window had seemed to gain a new and terrifyingly visceral momentum. He recognised some of the voices as belonging to people he shared the corridor with and knew that it was only a matter of time before the threats and abuse entered the building and took up residence outside his door. Until there was nowhere

left for him to escape to.

But the voices hadn't come upstairs. Instead the night had gone instantly and mysteriously silent. It was only when he had peered cautiously through a gap in the curtains that he had seen the effigy staring back at him.

He was wearing a dark green raincoat, inside each of the two outside pockets of which he had lodged a large rock. He thought about calling his mother, knowing that she loved him. But he also knew that that love was submerged beneath her constant, unconscious engagement with the crime that he was suspected of. It would take a long time to locate that love, let alone to bring it back up to the surface. And time was something that he didn't have anymore. Time was something that he couldn't, in that moment, either physically or psychologically bear to experience. The relentlessly slow pace of it. The mirror-like quality of it. Like the effigy staring back at him. Like the surface of the cold, still lake laid out in front of him. And always the worry that the feelings that he had could – and surely *would* – return. He took out a bottle of sleeping tablets and began to pop them back, one after another, washing them down with the whiskey and coke that he had pre-mixed before he set out. He lay back and closed his eyes. When he opened them again he wasn't sure if it was a floater he was seeing or a Red Kite drifting and rising, ascending ever higher and higher into the promise of thaw.

Hazily, with difficulty, he got to his feet and began to wade into the water.

*

It was Ian that found Matthew the following day, out walking off another hangover. He hadn't seen Sam the previous night because he and Keith hadn't gone to the union but the whole evening had been terrible all the same because he couldn't stop thinking and talking about her.

'Christ you only got off together once!' Keith had finally said, losing his temper.

But it was all very well for Keith. He always pulled and last night had been no exception. This time: a shockingly beautiful and voluptuous red-haired woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a vintage Liberty dress (Ian, who studied art, knew about these things). She was the older sister of an acquaintance of theirs, visiting for the weekend, and almost certainly the single most stylish person that Ian had ever seen set foot within their small university town. (Keith, of course, hadn't even thought that she was that good looking.)

The sun was surprisingly bright that morning, melting the last of the snow away.

Sure, the sun is splitting the trees, his Irish father would have said.

The sun is splitting the trees.

An old Irish phrase, meaning what a lovely, sunny day it is. It must originally have come about, Ian supposed, from the way that the sun breaks through the leaf-heavy-trees in a combination of hazy beams and shimmering glints in high summer. But when he was a child he hadn't realised that. When he was a child whenever he heard that phrase he had always used to get this image in his head of the sun being so hot that it was actually *burning* the trees. Actually making them split right down the centre the way a laser beam might do in an old science fiction movie.

He trudged round the bend in the road and the lake came into view. There was a secret, hidden feeling to the place even though everyone knew where it was. And perhaps because his eyes were a little dazzled by the light he didn't realise at first just what it was that he was seeing. Matthew's body washed up in a heap on the shore, looking uncannily like the effigy that his peer group had erected of him the night before last.

Sinéad Nolan

The Emperor Penguins

THERE'S A STORY I LOVE TO TELL BECAUSE IT ALWAYS GETS PEOPLE'S ATTENTION. IT'S about this yenta originally from the shtetl, who married money and ended up with more of it than she knew what to do with, so she decided to go on this trip to the Antarctic.

It was a photography trip, run by a man called Petrinski - rough diamond, total shmuck, you might know him? He makes his gelt taking pictures of pygmy owls in the snow and emperor penguin colonies, and kalij pheasants in the Himalayan foothills. The type of masochist who gets up at 3am to lie on damp ground in a swamp waiting for a tundra bean goose to show him some wing.

Anyway, dude charges an arm and a leg per class, and these gullible schleps like my neighbour, who've trained as accountants and computer technicians or in this buffleheads case - a chiropractor - just can't get enough of him.

So of course, this yenta - even though she's not the best photographer in the world and she's barely put her eye to the lens in her life, she goes out and buys the best of everything before her husband knows what's hit his Amex. Best photography equipment - were talking a Canon EOS 5D Mark III, with all of the attachments and lenses, top of the range camera bags - F-Stop, all the internal camera units - 700 dollars a pop. She buys the best clothing too; a down jacket that can take you down to minus 40 even though she's going to be sleeping in a five star cabin every night. A top-a-the-range waterproof jacket, high-tech fabric. Before she's even paid for the actual trip she's dropped a good ten thou on just the equipment alone.

All this shnook goes on about for the weeks coming up to the trip, is how she's going to see the emperor penguins. I know because I'd been having some back trouble and I had to go and see her so she could assess my lower lumber region, but that's another story for another day.

To be honest, I almost pitied the woman. I guessed it must be pretty depressing to have buckets of moolah but not an ounce of street smarts. She even managed to persuade her husband to come along. Poor shmuck worked as a Wall Street banker in his heyday. Had more heart bypasses than Burt Reynolds. All he wanted was to be left alone with the mets - feeding his black-capped chickadees and hiding from her in the outhouse with the FT and one of Cuba's finest. But she wouldn't hear anything of it. If she was going to see the emperor penguins, he was coming with her - 'and that was final'.

Course, I completely forgot about it all until six months later when my back started playing up. I'd been sitting in my favourite cafe on 49th and Broadway, drinking espresso and doing a Sudoku when I found I was suddenly unable to move. I had to wait a full hour until the pain abated enough for me to stand up and I hauled myself home and lay sweating on the sofa like a putz, dialling old Mrs Kasher and hoping to high heaven it wasn't bingo night at the Cabal.

Mrs Kasher answered but I barely recognised her voice. She sounded older and more far away.

"I suppose I can fit you in."

I barely remember how I managed to haul myself in there, if you've ever had back problems, you'll understand; it felt like someone was pushing a hot poker up my spine.

As usual, there was the same scent of incense in the air, the same calming music playing. I lay down on the table and Mrs Kasher asked me what the trouble was.

I explained to her the depth and breadth of the pain, mentioned it might have something to do with Natasha, who had recently left me for a putz with more money and patience for women's kvetching than me.

She had nodded sagely.

We both knew mental problems manifested in a physical way - because what Mrs Kasher didn't have in street smarts, she made up for with intuiting the problems of the flesh.

For me was a cold sore when I was stressed, a headache when I was poor and a backache when I was heartbroken.

Mrs Kasher sympathised a little, but not as much as usual, she seemed to be elsewhere in her head. Something was different about her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Wasn't until I caught sight of the small figurine of a penguin on the shelf that I remembered to ask.

“How was your trip? Did you get to see your precious emperor penguins?”

She continued to knead my lower lumber region as she heated rocks to place on my skin.

She was silent for a moment and then she said very softly.

“No.”

“Oh really? Why was that?”

“My husband died.”

It was a bald statement. Matter of fact. As though she was mentioning she’d had a bad meal in a restaurant out there.

I didn’t have any words ready to reply. Sure the zeyde had been in his 60s, but it was still unexpected. Initially I guessed his dicky heart was to blame. I told her, in that terribly awkward and hollow way, that I was sorry for her loss.

“It shouldn’t have happened - he just slipped and fell. I let go of him.”

She stopped kneading and burst into tears. It was as though she had been keeping it in for weeks.

Big, gasping sobs.

I turned over, wincing.

I couldn’t even move to give the poor yenta a hug.

“Right over the edge of the boat,” she sniffled. “He fell into the water. He was thrashing around and thrashing around... and we threw him a life ring... but then the polar bear we had been photographing got into the water and swam over to him....”

Another gasp and sob.

“...And the polar bear dragged him from the sea up onto the ice and bit into his flesh like it was a chicken wing, and ate him from the feet up. So casually. It took him ten minutes to die. I can’t stop hearing his screams in my mind. My husband of forty years...”

“No one could do anything?”

“It was too dangerous,” she sniffled, her face red. “All we could do was drive the boat back, leaving him there. So we turned the boat around, and I left my husband in the Antarctic, a bloody puddle on the red snow and the rest of him in the belly of a polar bear. The whole trip was cancelled, people had paid thousands. We didn’t see one emperor penguin.”

When I tell the shmucks down at the cafe that last part their mouths drop open. *I didn’t*

know polar bears even ate people. Yep, they damn well do - all the time. Just shows, you should probably stay in the safety of New York city, where you might get murdered but at least it's with some dignity. Others mumble in that knowing tone, that you never know the time nor the hour. Poor man... his poor, nebekh wife. How is she now? Does she have other family? Did they prosecute the polar bear?

The polar bear still remains at large, I tell them gravely. The woman doesn't have any other family apart from a sister in Europe. And people stare into the distance, their eyes far away, as if trying to comprehend the magnitude of this. And eventually, they go back to their coffee, turn the page of the New York Times and read another article, and my brief moment of storytelling glory is over.

David O'Neill

A Delayed Delivery

SNAP. THE MORNING POST HIT THE FLOOR AS THE LETTERBOX SPRUNG CLOSED. SITTING on the patch of carpet, now threadbare, to greet her when she finally awoke was a bank statement, two bills and a letter. The house had a warm, uncomfortable feeling due to a lack of circulation and last night's cigarette smoke. It created a sickly air that would only pass once life had re-emerged from its nightly halt and she eventually answered the call of the day ahead.

For now though, that could wait. For now, with her knees tucked upwards as a protective shield to her breast, she waited. Letting last night's dream ebb away into the ether she lay, halfway towards thought. She watched through half opened lids as the winter sunshine began to inch its way across the wooden floor of her bedroom. Each passing minute leading to the unavoidable acceptance that the day was here. Largely, undeniably, here. Gingerly, one eye focussed on the neon glow of the alarm clock.

Christ. Only 8:12, she thought. There was an unbearable weight of the unknown yet to emerge and it was a task that, today, seemed to defeat her without even a hint of a battle. This day was not for changing though and it had no intention of letting her off lightly. Stretching her body out, a ripple of nervous energy filled her limbs as she lay prostrate. Turning elegantly and swiftly she tossed the bedcovers aside and slipped her feet onto the floor. Toes curled as soon as they felt the cool wood below her. The temptation to hide away resurfaced. Nobody would notice. She worked from home anyway so a few unanswered phone calls would be the only barometer of a day avoided instead of lived. It was in a haze of conscious dreaming rather than any direct choice that she stood and shuffled into her clothes.

Downstairs, as coffee brewed and cigarettes were smoked, she again debated the idea of

closing ranks and ridding herself of the day. As she leaned against the countertop she felt at peace for the first time that morning. She watched the smoke unfurl, overlap and eventually diffuse around the room. Perhaps, she thought, that if she could hide away for long enough, today too might eventually disappear into nothing like the smoke pouring from the ashtray. As she turned to again retreat to the protection of her bed the doorbell jolted her into the present. Her body froze at the sound then slackened in acceptance. Moments later, the shrill tone of the doorbell echoed through the house once more, more persistent and irritated this time. Urgent. Exhaling deeply, she walked to the door.

He was standing on her mat, clearly impatient but with an almost comedic level of false positivity beaming from his face. As she opened the door, she immediately turned and offered him her profile. He walked past her, his smile still pasted onto a cleanly shaven face and strode into the kitchen. His demeanour was overwrought, yet brimming with action, a pastiche of productivity; all rustling bags and blabbering words. She followed him into the kitchen where he had already started to lay out newly purchased food items.

'I had some of these left over and I thought you might like them for lunch,' he lied. 'Let me see... you like prawns right?' He lifted the packaging and offered it to her hopefully.

She walked past the table and picked up the box of cigarettes that sat next to an already full ashtray. Leaning against the worktop, she lit a cigarette.

'I thought you had quit,' he said. Though she could only see his back, she knew that the smile had departed from his face in exchange for a look of concern.

'Leave it,' she said.

'You know, this isn't going to help. Sitting around here, half dressed and...'

'Just leave it.' She felt her throat contract slightly and she worried for a fleeting moment that she might cry.

'In fact, just leave. What are you even doing here anyway?' she said. Her composure had returned and a sense of indignant frustration has started to rise. 'I have work to do.'

They both knew that this was a lie. Likewise, they both knew that he wasn't going anywhere.

'Look. You know as well as I do that I am staying here today,' he said.

'Well, I am getting ready to go out so...'

'Then I am going with you. Now, you can sit here smoking all day or you can go out on some made-up errands; but either way, you are going to have to get used to seeing this face for the rest of the day; and this face...will look like this.' He pasted on that false smile again and pointed at himself, unnecessarily.

They both laughed, then stopped and stared at each other. Guilt crept up in her as she stared at him. Her gaze softened and for the second time in such a short period of time, he throat seemed to collapse on itself. It left her reeling and she felt powerless in her struggle to cling onto breath. Onto life.

She hated him, right now, for a second. It was a hatred borne of too many emotions, none of which made her feel any better about herself. He knew her so well and cared for her with such an unapologetic intensity that it made her reciprocal affections for him pale into nothingness. Surely, she thought, love must have been the nucleus for his actions. Why else would he show up, this morning, with false smiles and pre-packed fish?

She hated him but knew that he was right. Regardless of whether she accepted it or not, she needed him just as much as he knew she did.

Autumn has a way of calming a person. Summers recharging effects coupled with crisp reds and yellows underfoot can make you feel strong. Each step exudes a satisfying crunch yet a sudden gust can throw you off your stride. This balancing act of nature can settle you into a comfortable acceptance of the order of things. A realisation that we are nowhere but right in the middle. Between sleep and waking we graze, blissfully unaware of what is to come, yet studiously ignoring all that has been and passed. For the most part, this can be a tranquil existence. We daren't ask too many questions of ourselves for fear of what we might

discover. While a sense of failure may weigh heavily on us, ultimately it is waste that drags us deeper into the mire.

As they walked down the steps onto the beach she pulled her scarf close to her chin. A playful wind was tickling their features. It wasn't an altogether uncomfortable experience but still, in an act of automaticity, she shielded her soul from it by turning her shoulder to its force and leaning into it. Waves slid towards them in silky lines. Each one carrying a message of renewal and impermanence as it was replaced by another, overlapping, edging closer to their feet. They walked on, neither willing to peer behind the growing wall of silence that had been built on their walk to the water. As her feet began to sink in the wet sand she stopped. Staring at her feet, fresh foam sketched the outline of her boot and drifted away as if it had never been. Her head remained bowed. Finally, she succumbed to the release that had built inside her, and sobbed.

He held her for what felt like an age. His heavy coat absorbing her tears as he silently allowed her to shake.

Once she had re-joined her body, she became aware of a wave of embarrassment which was busy tearing through her. Lifting her head from his chest was now the most difficult action she could make. 'I...I'm sorry,' she said.

'Sorry for what?'

'Sorry for everything,' she said. 'I'm sorry for crying on you. I'm sorry for bringing you out here but most of all I'm sorry for...her.' Her head was still buried in his winter coat, though her grip of him had now slackened.

'You have nothing to be sorry about. For any of it,' he said. 'If anything, it is me that should be sorry.'

'Why would you be sorry?' she said.

'It's ridiculous,' he said. 'Me. Showing up unannounced like that. With a bag of stupid fucking food.' They both smiled. 'Like I have any right to turn up at all. It's just. I thought you might need to see someone. Someone that knows...knew.' He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned to face the strand.

They walked on silently towards the place. She realised that it was unavoidable now. She would walk up to the rocks where she might finally have the strength to ask him about her, about them but most especially, about what had happened that day. The wind had stopped now and suddenly, she was more aware of sounds than she had been at any other stage that morning. Self-consciously she winced at the rustling noise her heavy clothes made as she strode across the sand. She was also now aware of a faint buzzing sound coming from his pocket. Looking towards his face, she was met with a wry smile.

'She just wants to know that I'm ok, I guess,' he said.

Anger bristled inside her. 'Typical,' she said. 'Here was me thinking that we could finally share this. Hoping that now, nine years later, we could share something from that day. Together. Alone.'

'But no,' she said. 'She's always there, isn't she?'

'That's not fair,' he said.

'Fair? Don't talk to me about fair. Fair would be having your mother still alive. Fair would be having a father that knew what the job description was. Fair would be at least knowing why your life was ripped apart by a woman you have never met.'

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

'Oh just fucking answer it,' she said. 'She may as well hear this too. I mean, I'm sure you both had a great laugh at mum all that time as she...'

'That's really not fair,' he said, ignoring the phone. 'I think it is time we talked.'

Silence.

'You need to hear this.'

'Your mother was sick'.

'Don't you dare put all this on...'

'Just listen. Please,' he said.

'Your mother was sick long before you were even born. There were times that things were ok. Actually, there were times that things were more than ok. Lots of them. Sometimes, it was great. Really great,' he said. A smile crept across his face. Sincere this time. Quickly, like the retreating stream of waves that danced around their feet, it departed. His face clouded over with a feature of pure desperation.

'It didn't last too long though,' he said. 'She just...couldn't enjoy...' He turned to face the rocks.

'You know,' he said. 'When times were better she once told me that nothing is really permanent. Pain. Happiness. Nothing. She used to say that it was that thought that helped her the most. The thought that no matter how low she felt. No matter how much pain she went through. It would always end, like the tides.' He turned to face the shoreline. Foam evaporating on the sand as the waves trickled away, their duty done.

As they walked back to her house silently, she looked for the prints their heavy winter boots had etched in the sand previously. Not a trace of their weight had remained. All that was left was a memory of being there.

Lighting a cigarette she opened that mornings post. Tearing the envelope of the letter, absent minded, she tugged at the sheet. It spilled out and all at once she felt her breath leave her body, possibly never to return. A photocopied page with her mother's handwriting staring up at her. Hot tears trickled down her flushing cheeks. Scanning the page she instantly knew the context of the words. He, her father, had posted it. Through clouded vision she carefully read on:

And you, my beautiful daughter,

Please, never once, should you feel that I do not love you. The truth is so far from that. I have given you everything that I can. I know that is not close to being enough. I can see now though, that my actions will not last. Away, like clouds they will blow until all that is left of me is you. Try to understand that it is this comfort that allows me to pass.

I will always be thankful for the unmistakable effect you have left on my life. Without you, my love, I fear that I would have written this letter long before now.

X

For hours she sat. Allowing her mother's words to wash over her until she could recite the letter verbatim.

Later, she crept upstairs, the letter still protectively held tight. She had long since accepted that she would not sleep that night. How could she? Sliding into bed the enormity of the day began to envelope her. More questions now surfaced than ever before but they were tangled with a peculiar sense of peace. It was a feeling she had not experienced in some time. The words her mother had written resonated with her and she began to try to agree with them.

01:23 shone brightly from the clock dial, illuminating the dark room in a way that only those truly in search of sleep can ever see. The glow from a streetlight shone through her blinds in a multitude of slivers. Collectively they gave the impression of a ladder. One on which she might just escape the emotional depths she had trawled in this most recent chapter of her life. No doubt, she thought, tomorrow will bring challenges. There was also no doubt in her mind though, that this chapter would now be consigned to memory.

The information she had received today would be the bedrock of her consciousness for the foreseeable future. The assimilation of which would bring new directions for her life. It had been nine years of grief and bitterness. For a long time after her mother's passing she had bounced from guilt to blame, the latter providing marginally more genuine comfort than the former. Now though, she knew that this too would pass. Just as pain, loss and happiness had. Just as her heavy footsteps had, where once she had tread on softening sand. Their existence was fleeting.

Toirdealbhach Ó Lionáird

Falling

I IMAGINED HIM AS HE SLOUCHED AWAY TOWARDS THE SECURITY CHECK, NIKE BAG slung over his shoulder and his baggy grey tracksuit pants scuffing the ground. He'd need extra shorts, short-sleeved shirts, t-shirts and a cap when it got hot over there, but this was not my concern any more. I hadn't seen him for a few days and then I heard he was leaving by way of the usual post-mass table talk, a stew of rumour, conjecture and spurious speculation. When he eventually called around, I was busy and distracted. Living with your parents means pills, ironing and meals, not to mention the teaching by day. You looked after your people and were compensated handsomely with a site and a hefty will when the end came. Things worked by way of routine in my life and I hadn't time for unscheduled interruptions.

'You've heard by now, I s'pose?' he asked. I didn't look his way. Instead, I rinsed the beige slugs from the cauliflower and let him speak.

'I know we haven't been getting on great and shur I couldn't keep getting you to bail me out.' He paused before continuing.

'My mother saw an ad for sparks in Perth and offered to put up the price of the flight so I...' The cauliflower was soaked by now so I turned, kneading my hands dry with a towel as I began, but not before finding my best bitch-face.

'We've no future anyway Wayne. So you know what, you'd be better off halfway across the world doing something worthwhile rather than dragging me down into the shit with you.'

His head dropped and for the first time I noticed crop marks of baldness beginning to show on his scalp. We used to laugh a lot about our physical deficiencies: his creeping greyness and inevitable paunch; my spare tyre and wobbly knees – built like a flamingo, my balance was delicate. I only made friends after long periods of bedding-in; boyfriends were subjected to additional rigorous vetting. My commitment to my parents meant we came as

a package but Wayne had always “got” that. He drove them to mass, sometimes even to the beach for a walk and even went on holidays with us once, that time Dad’s colostomy bag burst and Wayne cleaned up the mess.

I turned back to my vegetables and just knew by the silence that he’d be up behind me in no time for a cuddle and a squeeze and that we’d sort it all out. I might even go with him. We just needed to discuss it properly. I spun around and opened my mouth to speak but was alone with the drip of the tap. Running to the window, I just caught sight of the last of his shadow disappearing after him around the corner.

‘Was that Wayne?’ My mother felt the pulse of the room soon after.

‘It was. Now, I’d better get the potatoes on the boil.’

He had walked up, something he hadn’t done since his first visit to meet the folks.

I knew the summer was over when they started advertising back-to-school deals in July. I had one eye on the classroom, while Wayne would no doubt be excited counting the days until his parents visited. Word had it that he’d salted away enough in three months to pay for their flights. His mother had hardly looked at me since. She even crossed the road one day, pretended to answer her phone another, then gave me the barest of nods, her eyes glazed like a bathroom window. I could hardly blame her. My own had “apprehended” her – mammy’s word, not mine – in the street after mass to take her to task about how her son had abandoned his responsibilities and what was Terry to do now? As if I needed a man to function; as if any girl needs a man to exist in her own right. We weren’t engaged, we hadn’t even been that intimate. At first I seethed. No conversation, not a word at dinner, not a reply when asked if I’d like some tea. After all, I’d effectively sacrificed my life for the two of them only to be embarrassed and gossiped about in the street. The only thing that could be worse than the idea that people are talking about you even if they’re not, was the fact that your parents could land you in it at any point without the slightest warning.

Then I got a call. I was never one for texting or Facebook. If my friends needed me, they could ring. It was Marie and she’d heard the news and would I come out for a coffee.

Marie was more of a friend in inverted commas but I needed some feedback and she'd have the inside line. She was tapping the phone when I got there and two flat white coffees lay in front of her – no time to waste. The talk meandered its way to the inevitable but still I wasn't ready when she socked me one without warning.

'So do you love him, then?'

I could picture her announcing to the town that I was heartbroken and unable to function, wallowing, pitiful, in a state. I wanted to spin some yarn so that the locals would see another side to me and maybe be a little bit more reflective when my name teetered on the tips of their tongues. But this was not a time for imagination.

'Course I do.'

I let those three words do their magic and sure enough, word got back to me via my mother's radar that I was indeed smitten, bitten and in a heap. The mother added her fulsome opinion and it was then that I decided to head out on the town. Marie had booked a table in the new tapas place and a pipeline of wine was just what I needed, a hangover to get back on track, to focus the mind.

Talking heads were bobbing like corks in the sea when I pushed through the double doors of the restaurant, which somehow seemed too heavy for a summer atmosphere. I waved to Marie. Typically, they all had their boyfriends in tow but who was your man at the end, his arse half out of his pants? Mutton dressed as lamb if ever I saw it, but in the male sense. I swivelled towards the bar but almost as if he could sense my approach, he shuffled backwards like a cow backing out after milking and clipped my hip heavily with his elbow. In an instant I was falling, but he relocated enough to swoop under me and take the hit.

Clambering to my feet, I lunged forward, intent on jabbing a finger in his face and delivering a few choice words, but his open smile and the combed wave across his forehead threw me. He slicked it back behind his ear and grinned at me from behind thick-lense horn-rimmed glasses.

'Those harem pants saved your blushes there I make out. No har-em done?'

I wanted to laugh but I hated that I couldn't make out his eyes behind the jam jars and the thought was growing some more before he seemed to intuit as much. I saw kindness and concern, belying a cheeky grin.

'It's ok. I've been tackled harder,' I said.

'You play sport? Let me guess... rugby!' he said.

We both knew this to be far-fetched but it was effortless and I needed a distraction. Easy company and attentive without being suffocating, he was a tonic. He listened and looked at me when I spoke, oblivious to the others who tapped phones or crouched into selfie poses.

'Sounds like ye got on pretty well for the most part,' he pointed out.

'Sorry Jon. I've been burning your ear. Let's let Wayne fly away. You've been more than patient.' To tell the truth, he'd clarified a few things. I needed an ear and he gave me both of his.

Later, when I was feeling him behind the old house down the road from mine, I couldn't help but fantasise about Wayne, half wanting him up against me, half wanting to remind him of what he was missing. Then, as I tapped my number into Jon's phone, he winced, suddenly, as if an old injury had returned to stab him as a reminder to be vigilant.

'Someone walk on your grave?' I asked.

'Nah. I just remembered I forgot to do something. I can handle it,' he said.

He grinned and I nodded but then I felt a chill of my own. A swelling but as yet formless thought crept into my head. Shivering, I hugged my cardigan around me before crossing the road to home. I had a hunch but couldn't quite nail it down. Had I forgotten something? Did I need to ready something for the morning? My breathing hadn't picked up nor had my heart rate but something had changed.

Next morning, the mother picked up on it immediately and I knew her nose had sniffed out the must of sex. She had the father primed. Usually, he hugged the sideline from behind the newspaper, processing the latest from within and without, not commenting either way. I eyed him through a fog of rosé but he shrugged and rubbed his hands together as if he sensed it too. Like a pair of dogs at a bone, they sandwiched me from either side of the table, expectant, ravenous in my mother's case, but concerned too.

'Seems like you'd a good night Terry?' My father was first to pipe up. These preliminaries killed my mother. Never one for a starter, she wanted meat and took her cuts rarer the older she got.

'You met a new boy,' she said. It was a statement, not a question. For once, I showed some interest in my eggs before reaching for my cup. She fixed the mats on the table and poured more tea but nothing could distract her now.

'Are you going to tell us or not?' The invective seeped out of her mouth and I leaned forward deftly releasing the catch to open the dam gate.

'Tell you what, exactly? Tell you I'm sick of all of this? Spending my days pandering to your every whim, a laughing stock in a town of fools? That I'm sick of suiting everyone else except myself? Tell you I'm going to Australia? That I'll be leaving as soon as I can and just need to book it? Is that what you want to hear?'

Inundated, my mother's mouth opened and closed like she was a fish on a boat floor. My father reached for the paper, content to let the women face the truth.

'When did this come about?' she asked.

'Last night but I've been thinking about it for a while. I'll get a job. I can catch up with Wayne. I miss him,' I said.

'You'll do no such thing. After all we've done for you? And what about your father, shur he can't fend for himself and you gallivanting halfway across the world,' she said.

Her bull's eyes almost burst their sockets but the words were out and she knew they couldn't be wound back around the coil. My plans would interfere with hers.

The doctor signed away my health so I could leave my job for a while and they insisted on bringing me to the airport. We stopped at a pub I'd heard of on the way where the only main course on offer was steak, take it or leave it. They didn't object and as we waited for our food, I noticed how old they'd become. His hands shook all the time and his glass of water just about survived a tumble when he tried to sip from it. She tutted and had a tissue at the ready to mop up after him but she wouldn't remember the episode after a day or two. I feared that after today I'd never see either of them again.

The food was good, as promised, and the conversation pleasant. It's amazing how civil people can be at times of imminent pain. I smiled at them both and told them I was just going to the ladies and that they could meet me at the car. I'd pick up the bill too.

'Already taken care of love.' The words came from my father but I knew from the way my mother patted her purse that it had been her idea. Her eyes had the look of serenity. She had forgiven me and wished me well. They'd be okay; I'd given them my best years.

I got up and smoothed down my skirt before turning in the direction of the toilets. The next thing I knew I was on the floor, legs flailing like an upside down horse. My tailbone was first to collide with the tiled surface and the pain punched me, not in a sharp, furious way

but with a lasting deadening throb. I looked up and saw those same concerned eyes behind the very same thick glasses peering down at me, except this time the owner gently held the hand of a pig-tailed little girl holding a huge teddy bear. Before he could speak, the child did.

‘Are you okay, pretty lady?’ she asked.

Just then, another man clad from head to toe in a bespoke plaid suit of fine wool, jogged into the scene breathing heavily. When he leaned down to me, I got the scent of sweet apples.

‘My dear girl. Are you hurt? Jonathan, have you injured this poor thing?’

My head was spinning, trying to piece together the narrative. I saw a modern family. Two men, falling for each other while never believing that either might love a man; a motherless child promised to both men, loved unconditionally; a vulnerable woman looking for distraction, no longer certain of where she stood in the world.

Little time had passed but my plane wouldn’t wait. I thanked them both, gave the little girl a smile and assured them of no hard feelings on my part. Outside, my parents waited, oblivious. I waved to them as I exited the pub, before an easy smile broke across my face and my mind set itself to leaving.

Brian Phelan

Molotov

THEY MET ON THE MULTI-STOREY CAR PARK ROOF, LIKE REAL CONSPIRATORS IN A FILM.

'What are we going to do?'

'We're going to fire-bomb his offices.'

'Why?'

'Because something has to give. Because there comes a point in any situation where violence is the only answer, the only next step. That or abject slavery.'

They walked up the car ramp, concrete forms, dying light, fire ladders, danger signs, over the fish-swerve of a yellow arrow on the ground, vibrant, pop art screen print pointing them towards a higher level.

'We'll get caught.'

'Not by these buffoons.'

'They have cameras everywhere, they read our e-mails, track our phone calls.'

'So we stay off grid. All communications old-school. Retro.'

'Retro?'

'Yes, retro. Back to the future.'

Up here, for a few moments, the darkness reached them first, unleavened by street lights, car headlights, the mannequin glow of shop windows. Distant housing estates disappeared first, the jumbled pattern of rooftops grew shadows, the Gothic spires of the cathedral became silhouetted against a darkness still lit from within, like a Rothko painting.

'We're really doing this,' Donal said, quietly, almost to himself.

'Yeah, we really are. Someone has to.'

It was crazy, but so were the times. What were they to do? Just watch the world slide away from them into despotism? So revolution. Except this was hardly that. It was a revolutionary act though. Which meant what? He sat in the coffee shop pondering this. The gap between thought and action, talk and action. They talked and talked, poured over comments on

websites and Facebook, recommended with a furious sense they were keeping the world in balance, keeping truth's head above the deluge. But none of it mattered, none if it was real, or carried the weight of actions, the sound of broken glass, the acrid smell of petrol and charred office furniture, the gaping hole of dissent in an ordinary side street, a wormhole through which time could be felt, the history of revolution glimpsed, the irrational wound of people pushed too far.

He worried about that word. Irrational. He knew how easy it would be to lose control of things. He felt a responsibility to be the one to do this, not hot-headed radicals looking for an excuse to inflict their own pain on the world, to punish indiscriminately, to unleash chaos. That wasn't it at all. He wanted this to be targeted, precise, moral. He wasn't a radical person by nature, he wasn't even political really, vaguely left-of-centre he would have said a few years before. But events had shifted beneath his feet. The rich has declared war on them all. People couldn't see it though, or couldn't articulate their unease. It took a special and/or crazy person to step into the flux of history, to be the agent of change.

Grey morning light irradiated sash windows, glared across the glass of photographs on the walls above him, tranquil avenues of trees knifed with jagged light. He looked at the people around him, women with the lean faces of dispossessed nuns, middle-aged men hunched over laptops, older women with uncombed hair ignoring grandchildren, young mothers chatting away brightly. Ordinary people, mostly, proud of that ordinariness. The whole tenor of the country was social, non-threatening. It was why tourists loved it so much.

Accommodating souls, so eager for chat, for the safe harbour of easy laughter. He imagined, suddenly, a bomb going off, saw reality shattering, becoming fluid with debris, smoke, shock, blood. It was so real for a moment, like a premonition, it made his heart gallop. It seemed implied in the scene, this destruction, as if the unbearable tension of all this lying to ourselves was longing for the release, the relief, of chaos.

He finished his Americano, tried to erase this thought from his mind. This wasn't what he wanted at all. Not chaos, just an awakening. An act that would bring people to their senses. Nothing the government did seemed to wake them from their stupor. Maybe it required a person to the side of events, without a vested interest in the status quo. He had children, wanted them to be happy; awake, yes, aware, yes, but still happy. Not revolutionaries, not

downtrodden, living their lives for the benefit of others. Parenthood made you naturally conservative he'd read a long time ago. Now he considered it to be the reverse. He felt like a polar bear after the tectonic plates had shifted, suddenly lost in tropical rainforests, or an antelope freezing in Arctic snowfields. How did this happen? It didn't matter now. What mattered was how we survived, adapted. It was an evolutionary moment. Survival of the fittest, of those awake to the lies they were floating in, like amniotic fluid.

'There's nothing on as usual. Did you download anything?'

'No, didn't get a chance.'

'Shit. I've seen this Grand Designs five times at least. I can't watch it again.'

'Maybe we should just turn it off. Talk.'

'About what?'

'I don't know. Anything. Better than watching crap we don't even want to watch.'

Her legs were folded beneath her on the sofa, pile of battered toy cars beside her, crack visible on the bottom of one slipper, growing fault line. It was like he was seeing her for the last time. Hair tied up, vodka and coke, long fingers, tension in her neck he could feel from here.

'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing.'

'You seem edgy, snappy.'

'Just think we could be doing something better is all.'

'Like rob a bank.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'like that. Head for the Mexican border.'

'Couple of outlaws.'

'Hiding out in bordellos with the sweet-hearted whores.'

'Until greed gets the better of us.'

'Bullet in the back of the head while I sleep?'

'For your own good. The money wouldn't have made you happy.'

'I only did it for love anyways.'

How did you make a Molotov cocktail? Petrol in a bottle, rag sticking into it and hanging out enough to light without it going off in your hand, then light and throw. It seemed simple, effective. This was what this thing needed. Low maintenance. Low profile. Only him and

Donal. He'd have to look it up, Google it, except they'd know that, it would still be in his laptop somewhere even if he deleted it from the history.

He went to the library, sat in the study room, took out the encyclopaedia and looked it up: Bottle-based improvised incendiary weapons. The poor man's grenade. Named by the Finns during the Winter War against the Soviet Union, named in the spirit of mockery after Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov who was responsible for raining cluster bombs down on them and calling it humanitarian aid in propaganda broadcasts. The cocktail was their answer, manufactured in their thousands by a Finnish beer company called Alko.

He liked this, that it was a response to propaganda. Made his act seem justified in the same way. The daily propaganda of every media outlet, national and international, was driving him to do this too. The lies and spin, the manipulation of prejudice, full-blown manufacture of consent, a hysterical tone that made him feel bewildered and angry. How had this happened? When had the world turned into a dystopian cartoon of itself?

He wondered should he read up on revolutionary ideas. He didn't really know that much about it. There was one quote he'd seen on Tumblr. Lay then the axe to the root, and teach governments humanity. This was Thomas Paine. Someone had to wield the axe, make the first blow to the root. The weed of corruption. How easy it was to sound like a teenager when describing the injustice of the world, complexity reduced to agit-prop slogans.

Cut out the weed of corruption!

But this situation was beyond words, ideologies, slogans, or the kind of people who self-define as outsiders, the shock-troops of anti-establishment demos, G8 summits, water-cannon martyrs for the cause secretly wishing for the state to be corrupt, for cops in riot gear to baton-charge them, so they can feel justified, superior. This wasn't like that at all. The truth was technology had amplified every bad impulse of the state, making them reckless, brazen. Humanity had become an abstraction to them. Statistics, propaganda. The only thing that motivated them to do the right thing was fear of the masses. Everything else was self-interest.

The met in Donal's garage, like Dads shooting the breeze, communing with male values; tool boxes, engine parts, bare walls, hoarded magazines. Donal had a petrol canister he kept for the lawnmower. They drank beer and ripped up old clothes from the black sacks his wife

had filled to be collected by charities. Old baby vests, school tracksuit bottoms with grass-stained knees, discoloured tea-towels. Donal rinsed out the bottles with the garden hose and they poured the petrol in, just over half way (he'd read this made it easier for the bottles to smash) stuffed the cloth in after them, secured it with elastic bands. They made twelve, lined them up on the concrete garage floor, stared at them.

'Lightning in a bottle.'

'That's moonshine isn't it?'

'Maybe. Works both ways.'

'I still think it should be a bank. The way they've harassed us over the last few years. Made Naimh cry. They deserve to burn for that alone. I see pain on her face, I see tears, and I want to get a shotgun and go full rogue on all those bastards.'

'Us too. But banks are just the symptom. Politics is the real problem, the root.'

There was a rustling sound from the garage door, a rattling of thin metal. A cat squeezed in under it, through the slight gap Donal had left so they wouldn't suffocate from petrol fumes. It seemed to defy space in that boneless cat way. Slinking in, jumped easily up onto some old TV boxes filled with Christmas decorations and curled there, watching them.

'What's the point again? Remind me.'

'What you just said, about Naimh.'

'Yeah, but that's just me sounding off. I'm not really going to go on a gun spree.'

'That's the problem, though, isn't it? Between doing nothing and doing too much. There needs to be a middle ground. A measured response. We need to act, for our own sanity if nothing else. But also to be a rallying point for disaffection. To break through the apathy, the hopelessness. The dreamwalking stupor of people's lives. To break the spell.'

'I see.'

'You don't have to do this. I'll do it myself. Now that I have them made.'

'No, no, don't be stupid. I started this I'm going to finish it.'

They watched the cat watching them, the row of bottles between them. Have you got the nerve, it seemed to be saying to them, to be boneless and free?

'Nobody gets hurt,' he said, feeling the sixth beer making his brain float inside his skull, the petrol fumes stinging his eyes. 'We're like the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

They stashed the bottles on the car park roof. Up the side stairwell no-one ever used, piss-stink and murky light, windows on each level mired in grime, walls on the top landing covered in graffiti. He stood here afterwards, beside rusting fire-hose valves, smoking a cigarette, contemplating the amorphous cartoon-like graffiti, spray-painted, wildstyle, black blocking on a blue background, someone's initials, possibly J.P.

Tagging. This was what the voiceless did, insisted they existed, made their mark. Taking back space, making it theirs, briefly. Only people who feel in their bones they don't belong do this. It's not vandalism for the sake of it, it's the human spirit reaching out, weeds breaking through concrete, flowers on the charred slopes of a volcanic mountain. Oblivion is engulfing them in darkness, bit by bit, day by day, a cloud of nothingness, and they respond in the only way they have, the art of the dispossessed.

He considered the other messages on the wall, written in black marker: White Guys Can't Jump. I did Km's Mam. Jerrone smokes herbs!!!! They were a weirdly private act, hidden away in here, a proclamation to no-one, a cry into the wilderness. The braver ones put their tags on trains, on street walls where the danger of getting caught was part of the act. They were optimists. They wanted to reach people, change them. What was in here, in this lonely stairwell, was an act of private despair. He wanted to do it the other way, not with art but with violence. Throwing a petrol bomb through a window was also, he believed, a creative act, the universal language of dissent. This white guy was gonna jump.

'What if no-one notices?'

'A fire? They'll notice.'

'What if they don't though?'

'They will. It's what they're waiting for. A spark, an action to ignite them.'

They walked to the offices on Davitt St. All twelve bottles in his shoulder bag. The Fig Tree it said innocently. A front office in a complex of offices for let, all the others empty. To the left of the building was a walkway heading towards apartments, on the other side an office supplies building. No real danger of the fire spreading. This was important. They waited in the shadows across the street, under the overhanging trees, like real conspirators.

His constituency office, his name over the doorway, blinds on the windows, painted a social democratic blue, anonymous otherwise. He held the cocktail out while Donal poured petrol from a Coke bottle on the torn piece of baby's vest sticking out. The petrol spilled over onto

his hand. Panic filled his chest, a rushed sense of forces closing in, dumb luck conspiring to produce a police car around the corner at precisely that moment or an elderly man (his old primary school headmaster) walking a dog, a good moral citizen bound to note every detail of his appearance. They wore hats pulled down over their faces, woolly hats with bobbles on top and holes for eyes. It didn't matter, he felt naked as he stepped out of the shadows, a Vegas-style neon sign hovering over his head with his name and address on it in gaudy coloured lights.

He raced blindly across the street and flung the cocktail at the window. Amazingly it smashed right through, tangled in the blinds and immediately began to flame. He felt Donal pass him, a rush of air rather than a person, a force of nature, and another cocktail crashed through. Then, nothing, silence. No alarms went off. Nobody came out on to the streets or looked out windows. No police car, no elderly old snoop with his incontinent dog.

Nothing. The fire grew steadily, melting the plastic blinds, smoke billowing out from the jagged hole. Instead of waking them up, though, violence brought a trance state down on them, a witching hour stillness. It didn't make him feel substantial, verified by history, transfigured by adrenaline. It was an out-of-body experience. He wasn't there. He was a hovering ball of static consciousness, smoke billowing from his smashed mind.

How long had he been standing there? Suddenly he realised it had been too long, that he had to run. He forced his gaze away from the window, at Donal's receding figure, running headlong down the middle of the street, wheezing breath carrying clearly in the night air. He thought of the bag in the shadows behind him, the other Molotovs. Why had they brought so many? He had no idea. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe, his face a blaze of prickly sweat from the too-tight hat. He pulled it up off his face, stood there, breathing in the cold night air, watching the fire flicker, yellow and blue, felt the heat of it on his face, felt the muzzle of the gun pressed, lovingly, to the back of his head.

flash fiction

Csilla Toldy

Necrophilia

HAVING SPENT MOST OF HER WORKING LIFE AS A PROFESSIONAL HAIRDRESSER, AFTER HER retirement, Tatyana became the personal groomer of a glorious man. As an attachment to her new job, she was given a one room flat on the sixth floor on the Vladimirskaia, so that she could walk to work.

She thought there was no crime in taking the hair home after cutting, the moustache, the eyebrows and beard and all the strays she could harvest on the nape and temples. She put it all into her best crystal vase, chipped like nearly all her possessions due to the all too many moves in her life.

As the grey tuff of hair grew, so did Tatyana's fixation with her collection. She kept the vase at a prominent place on the marble top of the Bombé commode near her laced window. In her free time she would sit and gaze at the fluffy mop for hours. The crystal facets broke the image into tear drop floating shapes, flashing dark and light. She could not fathom the source of need that made the embalmed body and the once prolific brain still perpetrate. The "crescent moons of fertile aggression" - as she called his nail clippings, got a home in a small carved, ivory box on the coffee table.

It had become her ceremonial custom to invite Ilyanova to have a sit by samovar on Sunday afternoons. Her neighbour's large presence calmed Tatyana. She often pictured herself as a buoy, bobbing up and down on the Volga in danger of drifting away. Ilyanova did her great service, by grounding her like a heavy concrete block. But if she was really honest, she just needed an excuse to light the samovar, the silver family relic left behind by her father. Every time she rekindled its fire she could hear his voice saying, 'It's a sin not to share the pleasure'.

Ilyanova might have mistaken the box on the coffee table for the sugar bowl, or perhaps she was just curious. She peeped inside, wrinkled her nose and snapped it closed.

The next day, Tatyana was picked up from work and taken away in an enormous, black Chaika. The car was floating, coffin-like, through the streets of Moscow, giving Tatyana time to say good-bye.

The commissar charged her with necrophilia. She had to roll around the word in her head a few times, dissecting it to its components, until she understood what it meant. She was grasping for words to defend herself, yet she was sinking all along. Eventually, she managed to utter a short, defensive laughter.

When they found out that her father had perished in the Gulag, they became rude.

'Why did you steal the property of the people?' The commissar shouted at her. The answer escaped her mouth like the last bubble.

'I wanted to teach him.'

Now it was their turn to laugh.

'What could you teach our Teacher?'

Tatyana bowed her head and turned her eyes inside.

'Some respect,' she sighed.

Claire Hennessy

This is not the Story

THE BOY WHO GIVES ME THE SECOND LEAFLET REMINDS ME OF JACK, HOW SOFT HIS HAIR is without the gel in it, and I want to touch it but don't. All the way down O'Connell Street and across town I collect boy-impressions along with the paper, and when I go into HMV on Grafton Street a tall guy in a black t-shirt hands me one about today's special deals, and that's when I look at them and my legs go shaky.

It is early December, three weeks since the story broke about that poor woman in Galway. The pro-life vigil is on this evening. There's a DVD box-set special offer on and also protect the rights of the unborn would you. I stand in front of a wall of newly-released CDs and tear paper, dividing by two each time the way cells do. Someone in a grey hoodie nudges past me. I forgot there were other people here.

This is not the story I want to tell when there are Christmas lights twinkling their way around Dublin. When my legs start working again I go to Burger King, where I haven't been in years during the daytime, and throw up in their toilets. Too late in the day for morning sickness – this is just ordinary, everyday shock. If anything is ordinary anymore.

Then it's onto college for a two-hour seminar on the political thought of the nineteenth century, where my hand clutches the pen too tightly as I make copious notes.

Our lecturer runs over, and I'm supposed to meet her for an essay meeting after, but she looks blank when I remind her, then says, "Sarah, you're right, sorry, it completely slipped my mind. I'll email you later and we'll arrange another time this week, okay?"

She's maybe thirty, friendly, slightly scatty. I thought she might be a person I could tell. Instead I nod, smile, say it's fine.

The city is dark now, but still bustling, and a man in one of those godforsaken tweed caps stops and asks if I know where to get the bus to Lucan. "I think it's the 66 or the 67," he says.

“Westmoreland Street, on the corner there.” I gesture and I want this to be the end of it.

He nods. Then says, “You can’t tell my daughter anything.”

This is not normal interaction. I tighten my grip on my handbag.

“She’s living in one part of the city,” he says, indicating to his left. “Her fella – he’s over here.” He shakes a finger. “She’s no sense.”

“Oh.”

“He goes away for three months, comes back, goes away for four months, comes back.”

I nod.

“That’s not on, is it?”

I shake my head.

“She’s forty-three, you know, that’s it, really, for a woman.”

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

“I don’t think –” I start.

“I mean if you want to have kids,” he says. “She does, now, my daughter, she does, and if you’re a decent fella and you don’t want them you say it to her, you don’t let her . . . but sure you can’t tell her. I can’t tell her.”

He keeps talking, and I put my hands in my coat pockets and wish I had a scarf. The fella’s been doing this for years now. And then he tells me his own wife is dead, twenty-one years this Christmas, and when he finally edges off to the side and I think we’re done he says, “Will you say a prayer for this girl?”

This girl of forty-three.

“Sarah’s her name.”

Something jolts through me then. It’s a common name. I know this. There were three of us in my year in primary school. But when he moves off to get his bus I stand there and wait until he’s reached the stop.

I could tell this story: three weeks before Christmas in 2012, I meet a man on the street, and we get to talking, and his daughter Sarah who wants a baby, well, I decide this one will be carried for her, saved for her like putting aside a bit of dinner for someone late home. I visit once a year. She is so grateful.

There is a package waiting for me at home, wrapped up like an early Christmas gift. “Amelia dropped it over,” my mother says. She’s clearing the table before dinner and I see the front cover of today’s newspaper, the reveal of Kate Middleton’s pregnancy. She’s in hospital with morning sickness, not yet twelve weeks along. They didn’t want to tell people. The first twelve weeks, you don’t tell.

Amelia lives away from her parents, and is clued-in; she sends a text to remind me to take both the pills, another one later asking me how I’m doing.

I throw up my dinner, with the taps running, and wonder if the Duchess feels terribly royal right now. I think about the other Sarah out there.

I wait for the blood. I wait for it to be over. I wait for another story. One I will be able to tell.

Emjay Holmes

Palpation

‘THE BRAIN AREA LIES IN THE CAPS OF THE FIRST THREE TOES.’

I am horizontal on a couch; *supine* Beryl called it, popping a bolster under my knees while bullet-pointing contraindications. Now in a puff of talcum powder, her fingers knuckle the tiny joints of my phalanges.

‘Movement or clawing in the corresponding area of focus is not unusual,’ she says, plucking and twisting each digit up and around. I contemplate the inside of my skull but find my mind unmoved, dull like it has been for weeks. Neither is it sweating, cramping, crying or laughing uncontrollably: the other possible responses on Beryl’s list of what to expect from the session. I’m glad I’m lying down.

I stare at the poster of a giant foot divided into coloured zones like a butcher’s chart of choice cuts. Beryl hacks lightly at my metatarsals.

‘Your tonsils inhabit the webs of your feet.’

Mine are long gone, a victim of serial infection but I swallow anyway, I’ve heard of cell memory; the shallow indents where the two little glands used to be, rise and fall. I imagine the doctor reattaching them with surgical thread to my feet and laugh. Not uncontrollably though; cautious, as if testing a buried reflex. May be this will help after all.

‘A reaction is not a cause for worry; it is a positive sign that the therapy is working.’ Beryl’s hair bobs with certainty as she kneads and pummels. ‘If we listen to our bodies they will tell us what to do.’ Her fingers drum my arches, pitter-pattering across the pressure points of liver, kidney, bowel; decongesting, unblocking, balancing, elbows fanning like bellows. In the small depression beneath the ankle she slows, rolling her thumbs in tiny circles against the crease of skin. It’s gritty like a thin film of poppy grains trapped beneath the tissue.

‘Tender?’

I nod searching the wall diagram for the corresponding body part.

The picture they let me keep was grainy too; a gauzy diorama of almost-bone and limb-buds curled recumbent at the bottom of the screen. The sonographer's cursor tapped out the tiny line of joints thin as Spillikins, the hollow of a socket, the dark smudge that no-one could hear. At least I was lying down.

Beryl repositions, pressing with her thumb and middle finger around the girdle of Achilles.

'There's congestion here that needs clearing.'

'No,' I say, rising from the couch, 'leave what's there.'

And just for a moment Beryl hovers, holding my leg in front of her like a dead offering. We both feel it, the sweat pooling in the crux of her palms and before I can tell her it's nothing to worry about, her hands are cradling the cushion of my heels.

She bends, her ear almost touching the tips of my toes and measuring six finger's breadth to the point where the heart resides, she leans in, pushing and releasing, pushing and releasing until at last it's time to stand upright again.

Brian Mallaghan

Sorry Mummy

IT WAS USUALLY LOCKED AWAY.

Warm wood, cold metal, a snickety click.

It was a stupid grown-ups' toy. No video screen or bright colours, no soundtrack or sound effects, no transforming. But today was moving house day. "Stand there!" "Not now!" "Go play in your room!"

On moving house day it lay beneath the bed, where Santa hid the presents. It was wrapped twirly twisted in mummy's gardening coat.

It took both hands to hold and all his strength to lift; small, grey, heavy as his sister's puppy.

First a cowboy, then a robber. Then from behind a sudden growl, daddy - being a friendly grizzly bear.

Now a hunter – "bang."

The crack of a thousand Disney fireworks.

Sudden stillness back-filled with his mother's screams. A siren, then two. Heavy footfalls on newly carpeted stairs.

A red blanket. Kindly yellow coated men. A child's room washed blue then white, blue then white, blue then white.

And daddy in his uniform.

The grizzly bear.

Playing dead.

Keeley Mansfield

A Message

HOGAN POINTS AT THE BLACK MARKS ON THE WALL. "SMOKE'S DONE A LOT OF DAMAGE there."

He's wrong. Those marks are from decades of stumbling legs and arms brushing past on the way to the jacks. Legs and arms I've never thought about until now. Mine would have added to those stains, as would Hogan's. Not Con's though - he only ever pisses in the street, on the way to the chipper.

"I reckon the kitchen went on fire," says Hogan, excavating a nostril.

"They didn't have one. You don't need a kitchen for cheese toasties." I say.

Third fire in a month. The Guards think it's someone with a grudge, but they're struggling to find clues, still sifting through the ashes in the snug of Kehoe's even as Gettigan's was burning to the ground. Our regular haunts are dwindling.

One of the surviving pump handles is wearing a mitten. It's a tiny red one in chunky wool.

"Might be a clue," I say, but Hogan dismisses it.

"Some wag must've put it there after, for the photos. Like them you see in the Sunday papers – all rubble, and then in the centre there's a single shoe or a broken toy."

Except it's not like that at all. It's a child's glove on the pump handle of a burnt-out bar, where only a few old boozehounds like us willingly ventured, and where children – their chocolate-smearing selves, their images, their ghosts – were not welcome. We already had all the pathos and melancholy we needed from the football scores and the unspoken failures that made us sit there, day after day.

The crowd of onlookers is thinning out, divided in relief and disappointment that no one perished. A woman in a bile-coloured hat mutters something about insurance scams. I nudge Con.

"We heading? No point standing here, it's not going to resurrect itself."

He doesn't move. He's noticed the mitten.

"Come on - Lacey's is still standing. Pint, big lad?"

Then Con's marching towards what's left of the bar, pushing aside a Guard who tries to block his way. I step over charred furniture, raising a finger to the Guard, shaking my head. He backs off; he's alone and doesn't fancy his chances with us, big men, well worn-in and ripe to stinking. I reach Con as he's crushing the mitten in his fist.

"It's a message," he mutters.

"What?"

He looks murderous and I have second thoughts about having stopped that Guard. He turns suddenly and thunders out of the gutted building. I rejoin Hogan and we watch as Con disappears over the bridge.

The spate ends with one more fire. Hogan and I hear about it that evening while we're in Lacey's, glaring into our pints. The news report mentions three bodies, and as the camera tracks across the ruins, I watch for a glimpse of a red mitten, a single shoe, a broken toy.

Therese Kieran

Stranger than Fiction

SHE INHALED THE HEAVY PETROL FUMES ENJOYING THE DIZZINESS. THE GUY AT THE NEXT pump smiled. Their eyes locked. He tilted his head to the side, raised his brow. He - in shiny brass buttons, gold braided sleeves and wings! She - in shabby duffle filling up for more school runs. Grinning broadly she skipped inside to pay. On returning, he was by her door. Her heart was thumping.

“Hey, you dropped this.”

She reached for an envelope but found her face cupped in his hands, his lips on hers.

Suddenly he fled leaving her this note:

Congratulations -

you're number 249

Gracias, El Capitán.

Mari Maxwell

Best Helper

IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME AND MAMMY'S AT IT AGAIN.

There is whiskey on the air and a flurry of activity in our Dublin kitchen. Mammy picks up the bottles on the weekly shop. For several weeks they stand in rows, like soldiers, the labels sleek across the glass bottles. Their stand to attention is brief as they're poured and measured. Emptied and replaced.

The earthy smell tingles and wafts through the kitchen. Mammy staggers from counter to sink to oven and back again. Even sleep does little to hide the black shadows beneath her eyes.

Mammy doesn't drink. She's a sworn teetotaler. These days though she's hitting the bottle hard.

It's the cakes that sup it up. Copious cupfuls of warm amber preserving fruit and nuts.

Love, Mammy calls it, and pours it out liberally for her children living abroad. A mother celebrating Christmas in the United States, New Zealand and Boston's frigid suburbs.

On our kitchen counter the bowls of shelled and skinned almonds await their moment. The glace cherries have been washed and dried. The raisins, currants and sultanas weighed. The flour sifted into white cascading mountains. Dozens of eggs waiting to be cracked.

Mammy says I'm a big help. Her best helper, in fact. I'm the youngest. The others have all gone. To Boston, Australia, London, anywhere the work is Mammy says. She expects the world will have changed by the time I'm ready to leave. Maybe, she whispers, I won't.

It's our first holiday ever without the older lot.

I'm not sure if it's the oven that makes her face so red, or if being a teetotaler means she's allergic to the whiskey. Still she's awful quiet as she loads the oven up.

The wrapping is the hardest part. First though is the rolling and blanketing of almond and royal icing. Mammy likes to tuck and coax the sweet ground almonds around the top and

into the crevices.

Your brother likes his almond icing thick, she reminds me. We laugh because he's the very one ate half off our granny's cake one Christmas! Mammy was mad but she and Granny laughed about it later over a pot of tea.

Mammy's hands are gentle. Caressing.

I wonder what the airport people think as they load up the airplane's belly. What does the US Postman think when he lugs the crinkled biscuit tins from our house to theirs with the smells of whiskey soaking through the layers of brown wrapping, and the waxed orange twine.

A piece of home my loves, Mammy says as the box is slid across the counter. Weighed and stamped.

Mammy, my brother tells her from the USA, I could just see you in the kitchen sifting the memories.

My Mammy smiles. Soon, she says, I'll be able to bake by myself.

Sure I can't go so. I'm Mammy's big helper.

Pat Mullan

Legend

WITH A CRACK DOWN THE MIDDLE OF ONE LENS AND A WING MISSING FROM HIS GLASSES, Aengus got attention from the bullies at St. Patricks. Academically-gifted, of nervous disposition, short-sighted and small in stature, today you'd call him a "nerd".

An air of anticipation hung over the congregation as they sat in the chapel on Sunday night waiting for Fr. Duffy. Aengus had served on the altar before during Benediction, but only as a lowly candle-bearer. Tonight he'd landed the big job - in charge of the thurible. Nailer's gang had set it up. The altar-boys were instructed to come to the sacristy early and get ready before the normal time. A single pair of size 10 black canvas altar slippers were to be left for Aengus. The rest were hidden. You didn't say no to "Nailer" Doherty and risk the consequences.

Aengus did not disappoint. Mounting the altar steps behind the Duffer he stumbled in the size tens, the thurible landing on the floor with a crash, charcoal spilling on the beige carpet. Aengus leapt up "Sorry, Father, sorry, sorry, sorry"

"You stupid pup," muttered the Duffer, for all to hear. "Pull yourself together man."

"Yes, Father."

The choir resumed with "O Salutaris" and Benediction proceeded. The moment came when the incense was to be added to the charcoal. Aengus worked the chains to raise the lid from the bowl of the thurible, hands shaking. The priest spooned the incense into the dormant coals and Aengus worked the chains again to replace the lid, gently swinging the thurible to keep the charcoal alight. The Duffer took the thurible and raised it to bless the altar. As he was swinging for the third double-swing, the chain broke and a smouldering charcoal-mix spattered over the front of his vestments and on to the carpet.

Aengus was first to react.

"Jesus," springing to his feet, slippers falling off as he ran to the sacristy. A twitter of excited

from the congregation.

“Settle down now. Start the hymn again,” said Duffer as Aengus emerged from the sacristy with a large enamel jug of water, which he proceeded to splash over the front of the priest and poured the rest on to the carpet.

“No harm done, Father,” to open guffaws from the congregation of young men.

“No harm done? No harm done, you say? That’s sacred holy water that you just sprayed around the place, you idiot? ”

This triggered something in Aengus.

“I’ve enough of this bullshit. You can make your own bloody holy smoke, Father,” as he ran out the sacristy door to the muted cheers of the congregation. Duffer could only continue with Benediction, a candle-bearer taking charge of the thurible, once he’d satisfied himself that the chain was secure.

All the talk at breakfast and for days, was about Aengus. Coming back after two weeks suspension, he was a different person - energised and confident. No longer a target of the bullies. He was one of the *boys*.

Legend.

review: Safia Moore

on Sleepwalkers

by Bernie McGill

NORTHERN IRISH WRITER BERNIE MCGILL HAS A SEDUCTIVE WAY OF EASING THE READER in and out of a story, without the need for killer opening sentences or twist endings. Hers is the voice of an authentic storyteller who guides the reader through her fictional world with authority. The eleven, perfectly paced stories in *Sleepwalkers* focus on Irish women in the aftermath of death or loss, yet the effect is never depressing or morose. Indeed, there is much humour, albeit of a decidedly dark nature.

The opening story 'Home' and the title piece 'Sleepwalkers', both feature a woman who travels south after a fatal accident involving a loved one. Escape is their temporary retreat while they learn how to heal. McGill expertly reveals the essence of each story by drip-feeding and interweaving enriching details. This is gratifying for the reader, enabling a sharing of the character's life-changing experiences and ultimately, a deeper understanding of her hopes and fears.

In 'Home', the unnamed woman constructs a shell of self-protective solitude in Provence. She obsessively covers herself to block the sun's rays, and hides sharp knives to avoid injury, or perhaps self-harm. Settings come alive with lyric descriptions – on a black hob in France, beads of water from a boiling kettle are like "ball bearings off a bicycle chain on a tar road, on a warm day, miles and years away from here". When her emotional shield slips and she sleeps with an American tourist, the woman admits she is in France because, "I don't know where else to be." The encounter is a turning point, forcing a verbalisation of grief. Her inner transformation is subtle, like the miracles the baker works on 'scraps of dough that emerge from the oven, semi-eclipses', and she contemplates moving on.

'Sleepwalkers' begins with Kate driving through Andalusia for a family holiday in the shadow of her estranged, alcoholic husband's death. Despite the early reveal, "Owen managed to kill himself before she managed to divorce him", McGill builds the story layer by fragile layer. Kate strives for normality for the sake of her children, whilst neglecting herself physically. Her lopsided hair mirrors her psyche, "like only part of her knows where she is going [...] There is nothing sharp about the reflection that looks back at her". Time is suspended in a borrowed house full of clocks, all showing a different hour, and McGill's poetic sensibility draws the reader into the characters' state of limbo. A watermelon seed becomes a "fossilised raindrop", whilst swifts "fly back and forth, casting shadows like grenades over the pool and garden". After much sleeplessness, on the final night no one wakes. The next day, as the family leave, Kate's daughter presses a walnut into her hand, "a blind, blunt-nosed, pock-marked thing, as dry and light as a heart can sometimes be".

'The Importance of Being Rhonda' and 'The Bells Were Ringing Out' explore memory loss. Rhonda is in a hospital bed, recovering from a brain injury after falling from a bus. She has forgotten who she is and responds unenthusiastically to her sister filling in the blanks. Despite the circumstances, Rhonda's pithy observations veer towards comedy. She wakes to find her Goth niece by her bedside. "She could be the angel of death", thinks Rhonda, trying to picture the teenager in sunshine, but failing. The wider question of identity (the title nods to an Oscar Wilde play) is encompassed in Rhonda's determination to re-find, or re-invent herself, "I'm not climbing back inside the shell of that woman they want me to be."

In 'The Bells Were Ringing Out', Nuala suffers temporary memory loss after a shock, and starts seeing the colour and shape of spoken vowels, which "hung in the air like errant musical notes". She is simultaneously haunted by a woman's voice describing days of the week as tangerines, or blue moons, or conkers. This is a quirky, sensory story in which identity becomes a jigsaw puzzle, remade via the contents of a handbag (perhaps another nod to Wilde). The engaging premise is neatly rounded off when, jolted by her husband humming a familiar Christmas song, Nuala drops the last piece of her puzzle into place.

McGill addresses Northern Irish political strife and sectarian violence in two stories in *Sleepwalkers*. In 'The Language Thing', two friends based abroad in the 1980s, are sobered

by the word ‘Savages’ in a newspaper headline reporting murders in Belfast. McGill competently encapsulates the feeling of being at odds both at home and elsewhere, and the story should strike a chord with anyone who left Northern Ireland only to find themselves metaphorically dragged back with each new atrocity.

‘No Angel’ also deals with a sectarian murder in the Eighties, but it is primarily about the influence of the dead on the living. “I won’t be told who to love by you”, Annie tells her dead father who frequently appears, apparently in order to nag her. Dark humour mingles with chilling insights into an “uneasy mixed community”, where Annie’s farmer father kept a shotgun under the bed, and her mother feared the unlit cars that pulled into their driveway at night. Echoes of Seamus Heaney’s work abound, and one line, describing Annie’s attachment to Belfast, jumps off the page: “The threat in the city never felt personal”.

Abandonment, loneliness, and isolation stalk the female characters in *Sleepwalkers*. Everyone from the forty year-old woman given up at birth in ‘What I Was Left’, to the thirteen year-old, a virtual leper because of her facial birthmark in ‘Marked’, have affecting stories to tell. However, what makes *Sleepwalkers* special is the way McGill threads subversive elements through her narratives, rendering them edgy and original. A niece inhales a caring aunt’s last breath and must now live two lives. A young girl’s decisions depend on which tie knot an old man at the library chooses on a particular day. But it is ‘Islander’ that contains what reads like a mission statement for *Sleepwalkers*: “We carry the living, and we do whatever it takes to wake the dead”. In McGill’s oeuvre, it is invariably a woman’s fate to do these things alone.

At this point, Frank O’Connor’s ‘The Lonely Voice’ could be cited, or reference made to Mary Lavin’s description of herself as a courageous chronicler of the vagaries of the heart, but I would rather end on a personal note. I rarely read the first story in a book and immediately re-read it, nor do I finish a short story collection and turn straight back to the beginning. In the case of Bernie McGill’s *Sleepwalkers*, I did both.

Sleepwalkers is published by Whittrick Press.

review: Kelly Creighton

on How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life

by Angela T. Carr

THERE ARE NOT MANY DEBUT POETRY COLLECTIONS AS SKILFUL AS THIS. THE BEAUTY OF reading 'How To Lose Your Home & Save Your Life' is, in part, the feeling that you have found a new voice, then finding that voice must have been already found long ago. Carr's collection is cohesive, she knows what she has to say and does so with accuracy and the kind of simplicity her contemporaries will appreciate is not simple to achieve at all.

As winner of the *Cork Literary Review Manuscript Competition*, one would expect the collection to be well-written; it is also a pleasant surprise to be able to open the book at any point and be lost in a work that is so deeply-felt. Nowhere between its covers will you find a poem that makes you ask, 'So what?'

The book has derived from the poet's experience when, in 2008, she lost her job and found her home and financial security put at risk. It is not hard to comprehend why this insecurity would force Carr's pen.

In 'The Long Straight Road', she details a day walking home from the Unemployment Bureau, *from signing my name to another month of failure*. The reader is brought to walk in the *lashing* rain, to share the discomfort of trouser legs *wet and flapping*. Everything spinning. Trees talking; nay, gossiping. We can feel the turbulence. Then there is a comfort, a revelation that the poet is *alone and not alone*.

This sense of intimacy is again visited in the pertinently titled 'The Tiger's Tail'. We are all

adrift on that same indefinite financial wave. In an unnamed Irish city the poet observes night priming itself for keeping up the pace, for excess and revelry. It is in 'The Tiger's Tail' – second poem in – where Carr's imagery first truly shines.

*Young girls toss iron curtains of ebony hair,
shared tribal head-dress: Tiger sucklings,*

These *Tiger sucklings* she describes with some magic: their *milky limbs* are *birch*, the girls are childishly *knock-kneed*, with *moon-eyed calves*. The use of *moon-eyed* juxtaposes innocence with impending maturation. And on those well described legs,

*they perch on the heights
of borrowed triumph: Prada, Miu Miu, Louboutin.*

The poem's children step blindly into credit agreements. Buy now, pay later lives.

Carr's description of the city is animalistic and untamed; her words offer a mewling savagery. There is much noise: *a howl of chemical laughter, horns blare*. Mix in movement and our balance is loosened by the *shifting* ground. We are drowning somewhere between these worlds, natural and financial, that seem now to be joined at the hip.

Carr achieves all this in fourteen lines. No word is spare.

In her poem 'Crows', language is even more visceral. Brutal, even.

*When the crows, with their gimlet eyes, count your bones
and weigh them, empty your skeleton of meat, claw cartilage,*

Despite being haunting, the poem is ultimately one of hope; of taking time to smell the roses. Carr is accomplished at pitting the modern world against the natural one. Her style has its own understated music.

However, her effective simplicity is arguably best displayed in 'Newspaper Story', wherein the poet examines a space between birth and death, an innocent moment before finance

and politics – in this space the child poet is an unfinished crossword; the imagery is black and white: *the chequered raft on the mottled shore*. Her mother cuts her hair onto a splayed newspaper; here the locks of a young girl are not an ebony curtain.

my hair, it falls in black half moons

like currachs on the fragile paper sea.

In 'Junkie', Carr wishes she had been raised *a gypsy*, telling us, in a softer manner than Larkin, that she blames the parents. Possessions have become our church, our home, our power. She says: *Don't judge me, I wasn't born this way.*

Perhaps Carr's themes are broader than post boom despair. Perhaps they are: innocence, fear and injustice. She does not seem to want to return to a so-called simpler time, but instead she asks: What if, in the first instance, we were never taught to become consumers?

There are also standalone poems such as 'Medusa', who speaks to the reader after she is raped by Poseidon; and 'Ruby Bridges Goes to School', about the de-segregation on schools in the US in 1960, when a black child entered a white school for the first time. Both topics result in poems that are poignantly tender.

You will find in this collection, trees that gossip, ground that shakes; you will feel the *black earth's chill ooze between your toes*. You will go away with the sense that while nature is free – that while returning to the dirt can be a comfort – nothing is consistent; that the earth is cruel in as many ways as it can be.

Of course with a title like *How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life*, there has to be a promising realisation; a new knowledge of self and society. For Carr the outlook is good as she receives well-deserved attention for her debut and takes up a new post in the Irish Writers' Centre in Dublin, where she once took creative writing classes back in 2007. As for her poems, they are certainly not hopeless and once heard will not be easily forgotten.

How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life is published by Bradshaw Books

poems

Emma McKervey

Chopping Wood

There is a rhythmic sound escaped from childhood book
Jarring and unnatural in the magnolia vacuum of suburbia
The Woodcutter, sweaty browed and shirtless, systematically swings his axe
Fracturing the logs with powerful golden arcs.
Beyond the boundary of backyard fence the Wildwoods encroach

I view him from my window, the bed more than partially stripped,
Feather duvet left hanging from popped cover in gibbous eclipse,
Whilst standing disguised in the curtain's shade I hope to remain unseen;
I watch the wolves and lost children drawing close in the trees,
Waiting as the balance shifts from hewn to cloven with every blow.

With each severed block stacked the forest recedes
The creatures and the changelings are gone
At night his shadow plays on drawn blinds
Projected by the twitching glow of television screen.

Dave McGinn

Canal Water

All that I want is the water—canal water—
slowly flowing past my waist. To feel the cold shock my skin;
then the smooth, slimy rocks beneath my bare feet.

All that I want is to float,
in a boat made of wood of some sort. To trail my hand in the cool, calm waters,
grasping at river reeds as I pass.

All that I want is a window,
and the early sun sprinkling diamonds on the steady stream;
ducks sitting contemplatively on the green banks;
and old couples walking, hand in hand.

All that I want is a morning,
and the tranquil quiet of a sleeping city: empty roads;
faceless chirping from surrounding trees;
a smile and nod from the rare passer-by.

And in the shadow of Kavanagh, there I'd sit—
Alone.

James O'Leary

We meet on Grafton Street

and you look different.
So much like who you became
in the years
in cities
I only visit.
Suit jacket instead of leather.
Brief hug instead of clamant
fastening. We talk
of the new housing crisis,
the year-old suicide,
things we cook at home,
people we bring home

wherever that is now.

Brian Gourley

Physics Lesson

-

Mr Long stands before us, the boys of J3B,
And declares that this week's physics lesson shall henceforth be

"Learning about the properties of electricity."

That is the aim for this most auspicious day

*(And on a less civilised day,
You might care to smirk and say,*

*That a man with a name to match his height
Was born to conduct*

*Lightning on a stormy day. 10,000 volts and the hair
Would have indeed been rare.)*

But God willing, Mr Long is filling the blackboard
With the thread-white outlines of a circuit board.

An Underground of straight lines
As the deliberately stupidest boy asks Sir what it all means,

"If you pay attention, this is the anode, this is the cathode,
And you all should know that wood

Can't conduct, but metal and steel *can*. Yes, yes, boy,
Any metal element can. You should all love the joy

Of *elec-tric-i-ty*, that oh-so marvellous stream
Of constantly flowing electrons. It is my aim

To show you now." He flicks a switch. On comes the light
Are we now that bright?

Jean James

Reeling

The byre is smeared with darkness,
its muck-scented doiled floor
 furring his boots.
He places his cheek against the heifer's flank,
her milky pillow smoothing him
 plucking teats,
his mind awash with the past.

A girl at the gate, a blowsy summer frock,
a promise in her eyes,
 and dancing,
 waist a willow wand,
watching the way the light
catches her downy arms
spinning a reel from hand to hand.

A couple hunched silently against
the fading light, seated at table,
 heads bowed in grace,
his clumsy thumbs breaking bread.
Her shuttered face, her ribbon breath
 around his neck.

A little suitcase leaning on the wall

while she unwraps the words
 letting them settle on his chest,
the rough coil of them
whipping him, leaving him
 searching for breath.

He sings psalms for her return
listening for her tread
 on the creaky stair,
keeping her side warm
under the eiderdown, imagining
 his beating heart
in her open mouth.

Thomas McColl

The Gamble Account

When I opened a new gamble account
to supplement my current account,
the bank sent me a different kind of card
to the usual plastic one.
It was the Four of Clubs.

At the nearest cashpoint machine,
I inserted the card
and, keying in my personal number,
the Queen of Hearts
and Three of Spades
came up upon the screen.
Seventeen.

I took the print out and went straight to the cashier's desk.
I placed my bet – sixty pounds.
Surely I'd win this time.
The cashier dealt the cards:
The Jack of Diamonds,
Two of Clubs and six of Hearts.
Damn! Eighteen.

'Better luck next time, sir,' the cashier said, smiling,
as I paid in sixty pounds
to the non-withdrawable gamble account.

Kate Dempsey

Jill Jacks It In

One of these days, I'm going to jack it all in,
and become a man.

I mean, honest to Eostre, it has to be easier than this

I'll get shorn to a short back and sides
a trip to the barber costs less than a twenty,
less than a tenner

The lines on my face
and the grey on my temples
will enhance my looks

I'll grow five inches up and five in
My feet will sprout like courgettes
and I'll never squeeze into stilettos again

I'll grow a pair and let them dangle
sit splayed-legged
scratch and burp to order

I'll go under the knife for a minor lobotomy,
a double mastectomy may be going too far
but I can bandage them flat

I will never carry anyone's keys,
phone and wallet in my handbag.

I'll have pockets in every piece of clothing

I'll do all my shopping in half an hour, once a year

My big head in my big hat

will be full of big ideas

and I'll say what I think, when I think it, out loud

even if it's politically incorrect,

even if it's it totally incorrect

I'll read the paper all the way through

without stopping to make tea for someone else

or answer the phone

I will drink from the carton by the light of the fridge

When the doorbell rings, someone else will open it

When I tumble, I will stand up by myself.

Peadar O'Donoghue

Habeas corpus

For those that held a shovel
not a squat pen, those
without a thousand diplomas,
we, that crashed the party,
never asking if it's for sale,
if there is an equation, a formula,
that we should buy like bread
and sell like beauty.

We drink, never sleep,
for tomorrow we may live,
but now is death,
the death of poetry.

The cabals add only half-truths to the lies
like pounds of flesh and flying flags,
pocketing king's shillings in recompense.

But death will claim us all,
calm us, quell us, write us out.

So, the ride is the joy.

Their rewards? Empty.

Karl Parkinson

A melody

Outside the wind's a never ending aria,
and the rain is Stockhausen down.

Two hollering women;
the middle aged mother of a doomed child,
others dead: Aids and overdose, she's pissed again.
The younger, high on coke, cans and strong weed.

It's all so loud and boring
why don't they whistle to the winds tenor,
or paint rain drops as they're falling?

contributors

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

Kelly Creighton (Editor) is an arts facilitator. Her debut novel 'The Bones of It' will be published by *Liberties Press* (Spring/Summer 2015). She was runner up for the Michael McLaverty Short Story Award and shortlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize and the Cúirt New Writing Prize for fiction. @KellyCreighton

Kate Dempsey's poetry and prose is published and broadcast all over Ireland and the UK. She reads with the *Poetry Divas*, a glittery collective of women poets who blur the wobbly boundaries between page and stage. Her debut collection, *The Space Between*, will be published Autumn 2015 by *Doire Press*. <http://www.doirepress.com@PoetryDivas>
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Brian Gourley's poems have appeared in a wide variety of magazines in Britain and Ireland, most recently in 'Acumen', 'Southlight' and 'The Eildon Tree'. He is working on short stories and his first novel. Brian produced critical articles and is aiming to turn his PhD thesis on the Reformation writer John Bale into a published monograph.

Claire Hennessy is a writer, editor and creative writing teacher from Dublin. She is mostly powered by tea and tweets at @clairehennessy.

Emjay Holmes is chief editor of Fish Publishing Ireland. In 2014 her work was shortlisted for the Bridport and she won the 2014 Dromineer Prize. She is an article contributor for Flash Fiction Chronicles and recently her work has been published in the Journal Of Compressed Creative Arts and Firewords Quarterly.

Jean James was born in Portadown, Co. Armagh but lives in Swansea where she recently completed an MA in creative writing with a particular focus on nature writing and poetry. She won The British Haiku Society haibun competition (2013) and has been published in *Abrided* and the *Welsh Arts Review*.

Therese Kieran lives in Belfast. She is a design graduate. Her achievements include publication in CAP's *Moments* anthology, *Shalom's Making Memories* anthology and in 2013, she won the Belfast Zoo's poetry competition. In 2015 she wants to build a room of her own in her garden.

John Lavin has a doctorate in Creative Writing from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. He edited the short story anthology, *A Fiction Map of Wales* (H'mm Foundation). He is Fiction Editor of *Wales Arts Review* as well as being the co-founder and former editor of *The Lampeter Review*. <http://www.walesartsreview.org/author/john-lavin/>
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Thomas McColl has recently been published in magazines such as *Geeked*, *the Alarmist*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *the Ghastling* and *Bare Fiction*, and in anthologies by *Smoke: A London Peculiar* and *One Eye Grey*. He came second in *4'33" Magazine's* 60 second story contest and has a twitter account: <https://twitter.com/thomasmccoll2>

Cathal McDaid, a mature-age English student at Ulster University, Coleraine, has been writing fiction for several years. Involved in various writers groups in the North West, he has attended creative writing workshops run by Eoin McNamee (*The Blue Tango*) in Dingle, Co. Kerry and Sean O'Reilly (*The Swing of Things*) at the Verbal Arts Centre in Derry.

Dave McGinn is an amateur writer, IT professional and aspiring entrepreneur from Tallaght in South-West Dublin. He runs www.irishwriting.ie, an online resource for Irish writers, and recently launched www.poemshuffle.com also. When he's not reading or writing poetry, he is usually rehearsing with his band, *Lavelle* (www.facebook.com/lavelleband).

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Emma McKervey has been writing poetry since childhood and her work features in several anthologies and magazines including Gold Dust and A New Ulster. She has worked in music education and community arts and is currently researching a PhD in Anthropology.

Danielle McLaughlin's debut short story collection will be published in autumn 2015 by The Stinging Fly Press. Danielle won the Writing Spirit Award for Fiction (2010), the WOW!2 Award for Fiction (2011). In 2012, she won the From the Well Short Story Competition, the William Trevor/Elizabeth Bowen International Short Story Competition and was shortlisted in the Francis MacManus Competition 2012.

Brian Mallaghan is a writer and music lover living in Newtownards. He has studied creative writing at the Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast and Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart. Brian has contributed to a number of music publications and websites and is currently working on his first novel.

Keeley Mansfield has a Writing MA from Sheffield Hallam University. Her stories have featured in The Bohemyth and Wordlegs. She was shortlisted for the 2014 Bristol Short Story Prize and was published in the accompanying anthology. Originally from East London, she has lived in Dublin for ten years.

Mari Maxwell's work is forthcoming in The Brasilia Review, Macabre Maine, and Veils, Halos and Shackles International Poetry Journal on the Abuse and Oppression of Women. Her work was highly commended in The Francis Ledwidge 2014 Poetry Award and shortlisted in the 2014 Walking on Thin Ice Short Story Contest. @MariMaxwell17

Safia Moore is a writer and freelance editor from County Down. Her PhD, from The University of Ulster, focussed on poets Seamus Heaney and Michael Hartnett. Ether Books published Safia's first 3 short stories and she features in Issue 3 of The Incubator. Safia won the 2014 Abu Dhabi National Short Story Competition. @SafiaMoore www.topofthetent.com

Pat Mullan, originally from rural North Derry, now lives in Co Kildare. His short story “The Same Place” was published in the fourth issue of Spontaneity, “Good For Me” was published in the Galway Review (August 2014) and “Blood on the Knife” was published in the Paper Swans i-pamphlet (December 2014).

Sinéad Nolan is a journalist and writer from Dublin. She has a BA in Creative Writing and an MA in Newspaper Journalism. In 2005, she was shortlisted for the Francis McManus Short Story Competition for RTÉ and in 2014 she was shortlisted for the Momaya Press Short Story Awards. www.thefemaleauthor.co.uk

Peadar O’Donoghue’s debut poetry collection, Jewel (Salmon), has been described as ‘one of the liveliest and most provocative poetry books I’ve read for some time’ (Jim Burns, Ambit). He co-edits PB magazine. <http://thepoetrybusmag.wix.com/change>
<https://www.facebook.com/peadar.odonoghue>

James O’Leary’s poems have appeared in Southword, Wordlegs, and The Burning Bush 2. He has read at the Cork Spring Poetry Festival as part of the Southword Journal showcase and his poetry-films have screened at festivals in Ireland, Scotland and Canada. Find more at vimeo.com/larico twitter: <https://twitter.com/Laric0>

Toirdealbhach Ó Lionáird is from Killarney, Co. Kerry and is a fluent Irish speaker. He writes short fiction, poetry and has a special interest in drama through the medium of Irish. He won the second Mash Stories Short Story Competition and has been published on Paragraph Planet. <http://teaandpeach.wordpress.com/>

David O’Neill is a writer, poet, songwriter and journalist. He has had written works feature in publications worldwide including Spontaneity Magazine and Useless Degree Magazine. He is currently working on his debut collection of short stories and poems. @cartoonmoonirl

Karl Parkinson's work has appeared in *New Planet Cabaret*, *If ever you go: A map of Dublin in poetry and song* (Dedalus press). *The Stinging Fly*, *Penduline*, *The Pickled Body*, *The Bohemyth*, *The Incubator*, *Revival Journal*, amongst other publications. Wurmpress published his Debut poetry collection *Litany of the City and Other Poems*. @Kparkspoet

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interview: Danielle McLaughlin

reviews: Safia Moore on Sleepwalkers, by Bernie McGill
Kelly Creighton on How to Lose Your Home & Save Your Life, by
Angela T. Carr

poems: Emma McKervey. Dave McGinn. James O'Leary. Brian
Gourley. Jean James. Thomas McColl. Kate Dempsey. Peadar
O'Donoghue. Karl Parkinson.

fiction: Cathal McDaid. John Lavin. Sinéad Nolan. David O'Neill.
Brian Phelan. Toirdealbhach Ó Lionáird. Csilla Toldy. Claire Hennessy.
Emjay Holmes. Brian Mallaghan. Keeley Mansfield. Therese Kieran.
Mari Maxwell. Pat Mullan.