The Stinging Fly

New Writers • New Writing

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The Stinging Fly magazine was established in 1997 to publish and promote the best new Irish and international writing. Published twice a year, in May and November, we operate an open submission policy for each new issue. Please read the submission guidelines and FAQ on our website.

In addition to publishing the magazine, we are now a book publisher, an education provider, and an online platform.

Our Winter 2025-26 issue will have a special focus on the climate crisis. Alongside our usual mix of the very best new writing, we want to showcase the best new work about the climate and the endangered future of our planet. We also wish to encourage more writers to engage with the consequences of climate change. Submissions for the issue will open from May 1 to May 15, 2025. A submission call, providing more information on what we are looking for, will be posted on our website in January 2025.

Visit stingingfly.org for more.

Editorial

I'm teaching quite a bit these days. It's often lamented that writers can't generally make a living from writing, that they must teach or edit or take on some arts admin as well (guilty on all counts), and while that's a valid lament, I'm happy to be able to teach as well as practise. Writing as an art is a mysterious thing, so it's immensely rewarding to examine the kaleidoscope of styles of writers we admire, to try to understand the compulsion to create in this way, then marvel at the magic of it. With the nights growing longer, my students and I have been discussing darker themes. We've analysed Yeats's 'The Second Coming' and the short story *The Irish Times* called a contender for the scariest ever written: 'The Tower' by Marghanita Laski. We consider the power in what's left undefined, unexplained, unresolved. This is contrary to what's expected; when we write, we try to put chaos in order, to make chronological the swirl of raw images that may constitute a story. We expect what we read to make sense, for the words to play together in a satisfying way. But there is a beautiful doom to writing, even at its most successful. We're attempting to make permanent concepts that, when nebulous, were imbued with endless potential. It is a little bit like pinning a butterfly to a board.

Frequently, the irrationality of life is positive; the fact that we can't easily predict how things will go means we get happy accidents, concepts like serendipity. More frequently, the irrationality of life is confounding in the worst way. In our Summer 2024 issue, we published a story from Yousri Alghoul, a Palestinian writer trapped in Gaza as Israel waged its indiscriminate, disproportionate and illogical war, as well as an essay from r alice, an activist who's made multiple visits to Palestine to witness lives lived under constant threat of violence beyond violence. I didn't think that things would have changed in any substantial way between that issue's editorial and this one, and wasn't under any illusion about the power of sharing stories (even an act of connection as profound as this only works on those already open to profound acts of connection). Even so, it is unsettling to realise that things did change, substantially; they got worse. No adversary nor ally seems able to calm Israel's fury. It is now issuing evacuation orders to Lebanese civilians before bombing its cities, too. The latest horror is its ban on Unrwa (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency) operating in Gaza

and the occupied West Bank, though the vast majority of Palestinian people rely on Unrwa for basic necessities… and this after over 200 Unrwa staff were killed in Israeli attacks in the past year. When last I heard news of Yousri, through his translator, Graham Liddell, he was learning to swim; his children were teaching him in the sea in Gaza, because at least they still had the sea. And yet, in Yousri's own words, 'If I were to say we are waiting for death, I would not be exaggerating.' His cousin, the *Al Jazeera* reporter Ismail Alghoul, was killed in a targeted strike not long before this update; Yousri had been with him earlier that same day.

This is not the only conflict on our minds. There is also the continuing war in Ukraine, in Sudan (of which more in these pages), in Myanmar… This time last year, on stingingfly.org, we published a longform piece from a young, queer Ugandan writer about the oppressive regime they are trying to survive. Our thoughts don't go often enough to our sisters in Afghanistan. Between writing and publishing this editorial, we will know which path American voters have chosen: a decision we await with trepidation, for it will affect us all. Through all this upheaval we read, and we write, and the likes of me, who teaches and edits as well as reads and writes, tries to promote the importance of words and open-hearted communication. The awarding of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature to Han Kang, author of *Human Acts* (the most incisive book about the consequences of conflict I have ever read) should confirm this philosophy. But it is hard more times than it isn't. It is hard to remember it. It is hard to believe it.

In *Nanette*, their brilliant standup show, Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby submits that a joke involves a setup—the building of tension—and a punchline—the release of that tension, before examining what happens when you refuse to release that tension. The power is in what's left undefined, unexplained, unresolved. It is not satisfying; we are not off the hook. We are, instead, left to question our discomfort. And so, as the winter sets in here in Ireland, in what can increasingly feel like an unearned paradise, I ask myself what happens when putting words in their most pleasing order isn't enough? Why do we write, even as all else feels as though it's disintegrating? Is it so futile to want to preserve our stories, our humanity, on pages? Is it actually a small act of necessary rebellion to pin these terrible butterflies to boards?

Lisa McInerney

November 2024

The Wrong Thing

Keith Ridgway

Oh Annie. Oh she dashed.

Forgetting what each room was for and what she was doing in it and remembering another, and an urgent task there, and in the sitting room and the hall, and then on the landing and in her daughter's smelly bedroom she shrieked little rejoinders to herself, called herself a fool and a stupid thing, and a pittle pattle mittle mattle rattle-headed dunce what's wrong with you you great dim void of the nth degree, you mollusc, you fathead, you pip.

She could find no bag, she could find no scarf. She found no shoes, nor. Then *there* was the bag, cornered on the kitchen floor, slumped like a drunk or—oh, she had thought of Kate, but chased that away with a stream of curses—and grabbed the bloody thing and turned it out on the table because it was full of such rubbish, my god, why could she not travel lightly through her life, why all this clutter in her wake, it was people like her who were fouling the planet, people like her who should. There was a sandwich, curling a lip at her, in its own little plastic pyramid. Look at that. Look at it. The death of all things, from Centra. Not a pyramid. A triangle. Not a triangle either. She binned the lot in the wrong bin, the landfill bin, because it didn't matter did it? Not today. Today was a day, oh god, don't say it, today was a day for landfill.

What a terrible thing to think.

She stared at her hands for a moment.

What terrible hands.

Why on earth did she have so many tissues, why? About eight packs, variously depleted. Possibly useful—Michael had been touch and go since it happened. There was her old phone. Aisling had told her that charities took them for the diamonds or the gold or the uranium, whatever it was.

You don't just put them in the bin Mum, Christ. An empty plastic water bottle, bits of crumpled paper, lipstick, lip balm, a little bottle of mouthwash, oh for god's sake what garbage, hand sanitiser, two crumpled masks, a tourist map of the city centre from when Aisling's German boyfriend had been over in the spring, the map now in their lives longer than he had been by a factor of whathaveyou, a packet of mints, loose mints, mints in the lint, fluff fluff fluff, balls of paper—receipts for why?—a mysterious pen, the photograph, the photograph, there, there it was. The photograph. Alright. Another packet of mints. You'd look at all this and think what. A woman with halitosis and no curiosity. She filled the water bottle at the sink, put it back in, along with one packet of mints, the sanitiser, the tissues, the lipstick, the pen, the photograph. And that was that. The bag, done.

She was surprised, and suspicious, but she wasn't sad. She was anxious instead, as if this was a test, and she set up to fail it. And the surprise and the suspicion were about that. They'd just arrived on the scene to stare. Odd sorts of things to feel, way off to the side of what was actually the matter. She didn't understand it, her normally so in touch with herself. She grinned at that. But she had to get organised. Really. She put the bag in the hall. Think, now. Think. Get a hat. Get your scarf. Go.

Death was the matter. Her older sister Kate had felt unwell at breakfast and died then in the shower of a heart attack. Last week, this. Her husband, Kate's husband, Michael—who Annie had never much respected—had found her, had found Kate, half exploded on the shower tray and the mat, a dropped egg of a dead woman, her face distorted in terror, and he thought she'd been attacked. For half of a long shocking day they'd believed there'd been a murder in the family—though the ambulance men and the Guards were dubious—and Annie had run through the streets back and forth between hers and Kate's on the phone to her other sister, her younger sister June, about how she'd never liked Michael, never even respected him, and a man you can't respect might well be a killer. And all his wailing and his bloodless face and his half fainting in the kitchen doorway, all of it just a touch too much, didn't June think so? And June shouted at her not to say such things, and bawled and called her evil, and the garda from Cabra looked at the pair of them with a dirty little smile on his face, his hands in his pockets. This was later, when they were both in the house and Michael was in the garden crying on the deckchair

with his son Tom looking at him nervously, and his daughter Lillian back from where she worked in some technology park off the M50, sitting in the kitchen looking like she was in the wrong house. Annie didn't see them hug. None of them. She'd grabbed each of them and held their stiff bodies, trying to squeeze them into softness, and got nowhere with the kids, though Michael seemed—didn't he?—to decide suddenly that he should soften, and so he did, deforming in her arms like wet laundry. But Michael didn't hug his children, they didn't hug each other. Not that she saw anyway. She'd watched, and was pretty sure. Not even a touch. Which had just made her all the more suspicious, she couldn't help it, Michael with his history of silences and sulks and comments. Pass remarkable, he had always been, and never much warmth in any of it. She didn't think she'd ever had a proper conversation with him. He wouldn't look at you. He'd say things into the air, politely, or polite-sounding anyway, so that it was only five minutes later you'd think to yourself, wasn't that a bit rude? Who did he think he was? Kate with her *ah he works very hard, he's just tired*, moryah, and *oh Annie you wouldn't understand*—and what had that hidden, what had that covered up? The daughter had moved out early, beautiful name, Lillian, but there wasn't much to her. She knew, though. Sitting there staring into space, two cups of cold tea in front of her like offerings. She knew and was traumatised—that was Annie's read of the situation. Some sort of hellish collapse of a family. Lillian had escaped to safety, just Michael and Kate left in the house with the boy, who was pale and silent and stern, deep in the masturbatory years by the look of it. Annie sensed a simmer, a tremor, a hidden something, God knows, something dark and awful, she could see it in Lillian's face, a sort of Scandinavian television thing, incest or murder or satanism, and a whole horrible story that would take an age to come out and never make sense.

Annie rolled her eyes at herself. Her speculations were outrageous. She lived only five minutes away, and she didn't really know them at all, did she? And whose fault was that?

The plain clothes man, the detective, he was almost merry. Bit of a break from the violence she supposed. He was dressed like an estate agent and was built like a January gym man, the belt doing a lot of work. He told them in a squeaky sort of voice that it was a terrible thing but not a crime, that he'd seen many like it over the years—at which June and herself exchanged a look—and that while of course they awaited the medical examiner's report, they had no reason to believe that it had been

anything other than a massive tragic heart attack. *Sorry for your loss*. He couldn't take his eyes off Lillian the whole time. Guards always seem astonished by women.

Annie was envious of them of course, was the truth of it, maybe. Kate and her two quiet, polite children. And Michael—despite his often haughtiness, his sometime prickliness—obviously devoted. It was obvious wasn't it? Maybe it was. Thin line, in fairness. He'd given her the photograph after all. He told her that it had sat upstairs on the shelf in their bedroom, that Kate had loved it, that it had meant a lot to her, and that Annie should have it. It was just the two of them, very young—Kate maybe 8, Annie about 5—standing with their arms around each other, their curls pressed together, two huge smiles on them for the camera, and for their Dad she presumed. She'd never seen it before. For a moment she wasn't even sure it was them. That he had faked it somehow, part of the plot. But it was them, of course. Just the two of them. Those curls. My god.

Missle mittle mattle hattle cattle on the landing.

The moon looked down on all of them and the horses came and went.

She had.

She couldn't find a hat. Did she even need a hat? Did churches still expect that? There was one, somewhere. There were *two*, somewhere. One was definitely no good, a great big red thing she'd worn once to the races with… anyway. The other one she thought might be alright. Wherever it was. She looked at the hatch to the attic. She wasn't going up there. She should have insisted that Aisling take the day off. Aisling could get up there and down again in a flash. But Aisling had exams. You could get some sort of compassionate leave, some dispensation from the university or what have you, but Aisling was indifferent now to family, who could blame her, and it hadn't even been discussed. No hat then. This was undoubtedly a terrible faux-pas for which June would bawl at her sporadically for the rest of their lives.

Shoes.

The taxi, she supposed, honked its horn outside. Her phone rang a single bell. She froze, and a cold clarity came into her. Her sister was dead, and her shoes were in the spare room, and her scarf was in the third drawer down in the old chest that tilted left, and her keys were there—look, *there*—and her bag was in the hall, and her sister was dead.

*

The funeral was a horrible thing. Annie had a whispered argument with Aisling who showed up beside her in the second row wearing a hat. Well of course she did. And of course she was. It was her aunt's funeral, why on earth wouldn't she be there? Of course she was there. *How could you think I wouldn't come to Kate's funeral, Christ*. But her exams? She had got the dispensation, she hissed, and Annie was about to ask her if it came with a hat when she saw Tom, the son, glance back at them from the front row. Darkness under his eyes like he'd been punched out of his childhood, a tremble in his lips, and Annie for the first time felt a terrible despair, a rush of it, and saw Kate in his face, but Kate was not there. She was in the pale coffin in front of the altar. The first time she'd been in a church, Annie guessed, since their father died.

Ah Dad. Dad would have been so sad. Had he lived long enough to bury a daughter. Well who wouldn't? No favourites. But he didn't really differentiate one from the other either. Three daughters. First one, then two, then three. That was more than enough he would say. More than enough. They were an indivisible trinity of pretty things that he paraded around like other men walked their dogs. No, that was unfair. One of them dying, any one of them dying, would have broken his heart.

The priest looked sour. Sounded wholly uninterested. It was the same with the funeral home people as well. All in a day's work. The day you bury your sister is just Tuesday for them. She really didn't like the priest though. Lip-licking grey-faced creep, doing it all by rote, obviously unimpressed that he'd never seen any of these people before. They all sat when they should have knelt and stood when they should have sat, and he sighed and tutted and redirected them with vague gestures that were variously interpreted, and there was hesitation and general hubbub then until a majority was established and imposed, and they all sat down, or stood up, or whatever it was. Wrong, she was sure, most of the time.

Of course it would have broken his heart. What parent's heart would not be broken?

In the middle of all the nonsense Lillian went up and read a poem, calmly, quietly, and Annie couldn't listen to the words for fear of wailing, distracting herself instead with the stations of the cross. She tried to remember the sequence of tortures and humiliations, the three times falling, the woman with the facecloth, his mother, the whip. Grim old litany. Lillian continued. Something about the persistence only of love. The failing of all things but the strength of love. Annie turned in

desperation to the nearly naked Jesus hanging on the cross, his fine legs shining, and his loincloth barely on, and his bloody face and shoulders, and the muscles of his arms.

She was terrified they'd send Tom up there, or even Michael, to say something. The priest regarded the front row, obviously wondering himself. But no one moved. He sighed again and hauled himself up out of his elaborate armchair and embarked on the rest of it. Very few presented themselves for communion. They waited their turn, he fed them. She remembered as a child that the priest would put it in your mouth. Now he placed it in their cupped hands. *The body of Christ*, he would say, holding it up. She glanced again at the body itself, the rib cage like a cave you might crawl into. *Amen*, they said, their hands held. And he placed it there and they retrieved it, one hand out of another, and fed themselves. Mittle mattle eggs and cattle. Bacon rashers, Jesus crackers. Sometimes the priest's chalky finger would touch your tongue.

She was not, she decided, in the moment. She should be, she knew, in the moment. That was where you were supposed to be.

Everything though, was moving too fast for her. Dad combing their hair. *Next*, he'd say. *Aren't you the prettiest?* Uproar. She could hear people crying. She wanted to turn and look, but you can't do that. Someone, maybe two people, sobbing quietly. Behind her. Which meant that she was closer to the deceased than they were. In all senses. She wondered if they were making a point. Given that no one ahead of them was at that moment sobbing at all. Michael was slumped a little, but silent.

Grieve, Annie announced, to herself. You're supposed to grieve. But none of them knew how to do it. She wished the priest would shut up. She wished they could sit and sob without being bothered, for an hour or two. A day or two. In the past they would have waked her. But who did that now? Annie wanted a period of getting to know what it was that she felt, because she had no idea. She needed time. She wanted to live here for a while, in silence, but it was over before she'd had a chance to feel that it had started. The stupid priest had his stupid instructions, and it all wound down through the platitudes into a godawful puddle—the playing of 'Somewhere There's A Place For Us', June's choice, which got the howls going from behind, and which set everyone off soon enough, how could it not, *peace and quiet and open air*, and everyone was at it, including Aisling. She held her mother's hand too tightly. Annie prised it off, then realised what she was doing and shook her head and said *sorry* and put it back,

willing her daughter to squeeze as tight as she needed, tight enough to crack a bone, and they looked away from the shouldered coffin moving down the church, and at each other instead, and then could not stop the tears. And Annie was uncertain if they were crying for Kate or Maria or Natalie Wood. Mother for daughter, daughter for mother, both of them for show. She didn't know. Maybe that was why she cried.

At the graveside everyone was more composed. Composed—she skewed her mouth sideways—atop the decomposing. Lord. Lilly Lally Mick and Sally. They were putting her in the ground. Kate. Kate, for god's sake. The ground where she would rot. They'd never talked about it that Annie could remember, but she was surprised Kate hadn't gone for cremation. Surprised that she'd gone for the cold wet clay and the silence. Little scratches at the wood. The dream sounds of burrowing. The darkness. Lord. She shivered, and wanted to call a halt to the whole thing. Stop this! My god! This is outrageous!

She'd probably not gone for one thing or the other of course. No will, said Michael. No instructions. No notion. Not even sixty. It'd all go to him. All of it. The golf clubs, the ice-cream maker, the Hermés handbag. She sucked down a snort. She was being mean.

The clouds were dashing past in a high breeze and the priest was muttering, awful man. No sense of occasion. Anorak over his vestments. Bad breath. She couldn't smell it, she just knew. He probably did a dozen a week—very few priests these days, and the deaths kept on coming. Should she pray? Give it a go? She didn't even know if she believed. How could she not know? If she didn't know, then she didn't. Presumably. Remarkable, the number of things decided on the quiet.

They stood around the hole in the ground under the racing clouds. She looked everywhere but into the grave. She pretended it was some other sort of event. A trip to Leopardstown in the holidays. A wedding. What part of a wedding? Fewer people than had been in the church, she thought. There'd be fewer still at the house. Like a wedding run backwards. She thought about her thinking—a clever little manoeuvre. And why, for example, were there no altar boys? Not at the church, not at the cemetery. He was swinging his own scent box, the jezebel, what's it called? The censorious. She chewed on a laugh. Michael coughing.

Mittle mattle mostly baffled.

Natalie Wood had gone into the water and nobody knew anything about it. They said. Annie couldn't remember the name of the husband. And there had been someone else famous on the boat. And the police, over the years, had come and gone. It wasn't unheard of.

She looked at him. At Michael. He'd stopped coughing. He was silent, dry faced, head bowed. His children stood each side of him, and Annie and Aisling were next to Lillian, June next to Tom, with Nora and Siobhán, wearing their school uniform skirts and puffer jackets and each clutching a handkerchief, looking like they did when their mother wouldn't let them go to a party. Embarrassed. The priest went on. Annie tried to keep an eye on everyone, scanned the small crowd, thinking about her first boyfriend Robbie McCarthy, proper little gentleman—suspiciously—and thinking about Natalie Wood. She wondered if June would be alright, monitored Lillian's arm—which was touching her own—for tremors, clutched Aisling's hand in hers, wished the priest would shut up, and then suddenly, when he did, and the men moved in and lifted the straps, and the coffin began to go down, she gasped. She gasped, and her free hand went to her mouth.

They walked through the graves and the trees to the cars and she didn't want to talk to anyone. There was a limousine for Michael and Lillian and Tom. And another one for her and June and Aisling and Nora and Siobhán. Bit excessive. Two great big sleek black things shining, and she thought of scenes from gangster movies. She liked it. Stupid. She was the matriarch now, god help us. She bit down a grin. Dimster, bluster, blister, sister of the dead, head of The Family now, The Mulvey Dean Camorra, of Sodom and Drumcondra. Hoots mac ninny. She coughed into her hand and Aisling gave her a look, then nudged alongside her, phone out.

—Dad sends his sympathies. He's sorry he can't be here. He says he liked Kate a lot, that she was always great fun, and he hopes that you're doing ok. Et cetera.

Annie stopped walking, She looked at her daughter as if she'd announced that the city was under attack.

—What?

—What do you mean what? What I said.

—What's he doing? Is that a text? What is that?

—Yes Ma it's a text. He's just being polite.

—You text him?

—Yes.

—What?

—Jesus Ma he's my father.

She was furious. What did she mean by et cetera?

—What do you mean et cetera?

—He goes on a bit. He remembers when you all went to the beach before I was born, before there were any kids. You all went to the beach and Kate used to get drunk and sunburned.

—She did not! What's he going on about? Jesus Christ Aisling what are you doing in touch with him? I had no idea. You never told me.

Aisling stared bug-eyed at her mother, her jaw fluttering.

—Sticking his oar in on today of all days. What a bastard he is. What a bastard.

People walked around them.

—Ma.

—Don't Ma me. You shouldn't talk to him.

—He's my father.

He's my abuser, is what she wanted to say. He nearly fucking killed me, is what she wanted to say. And every time you talk to him you're abusing me again. That would shut her up. Little brat. Jesus Christ. But June was standing there now with the two girls.

—You take the window this time Annie, she was saying. I'll go in the middle.

She had been proceeding on the basis that the man was gone. And there he was, in her daughter's pocket.

—The window, said June. You go first. Annie.

—What?

No one answered. She glanced at her surviving sister, her daughter, her nieces. What on earth were they all doing, looking at her? What was that look? What was expected of her? You go first. Get in the car.

She got in the car.

In Kate and Michael's house they gathered, just Michael's now, and the cloudy, breezy day allowed them into the garden, where June stood staring into a japonica while drinking from two glasses, one in each hand. Annie watched her from the kitchen. Had she put on weight? Puffier around the face. She looked heavier, even in black. She was biting her lips. And then she expertly balanced the two glasses in one hand and bit her

nails. That was new. June was simply sad, wasn't she, and Annie wished the same for herself, didn't she, but was incapable of it, apparently. Lost in a rage instead. Ambushed, lambasted, lump hammered, lashed to the ladder lashed to the rack, battered by bricks and blasted by bats.

No one had spoken in the limousine, except June of course, poor June, who had said only *It's all so sudden*, but had said it twice, as if it kept on being sudden, continually, a week of sudden. Which of course it was. Sudden and slow. And Annie felt terrible now that no one had answered her, had comforted her. Poor June.

—Ma

—Aisling, go out there and check on Aunty June will you?

—What?

—Go out and talk to her. I have to find my bag.

—Okay, I

—Just do it please.

She knew where her bag was. She had almost lost it, that was true. She'd left it in the limousine, but the driver had come after her, shouting 'Missus! Missus!' She'd put it in the little front room then that Michael used as an office. All the coats were there. She'd put her bag under his desk. Cast a cold eye over the funeral expenses, laid out neatly. Touched nothing. She'd have to offer to cover some of it she supposed. Shocking numbers. The death toll was high. He could afford it, mind you, better than she or June. Maybe that was why June had insisted, absolutely insisted, on doing the food. Contribution in kind. A lot of small sandwiches and two different soups. Vegan mini sausage rolls. A big trifle swimming in sherry. It had all disappeared in half an hour.

She watched her daughter cross the grass, drinking red she now noticed. The awful bitch. Ah no. Stop that. She should go to her bag, get some tissues, to offer her sister. She could offer her a mint, a sip of water. Will I redo your lips June? Will I sanitise your hands? As it was she had nothing to offer at all. Except her daughter, she supposed. Here, have my daughter. Take her.

Tom and Lillian had disappeared—to their rooms Annie imagined, and who could blame them? At her back was a small crowd telling maudlin stories of early death, diseases of the heart, bleeds on the brain, and the catatonic grief of children. She could hear, from the living room, someone begin to sing.

Their mother had sung. She had liked to annoy them all with it, bursting into 'The Raggle Taggle Gypsy', 'The Auld Triangle'. Bursting or sliding, by way of a mutter that found a melody. 'Spancil Hill'. 'Que Sera Sera' sometimes to clear the room. Annie couldn't tell what mournful thing was now being wailed behind her. Ah leave them be.

Aisling looked towards her and she remembered that she was supposed to be looking for her bag, but she stared back defiant. The row had knocked her oddly. She didn't know what to think and didn't like that. He *was* her father after all. She was his daughter. Who had heard, hadn't she, heard about everything that had happened? Did she not remember? How do you not remember? For god's sake.

It was a mistake. A young mistake. The young they blunder. She should leave it, today of all… though that was part of it. The cheek. How long had it been going on? What did they talk about? Why? How did they manage the time difference? Was he even still out there? He couldn't be. Was he back? He couldn't be. Was he back? Had they met? Good god. Had they met?

She set off into the garden. There were people to the right of her, and a blur of green and tea grey and that was all she saw. Her bag, she thought, as she came up to her sister's shoulder, was not out here.

—Aisling. A word.

—Annie do you want this? Someone asked me to hold it while they went to the loo.

—I don't want someone's dregs June, no.

—No. She laughed. Makes me look like an alco.

—Well put it down somewhere. I want to talk to Aisling for a moment.

—Alright, said June, hesitating briefly, suspicious. Then she wandered off slowly towards the house.

—Mam they were both her drinks.

—I know.

—She told me that she'd grabbed two to save her going back and forth.

—I know. She pretends to me. Thinks I'll tell her off. She has a wine lunch most days, apparently. Mary Whatshername said it to me, the malicious bitch. Over in that place on Dame Street with the lights. Back at her desk all mints and mouthwash. And there is a lot of wine in the house. I'm keeping an eye on it.

—I had no idea. Listen.

—No you listen.

—Ma.

—Is he back?

—What?

—Is he back? In Ireland? Is he back?

Her daughter looked at her. They were the same height. Her perfect little face tilted slightly, her clear unblemished skin, her nose still not quite an adult nose, her hair falling down, a barely perceptible smile forming, not amusement, obviously, not that, but what?

—Oh, Ma. No. No he's not back. He's still out there.

—Japan.

—Korea.

—He's in Korea?

—He left Japan about a year ago.

—Why?

—I don't know. Work.

—You don't just move from Japan to Korea. They're entirely different languages and everything.

—He doesn't speak any languages. He just hangs out with all the expats. He has been trying to learn Korean though. Says it's very hard. Work is all in English.

—How long have you been talking to him?

—Not long.

—How long Aisling?

—Since November. My birthday.

She had turned eighteen, got herself a German boyfriend on the internet, and a father to talk to. He'd probably heard about the German boy before Annie had.

—I'm sorry Ma. I was stupid. I thought it would be a good time to let you know. A message about Kate, you know. Condolences. Neutral. Well, not neutral, but you know what I mean. He just seems sad and lonely and sort of pathetic. I don't know what to do with him. I wanted to tell you. Wanted to ask you. What I should do with him. But he was the last thing on your mind today and today is supposed to be about Kate, today is about Kate, and I've ruined that for you now and I'm so sorry.

She sobbed and sniffed dropped her head. Annie found herself reaching out to her, taking her shoulders, taking her in. Ah god. What can you do? Not even tissues. You don't live your life, you fall through it like a leaf.

—It's alright. It's alright. Shhh. It doesn't matter.

Her daughter hugged her and they swayed for a silent while in the garden, on the grass. The people watching, it occurred to Annie, must have thought their grief very moving.

It passed slowly but was over in no time. Then Michael stood in the hallway saying long goodbyes. He was in control now—pale, but tearless and alert. His jacket off, his tie loose, his hair a little ruffled, generally more handsome than he had been when puffed and empurpled by his grief. Oh his grief was grief now was it? The real deal, was it? Is that what she'd decided? She was a fathead, a burp. Shame on her.

Annie stood at his shoulder as he said various polite things, little empty things, the reassurances the bereaved owe to the merely awkward. Thank you. You're very good. *No no, don't worry about us at all*. Why didn't they leave him alone? She was embarrassed at herself, at her tune-changing, at her half-boiled eggs, at the bolted horses of her thoughts.

—Are you hungry Michael? At all? He'd closed the door.

—What's that?

—Hungry?

—No. I'm not. I should probably do something for the kids though.

They looked at each other, both knowing that if he could do any cooking at all it was not very much. The instructions on a microwaveable. A fry up, maybe. It troubled him. He looked away, bit his lip. She imagined that the kids would be no better. Kate had loved the kitchen.

—Ah I'll organise something, said Annie. Was that the last of them? There's only me and Aisling, and June and the girls. You can relax Michael. We'll organise some food. You don't worry about it.

He regarded her curiously, as if trying to place her.

—Annie, he said.

—Yes love?

His eyes were a little bloodshot. Like June's. She thought suddenly that he was going to tell them to leave. *Get out of my house*.

—Just… thank you. I have been so destroyed, so destroyed, and you have been so solid, so strong. I know how much you loved Kate. You and June both. And yet all this week you've put me and the children first, and I just want you to know, to know that I know, and I love you for it.

He was a barrister. Kate had met him during some sort of fraud trial. Different sides. Both juniors. They had jousted, Kate had said. They had

squared up to each other and circled each other and moved in for the kill. She had loved to tell the story.

He hugged her then. Annie submitted to it. She knew suddenly that they would not stay close. She hadn't even thought about it before. They had never *been* close. They would drift away now though. The kids as well. She barely knew them. Was that sad? Should she fight it?

Then Aisling was there, and then June was there as well, and there was some talk about the girls, where were the girls? The girls were upstairs, hiding out with Lillian and Tom. Michael shouted for them. June was bleary and Aisling was stressed.

They all ended up in the kitchen talking about food. Tom offered to go to the chipper, to general relief, and Aisling said she'd go with him. Then Lillian. Then Nora and Siobhán. All of them would go. Annie wanted to go too, but thought that would annoy everyone. Then Lillian was writing out the orders.

—Aunty June?

—Small cod, said June.

—Chips?

—Of course chips, said June, with a bit of a laugh.

—Salt and vinegar?

—Yes, said June, as if this was becoming a bit of an interrogation now.

—We have salt and vinegar here, said Tom. Everyone looked at him and he blushed.

—If you get them without salt and vinegar then they won't be all soggy, you know, by the time we get back.

—Man's a genius, said Michael.

—I'll do that then, said June.

—Aunty Annie?

—Batter burger, Lillian. Batter burger and small chips. And Tom's condiment trick.

—Dad?

—I suppose I should have something. I'll have the same as Annie. Small everything for me. Do we have ketchup?

She watched him. He had found his appetite so. He gave Tom his debit card, and whispered something in his ear. A number, maybe. Or encouragement. Father son secrets. He seemed almost cheerful. He took off his tie and ushered them out to the front door with instructions about

which way they should go, about getting a receipt, about taking their time on the way, but getting the hot food back quickly.

When they were gone they were gone, just like that, and the house went very quiet.

—Do you remember Robbie McCarthy?

—I do, Annie. Ha! Your gay boyfriend. He was a nice lad.

—Wasn't he? I was thinking of him today. I was thinking of him, and I was thinking of Dad, and of Mam. I was thinking of lots of people June. You and Michael and Aisling. I was thinking of everyone except Kate.

They were clearing up, setting the table. Michael was upstairs. The sisters in the kitchen. One missing.

—What were you thinking about me?

—I worry about you.

—I'm fine.

—Are you?

There was a pause, and Annie looked at her. She was stopped in the middle of drying a dinner plate, facing the window. Still as stone. Her mouth open a little. She blinked a few times and Annie's heart thumped.

—Yes Annie, she said at last, her body suddenly relaxing. Jesus I thought I was going to sneeze but it's gone now.

Annie regarded her suspiciously. Her fingernails were a state. There was a red mark on her neck. She was drying the plate very thoroughly.

—Alright.

—I've been thinking about the girls a bit. Nora and Siobhán I mean. How they're just about to start leaving me. You know.

—No. What do you mean?

—They're getting to that age. That you're nearly at the end of with Aisling.

—Well.

—It's just what happens.

—They don't leave, June. It changes. But they never leave. Not really.

June raised an eyebrow at her.

—Aisling hasn't left, insisted Annie. My god. I'll never get rid of her. She picked up her bag from a chair and rummaged through it. She'd remembered the photograph.

—Anyway. Why are we not thinking about Kate? The three of us. I mean. But it was always… it's the end of… where is it? Why are we not thinking about Kate?

June was on to cutlery, but still looking at her sister.

—We are.

—No we're not. Where is it?

—It hasn't hit us yet Annie, that's all. We're slow. We get everything out of order. You'll have plenty of time to think about Kate at my funeral.

—Jesus June don't. Don't say that.

June laughed, and poured them each another glass of wine, and Annie found what she was looking for. She stared at it, but it was the wrong thing, the wrong time, and she put it back. Just the two of them. Poor June.

Michael returned, and they waited quietly with the dusk coming down on them, and Annie settled in the armchair and her thoughts rattled on. But she was hungry now. Hungry and tired and she didn't seem to care so much, about anything. She wasn't good at it.

—I want to go the grave, said Michael suddenly.

—To the grave?

—Tonight.

June and Annie looked at each other.

—Tonight, love?

—I want to be with her and I don't know where she is.

He cried a little, and June sat beside him and tried to comfort him.

—You should go if you want Michael, she said. Whatever is necessary. I'll go with you. If that's what you want Michael.

Annie didn't think that was right, but she said nothing. He stopped crying. She could barely make him out in the low light, a white shirt with a bowed head, June's arm stroking his shoulder. There was something so strange about him. Something odd. Wasn't there?

The silence was broken by the children returning. Hardly children. *What are you doing sitting in the dark? Christ*. The smell of food was rousing, rich and rousing, and the lights were lit. The faces startled her.

They ate together quietly, and Annie thought about one thing after another, and came to no conclusions.

Mittle mattle chips and batter. Bury the dead before they matter.

Drunken Driving (an extract)

Martina Evans

1.

'Come,' he said at last, 'tell me of London…'

DIRTY-grey, sallow, clanging Pentonville Prison gulped me
every Wednesday morning & spat me out in four hours,
stinking of Fixer & Developer—my black suede shoes
sodden—stiff neck tingling, hand on the gearstick, glued inside
Red Astra on the spider-web crossroads at York Way. Why
should turning right be a Matter of Force? I hadn't asked for
War. *Clutch! I said Clutch!* Carl was shaking & angry at the mercy
of Me Behind the Wheel. Would I die on the road because
of a drunken driver? Was I as bad as a drunken driver?
But you're doing a great job, said Carl afterwards.
That's not what you said on the West Way, I said. *I'm terrified.*
I want to leave the prison. We can't afford it, he said. Same
for driving lessons, D.I.V.O.R.C.E. & the internet. Then
overnight he asked me to step up—right onto the accelerator.

TO HELP AN INMATE TO ESCAPE OR ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE THE MAXIMUM PENALTY IS 5 YEARS IMPRISONMENT.

2.

…we appeared to fly along…

IT worked out at £135 a month. Doctor Grey showed me round two X-ray departments—HMP Holloway & HMP Pentonville just in case I could do both. It was my lunch hour at the Whittington & when I got into his charcoal Volvo, I left the London I knew. One minute we floated past the Nag's Head —turning right was just nothing to him, he had the special powers —then we were clicking the car doors shut outside Holloway Prison as if we'd been beamed in like two vampires. Some people just knew they were in control of The Wheel. I couldn't believe the smooth glide down Holloway & up Camden Road. He didn't shake with the steel fear of going as fast as thirty miles an hour, his neck in flames, the cloth stuck to his back. In the prison car park he took out a black belt with a chain & a whistle, *You won't be needing one of these, Mrs McGlinchey*, he said.

BE AWARE OF YOUR ROLE IN THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE SECURITY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT.

3.

With strained ears, I listened, and heard downstairs the grinding of the key in the great lock and the falling back of the heavy door.

THE front entrance was glass & when the automatic doors
closed, fear wrapped me like black plastic. They gave him keys to put
on the chain. There'd been a fight over one of the officer's
girlfriends, someone had a black eye. He thought it was funny.
I thought it was exciting. If only I was a Lesbian.
It would explain Everything & Carl would have to let me go.
Argued, guilt-ridden & mesmerised out of my own mind—
if only I had a doctor's certificate. *This woman is a Certified Lesbian*.
Otherwise it would have to be a fatal accident on the road.
Divorce is out while Negative Equity lasts—Carl was an Estate Agent.
I'd spent so many nights, stiff with worry he'd be killed as
I walked round immobilised blood & alcohol-smelling bodies
on the X-ray table, I just *turned*. If someone had to have the blood
drained out of them, why should it be me? Who took care of Baby.

KNOW THE METHOD OF THE ISSUE, USE OF AND RETURN OF SECURITY KEYS

4.

Monster, give me my child!

CARL earned four times what I earned in the NHS. *That man saved you from the gutter,* Justin said. *Do you ever stop to thank him?* The corridors were buttery-cream, windowless. How did Dr Grey know his way? I imagined dropping crumbs or a ball of scarlet yarn as he unlocked gate after gate & every time, he took out the keys threaded through the pocket of his white coat. Rattling & clanking, we got to a gate where a crowd of girls in grey & white tracksuits holding babies, asked to be let through. *I'm afraid I can't take responsibility for you ladies!* Oh God, why did he say *ladies*! It was bad enough leaving them there. I was ashamed to be beside him. I said if we took a photo the world would rise up against the Injustice. *Sadly it wouldn't, Mrs McGlinchy & you're not allowed to photograph guests of Her Majesty & what would Linton Kwesi Johnson say?* I asked. *Who is he?* said Dr Grey.

BE AWARE OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN THE USE OF SECURITY KEYS

5.

What sort of place had I come to, and among what kind of people?

WOULDN'T you think the Queen would be pure embarrassed to have her guests treated like this? Oh You Irish! said Dr Grey. Matron joked him about *the pool. Allow me to introduce Sister Singh!* HMPS was very correct, he said. I must always refer to myself as Mrs McGlinchy. His long legs scissored under his white coat, speeding me through corridors to the Dark Room—no automatic processer, only wet developing! *I'm grey from writing letters, requesting updated equipment but the wheels are slow in HMPS.* Slow? I'd never seen a manual Dark Room in my life, *Maybe you should write to the Queen?* & then we were where he wanted to bring me. The huge room, lit-up, quiet. Royal Blue pool, HM's Lion shimmering in gold on its floor. *I swim here every Wednesday.* I looked at him. *Yes I know. It's a shame! What a waste! Never used!* His silver fillings caught the light.

A THICK WHITE LINE ACROSS THE ROAD SHOWS THE POINT AT WHICH THE VEHICLE MUST STOP

6.

…for certainly if I had been fully awake I must have noticed the approach of such a remarkable place.

THE portal to Pentonville was not new. The main gate looked
Victorian, big wooden door, thin slat of glass to look out.
An officer let us in & Dr Grey collected his keys, joking about
his lovely assistant & nothing about watching out for the *Pentonville*
prison officers. Only Lesbians were Wolves. The Holloway
visit had been cream corridors & a stinking Dark Room
but this was walking right through the Lion's Den because
the Hospital was in the middle of the prison, a metal
cage with greying canvas hung across the landings to stop
the prisoners from throwing themselves off. I could see the
prisoners' cells with their thick sallow doors. I didn't notice
the smell or the dirt at first. The X-ray room seemed okay.
Another Deane Mobile, a newer unit, a Phillips but the
Dark Room—shit! My neck creaked. Wet developing again.

PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE OUTSIDE WALL. LOOK FOR CRACKS, FRESH PAINT AND TAP WALLS FOR HOLLOW SOUNDS.

7.

I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians…

MANUAL Developing was spoken about by silver-haired radiographers who had mortgages of £9 a month because they'd been around so long & two-inch wobbling ash piles on the end of their Silk Cuts. Moll Finn, who smoked Major & was the only one able for the Roaring Surgeons of Cork Regional, told stories of radiographers' slippery fingers dropping undeveloped gall bladders in the theatre or the radiographer who was also a Ballerina opening the Dark Room hatch to see a Surgeon's Dracula face screaming on the other side. *One fecking fogged film!* said Molly from her funnel of smoke. Wet developing was like drawing water from a well. Or oil lamps & horse drawn carriages & I'd seen one of them already that morning, a glass hearse with black horses & red & white faced mourners, sooty plumes nodding on the horses' heads as they trotted down Holloway Road.

Pentonville's first execution facility originally consisted of a purpose built shed adjoining B Wing. Execution sheds became the norm in most British prisons, after the abolition of public hanging in 1868, (and typically had the trapdoors installed over a 12 feet deep brick lined pit, as drops of up to 10 feet could be given.) They were often used as a garage for the prison van when not required for executions.

8.

I would watch my colonial tongue if I were you.

I GOT a card with a chain that said VISITOR, sat in a cold draughty room, dirty hard wooden benches. Staircase in the corner. The man on the gate rang over for someone to get me. A man came in a black & white check sports coat, grey brief-case under his arm—Dan, a teacher *of Mechanical Drawing*, from Cavan or maybe Monaghan. Or was it Westmeath? It might have been Roscommon. All those counties meant nothing to me—only a memory of the blank map in National School & the Master's roaring whiskey breath, *Point out the town of Athlone!* I rarely met anyone from Cork. *Do you know Oscar Wilde spent time here?* I bowed with an imperceptible nod *& Roger Casement was hanged in the yard.* I did know but I was Undercover & didn't want anyone to know what I was thinking. What was Dan thinking? The officer in the corner had his head down. I looked up the filthy stairs.

The Security Office is situated above and to the right of the main gate. As you would expect all aspects of security are dealt with by this department. The collating of all information however trivial is pieced together with other information to create a better picture of what is happening.

9.

Enter freely and of your own will!

DAN was halfway through reciting *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in the sing-song voice of a child from National School when boots tapped on the stairs & a white-faced officer, Phil, shouted, *Who's for collection?* Desperate banging clanged like there was scaffolding going up as we went through. Where was the centre of the Panopticon eye? *Invented by a Utilitarian*, reminding me of Dora & Justin's tarry-black disgusted eye. *Don't remind me of Utilitarianism please!* Dora said when I rang from Dr Foot's Secret International Line at the Whittington. In the middle of the cage, a giant blonde officer stopped us—Mr Barnsley, the Dark Room Technician. When Dr Grey said Mr Barnsley would show me the ropes, I said, *Pentonville—the Home of Ropes!* & Dr Grey said not to make that joke with Mr Barnsley who'd been taking the X-rays because they couldn't get a radiographer. I should've seen that fierce red flag from the start.

WHEN GIVEN AN IDENTITY CARD YOU WILL BE EXPECTED TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE REVERSE SIDE.

10.

Suddenly, away on our left, I saw a faint flickering blue flame.
The driver saw it at the same moment; he at once checked the horses,
and, jumping to the ground, disappeared into the darkness.

MR. Barnsley'd been taking the X-rays & according
to Dr Grey was the *Best Radiographer* he'd ever met.
I coughed loudly & redly. Dr Grey said, *Do you need water,*
Mrs McGlinchey? Well, you're worrying me, I said, *because I can't do*
wet developing. Oh no need to be jealous, I prefer you, said Dr Grey.
& so I had to follow in the black polished footsteps of the Best
Radiographer Ever who didn't even need to train. He'll be
thrilled to assist, said Dr Grey, his head black against the white
light box, talking into his dictaphone… *Myocardial Infarct… ahem*.
It was like he'd inhaled some sulphurous Tough-Guy prison gas.
Maybe he was afraid to his spirit would be broken by the prison
system. Or was he joking because he'd Very Cold Feet about me
doing the job too. What if the original offer'd been a joke
he couldn't get out of? Were we both trapped?

SHOW AND PHYSICALLY GO THROUGH WITH THE NEW MEMBER OF STAFF THE USE OF CELL AND PASS KEYS AND IN PARTICULAR THE METHOD OF NOT LOCKING ONESELF INTO A CELL.

Orbital Decay

Dan Hogan

1

Dad never tells me this story without adding how one might imagine the scene inside the caravan after so many days exposed to the Cairns humidity. What is it with flies? They come from nowhere. You could be three days dead and alone aboard the International Space Station, floating 420 kilometres above the planet, and the flies will find a way to you, into you, find a way to convert your body into a fleshpod for incubating maggots. I try to force a memory of talking to Grandad Bill on the phone when I was a kid but all I get is the mechanical clang of coins falling into a payphone and the gruff utterance of a happy birthday wrapped in static squelch. Even then, I'm probably projecting. Even then, it's probably just the flies.

2

The only thing I remember about the day Grandad Bill died is plying hot rocks of gravel from the bottoms of my feet in the driveway. Looking back at our house. Someone saying your dad needs a bit of time. Playing *Yoshi's Island* on the Super Nintendo at our neighbour's place across the street. In a photo, Grandad takes a whipper snipper to some feral grass that'd overwhelmed a sand dune. Cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, wearing nothing but his undies. Overexposed sky. Mum is in the foreground, pushing her hair out of her eyes, pregnant with me. Elsewhere in Cairns, seventeen degrees from the equator, the tent my parents are living in bakes like a kiln in the tropical heat, orbited by sand flies. Dad makes sure to disturb me with a reminder that I was conceived in a tent during a thunderstorm surrounded by dingoes.

3

Grandad Bill calling from a payphone in Cairns: 'Happy birthday. The existential misconception that while we love and grieve for the dead, this love lacks social utility is emblematic of the pervasive ways in which capitalism organises us socially and culturally. Life and death and new life and new death are besieged by the machinery of the market economy. People, living or dead, are never people under capitalism. Instead, we are datasets measured against the labour productivity index, gross value added, GDP per capita. A way of remembering the end in advance. So hectic. Anyway, how old are you now?'

4

The first telephone came from the sea. A Cambrian flourish, it beached itself on a desolate stretch of sand early one morning, the first of hundreds of its kind to litter the landscape. Owing to the area's shipwreck-laden waters, sailors and lighthouse-keepers refer to the Iroise Sea in Brittany, France, as 'Hell'. The name 'Iroise' is similarly encoded with clues to the area's lore. It is contested whether it was intended to mean 'Irish', noting Hell as a path to Ireland, or 'angry', reflecting the sea's typically treacherous conditions (why not both?). Ushant, a rocky island and maritime landmark in Hell that borders the Celtic Sea, is encircled by the area's characteristic extremes of current, storm and brume. Mariners viewed the island with fear and superstition: '*qui voit Ouessant voit son sang*' or 'whoever sees Ushant, sees his blood'. Home to the highest density of lighthouses in the world, today Hell is unmanned but its megaliths remain, tentacled by fog, a periscopic ghost town poking out of the sea. Like any ghost town, these ruins invoke the spectre of endings and lives lost. Legends, too: shipwrecks, apparitions, theories of disappearance, origin stories, secrets and, sometimes, telephones. Hell coughed up the first telephone in 1983, and boy, let me tell you, did that telephone love lasagna and hate Mondays.

5

I cannot say with certainty that the description of the birthday phone call with my grandad constitutes the Nielsen BookScan definition of memoir. I do, however, remember the phone. It did not hate Mondays, nor did it love lasagna (singular, North American; not to be confused with lasagne, plural, Italian). I recall its coiled cord and the pin-prick black holes in its receiver handset; being unable to reach the receiver, tugging on its

cord and bringing the thing down on my head. How I would listen to the dial tone because I found it calming. Later, much later, around Christmas time, I asked Dad what Grandad Bill was like. He disappeared into his room and returned with a photocopy of a newspaper article emblazoned with a photograph of Grandad, published not long before he died. On the back of the photocopy somebody had scrawled: this is what he was like:

6

What is memoir if not an ideological playset? And I say this as someone who was almost born on the floor of a call centre. What am I supposed to say in this situation? That the good thing about living in a tent is you don't have to vacuum, but the catch is you're pregnant with me in Cairns in the year 1987? That you're also working as a cleaner in a hospice while heavily pregnant? I must confess, I was born at a very early age [Groucho Marx said this and I have copy/pasted it here]. Do I mention how today I move through the world the same way I move through a staffroom when doing a casual shift? [Do I?] When does one gain permanency in this regard? You know, a staffroom to call one's own. Clown emoji or? What is this tendency towards origin stories (self-mythology) other than what is probably the logical evolution of a specific kind of neoliberal individualism? A tired terminology? Sign me up. What is an origin story if not an icebreaker activity for your first day in hell (HR induction)? Before there was yeet, there was a word for when an enemy throws you out of the window of the Main Character Careers Expo and that word was defenestration.

7

Dramatic indulgences aside, Garfield.

Specifically, the trove of 'personality telephones' resembling the obscenely well-known cartoon cat, Garfield. A real phone that's real fun! Now you're talkin'. Manufactured at the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Garfield phones formed part of Tyco's line of 'Personality Phones'. For 35 years these devices and their components washed up on the beaches of Brittany, their source a mystery. What a fun phone! And now, discovered entombed in a shipwrecked container lodged at the back of a sea cave, hundreds—if not thousands—of the orange things. Launched in 1978, *Garfield*, created by Jim Davis, is the most widely syndicated comic strip of all time. *Garfield*'s rise was stratospheric.

Incorporating his intellectual property as Paws, Inc, Jim Davis's *Garfield* generated a return of more than $15 million on merchandise and licensing in the three years following the cartoon cat's national debut. Scarce is a marketing or promotional material that has not been touched by Garfield since the 1970s; novelty phones, compilation books and plush toys, including a Garfield with suction-cap feet, Garfield dressed as the Easter Bunny and Christmas Garfield. Random House released *Garfield, Eat Your Words* in 1985, a video game compatible only with the Apple II. I played an emulation of the game on Internet Archive and after guessing the first word wrong, Garfield ate a whole lasagna before announcing 'consumption is my life!'

Depicting inane happenings between an orange cat and his earthling owner, Jon Arbuckle, the three-panel comic strip repeats the same joke format ad nauseam. *Garfield* is a humour so denuded of stakes that its veneer of relevancy does not stem from its contents but from its prolific syndication; arguably we entertain *Garfield* more often that it entertains us. In 2015, Guinness World Records ruled that *Garfield*'s circulation in more than 80 countries and historical presence in 2100 publications qualified it as 'the world's most syndicated comic strip'. By any measure, *Garfield* has become an immovable mass, a clump of an almost-half century of merchandise centred around the lore of an anthropomorphised ginger cat. Garfield, however, as a property and a mode of content production, neither acquiesces nor argues with the culture within which it is contained. Rather, Garfield is a vector, a transactional plane, a place where capital goes to accumulate.

8

In gravitational physics, orbital decay refers to the incremental reduction in the distance between two orbiting bodies until eventually one is absorbed or destroyed by the other. In the context of Earth, the higher the altitude, the longer the orbital decay. According to NASA, the orbital decay of space junk at 1,000 kilometres above the planet is a century, at which point the debris re-enters Earth's atmosphere where it disintegrates or, surviving re-entry, crashes to the ground.

9

In 2014 a two-minute video entitled 'Jim Davis and Garfield—By the Numbers' was published to Paws, Inc's official *Garfield* YouTube channel.

Cheered on by a discordant pile of variously sized Garfield toys, Davis talks directly to the camera, boasting about his creation's immense generation of capital and cultural reach. I love you is embroidered onto a red love heart clutched by a plush Garfield centred in the foreground of the frame. Halfway through the clip, Davis apologises to the Easter Bunny, citing Garfield's familiarity as being 94 per cent: equal to Santa Claus and greater than the chocolate-egg-bearing leporid. Davis concludes by thanking viewers for their time, dedication, and 'faith' in the cat. Since at least 2004, Garfield has raked in somewhere between $750 million and $1 billion every year. A real conversation starter! Ask for Garfield wherever phones are sold. Even if we were to seize the means of Garfield production, another Garfield would appear. The internet is a field strewn with uncanny knockoff Garfield merch, including a Neon Genesis Evangelion/Garfield mashup T-shirt and posters, vinyl stickers and throw pillows depicting a disturbingly buff Garfield. In orbital mechanics, the phenomenon in which an object leaks a portion of its own gravity to evergreen its presence is called the Garfield Effect [I made this up but it sounds good].

10

Nothing is gained and nothing is lost when reading *Garfield*. The act of reading *Garfield* is quick and inconsequential. The experience is so fleeting and so severely neutral that its meaning cannot be rendered explicitly or implicitly, but inescapably; the franchise is backlash-proof and frictionless by design. Garfield loves lasagna and hates Mondays. That's it. Many billions of dollars, please. Offering just enough dopamine to keep the consumer coming back, *Garfield* is arguably an analogue precursor to today's digital mode where mindless doomscrolling is a business model. In a comic strip from 1981, a fedora-clad Jon Arbuckle defenestrated Garfield. Seriously though, this is what Grandad Bill was like:

11

Shirtless, clad in flip-flops, lit rollie barely clinging to the edge of a devilish smirk. His body looks like my body. Behind him a rush of clustered lovegrass charges across leaf litter, disappearing into thicket, tropical scrub, old gum trees enwreathed by knotvine left at a lean by Cyclone Sadie. In his hands he holds a sleeping python, rendered immobile by the unfortunate cat it is digesting. 'This python's morning nap was rudely

interrupted when it was found curled up under a caravan. Caravan park resident Bill Hogan—above—removed the snake from under the caravan and returned it to the bush to complete digesting its meal.'

In another photo, Dad and Grandad are standing in a yard in Meanjin/Brisbane, ready for church. It is the most clothed I have ever seen Grandad Bill in a photo. Dad can't be older than seven. Decontextualised, the photo registers as unremarkable, someone else's memento (although Grandad Bill's ill-fitting suit does scream *Stop Making Sense*). For me, the sight of a feral lawn in the background invokes family lore. Sometime during the same period in which the photograph was taken, the tall grass occupying the empty lot next door caught fire after Grandad and his younger brother shot fireworks into it.

12

The story goes: someone called the fire brigade and Grandad grabbed the beers. The attending firemen were supplied with a steady stream of home brew, which they graciously gulped down. In this story Grandad Bill's love of havoc converted palpable tension between emergency personnel, an inferno and two accidental arsonists into a night of drunken merry-making, carousing and firefighting. Or so the story goes.

The fire party would have occurred around the time he was working as a farm hand out west and so the photo was likely taken during a visit to his parents and brother. Before 'going bush', Grandad Bill stood in the middle of the twentieth century with a sack of garbage in each hand. He worked as a garbageman, collecting the household waste of the 1950s. There was also the period of weeks where he found himself in the employ of the military against his will. He was quickly thrown out for insubordination; threats of violence or actual violence, and dispensing havoc with choice phrases, such as 'get fucked'. Grandad Bill was not an activist, but he was an alcoholic. He was ungovernable; the drink ultimately led him to a disused caravan and bottle of methylated spirits on an afternoon in 1996. I hope the last thing he saw was the sparkling Coral Sea. But maybe he hated the water. If he's anything like his son, he would have detested the sea, citing it as the sink of iniquity where fish go to piss, shit and have sex, sometimes all at once.

His landlord provided the caravan in exchange for maintenance work—mowing lawns, cleaning amenities, whatever was needed. On Djabugay Country, north of Cairns City, his caravan was in an area of

scrub out of view of the tourists (God forbid the moneyed should glance the unmoneyed), a great place for grandads and pythons looking for somewhere shady to nap after recently inhaling a feral cat. Grandad Bill always evaded death's hottest offers, until he didn't. Until 1996. And even then, somewhere a landlord

13

is kissing another landlord. What am I supposed to do with this information? Insufficiency only makes the landlord more insatiable. If a past is to possess utility in the present, to what end is it a means?

14

I read the breaking news of the discovery of the origins of the beached Garfield phones on a French website using Google Chrome's unreliable auto-translate. A farmer named René Morvan, speaking to an environmental group, employed a curious phrase. *Sur place, les langues se sont déliées*, which is to say, on the spot the languages are untied.

'There was a big storm. We saw phones everywhere on the beach,' René Morvan is quoted on French news website franceinfo in 2019. He recalls finding a shipping container lodged in a fissure, deep inside a cave only accessible by foot when the tide was low. 'A lot of things were gone, but there was a supply of phones,' said Morvan who, along with his brother, kept their lips zipped for almost 40 years, for reasons that can only be speculated. At just the right intersection of conditions (high tide, solid groundswell, sustained period of forceful winds), the container regurgitates a selection of Garfield parts to the sea like a mother bird feeding its chicks reconstituted worm bits. A pair of eyes, a face plate, paws, the stripy loaf of Garfield's body, sometimes even a whole telephone.

15

René Morvan: 'At the time there were lots of things coming to us from the sea.'

16

Reconfiguration of the proletariat is an ongoing project experienced by the individual worker as fluid grief. Capitalist realism exploits this spiritual atrophy by drawing it into a seemingly inescapable, all-encompassing force. It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Garfield.

Capitalist gravity, then, is the amount of force the worker must overcome in order to unmatch their identity and self-sense from the interests of capital. If only for the purpose of optimising resolve. I use the term 'gravity' because capitalism's totalising force and presence in our lives has collapsed the collective imagination into the anxiety of the individual; the individual who fears they will float away into oblivion if there is no capitalism. Capitalist gravity operates in principle not unlike a celestial body, drawing wealth towards its centre and keeping workers in a slowly decaying orbit around its interests. Capitalist gravity keeps the worker in a constant state of work and recovering from work, manufacturing submission in undetectable increments. Another feature of capitalist gravity is the orbital decay between the collective self and the forces of production. We're at the point where two walls make a corner, where capitalist realism meets climate catastrophe, and we are cornered. The end of the world or the end of history? Pick one and only one. There is no secret third thing. But distancing our interior worlds from the forces of capitalist gravity is possible. Capitalism isn't a planet, after all.

17

Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*: 'Consciousness of being at peace in one's corner produces a sense of immobility, and this, in turn, radiates immobility. An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner.'

18

Computer, show me

19

a mutant colossus of nostalgia. The remnants of a misremembered past. I've got a hankering for Nostalgia Trash. In 2019, a team of environmentalists scrambled over a chaos

20

of rocks where they found the opening of a cave once described only by myth and secrets. The cave's opening is dark and uninviting. Its mouth forebodes. Roaring only when you are not near. Pungent is the distressed Irish moss, suffering as it does during a protracted series of low tides and shallow high tides. Suddenly,

21

what is the opposite of a cordless phone? A cordful phone? The mind boggles. But why is it always the mind that boggles? Why not the horizon or kin?

22

Grandad Bill was always befriending wild snakes. He had a mortal fear of frogs though. This is what he was like:

'I asked him to give me the gun but he wouldn't do it,' said Dad. 'It was a frog that talked your grandad down. A little green thing that hopped onto his foot. The rifle in his mouth was nothing next to your grandad's phobia of frogs.'

'What did you do?'

'Dad threw the rifle on the ground and ran inside. I took the rifle and hid it somewhere. I can't remember where but I remember he didn't find it before he passed out.'

23

The environmentalists find that prospering sea critters have deployed their parasitic powers of adaptability to make hosts of the Garfields. Lift the receiver, and Garfield's eyes open. Occupying Garfield's internal world of electronic components forged in a Tyco factory in the early 1980s, small starfish, sea snails and baby abalone are found to be thriving in the spaces between wires and micro-semiconductors. All the latest features: last number redial and mute button for privacy. Compatible with rotary and tone systems. One-year limited warranty. At the bottom of the darkness, a colony of crabs is heard rattling inside a clump of Garfield telephones fused together by barnacles. When you hang up, Garfield's eyes close. The tide lowers, allowing terrestrial access. Crabs retreat inside the monstrous clump of Garfield landlines as the earthlings unpocket their smartphones, dragging beams of torchlight across the water. *Le mal est fait*. The damage is done, they say.

24

The colonised Irish removed to the colony in the nineteenth century were condemned to lose their histories and folkways, to have their language and struggles repossessed, rebranded and reanimated across time as congruent with both the imperialist impulse and the image of the 'noble

proletariat'. This archetype of the Irish settler persists in the Australian colonial imagination, a symbol commensurate with the union movement (despite the movement's place in the colonial bedrock as an instrument of white supremacy). In the 1870s, a gold-rush village named Home Rule was established on stolen Wiradjuri land in so-called New South Wales. The town and its curious name survive today, and it was Home Rule where trade unionist Edward Grayndler, born to an Irish mother and Canadian father, grew up and attended school. Involved in the establishment of the Australian Workers Union and serving as the organisation's national secretary from 1912 to 1941, Grayndler was a devout advocate of the White Australia Policy, allowing only white workers to join the union. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out in *The White Possessive*, this constant reanimation of Anglo-Celtic fantasies in the form of the 'Aussie battler' or noble proletariat 'has the effect of reducing Indigenous dispossession to a mere blemish on the historical record.'

25

We joke that the local gaol once frequented by Grandad Bill is probably heritage listed now. We pull up in front of what appears to be a Federation-era cottage. That's the cop shop, says Dad. We drive down a side street to catch a view of the yard behind the police station. Dad points to what looks like an outhouse. That's where they used to lock up your grandfather.

Grandad Bill's favourite punching bag was a local bartender who taunted him for being short. If the punching bag was working when Grandad wanted to drink you could bet Grandad would be in custody by night's end. The same bartender would sometimes refuse to sell him takeaway alcohol because his mates were Aboriginal. When segregation was abolished and his Aboriginal mates were allowed inside the pub, the same racist bartender refused to serve them. On another occasion, the same barkeep called him 'Tom Thumb' for the last time. Grandad Bill left and returned with one of his fists wrapped in barbed wire, which is one way of adding a new twist to an old nursery rhyme.

For my dad as a kid, havoc was the uncontained language of survival. Wherever its words fell there was devastation. Commissioning havoc was sometimes a means of raising localised resistance or solidarity, but Grandad Bill didn't call it that. He didn't call it anything. There wasn't a noble bone in his body. When me and Dad took a road trip to Cairns, I thought I might experience something like locating the source of my

family's intergenerational nihilism. I wasn't sure what it would look like or what shape it could take, but I was positive it must be out there somewhere. It wasn't. When we trespassed to where Grandad spent the last twenty years of his life, Dad pointed unceremoniously to a patch of scrub. His caravan was in there somewhere. Neither grief nor puzzlement found me in that moment, but what I did feel was the exuberance of conclusion. There was nothing there but scrub.

26

It is said that when your enzymes lose their shape, they are denatured. Your metabolism switches off and your life concludes. The kind of methylated spirits Grandad Bill drank were a form of denatured alcohol. Industrial-grade cleaning agent. In the same context but along a different track, a denatured spirit is also a grandad stripped of the promise of life. The point where precarity and poverty operate as a form of containment, a corner. This type of death was imposed on Grandad Bill with 'perfect correctness', the kind Friedrich Engels refers to as 'social murder'. Poverty is a political choice; Australia's state-mandated poverty hurries those who it deems 'undesirable' to early graves. Australia knows the extent of devastation wrought by poverty, and chooses to do nothing. As Engels identified of the capitalist state: 'That it knows the consequences of its deeds demonstrates its acts and procedures are, therefore, not mere manslaughter, but murder ... because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.'

27

[Dial tone]

28

In *L'état d'ébauche*, Noël Arnaud writes: *Je suis l'espace où je suis*, or I am the space where I am. On this, Gaston Bachelard writes: 'This is a great line. But nowhere can it be better appreciated than in a corner.'

29

In 2008, the YouTube channel *Lasagna Cat* appeared, uploading twenty-seven live-action re-enactments of *Garfield* comic strips. Production value and depictions are crude but could easily be mistaken as the homemade

workings of a *Garfield* super fan. Portrayed by an actor clad in a sinister-looking knock-off orange cat suit, Garfield interacts with an actor playing Jon Arbuckle. Each re-enactment ends with an excessive laugh track before launching into a clip of the comic re-imagined as a music video tribute to Jim Davis. Couched in parody, *Lasagna Cat* points squarely at the mind-boggling disproportionality between *Garfield*'s colossal cultural and economic capital and its vacuous artistry.

30

Almost a decade later, *Lasagna Cat*'s Jon Arbuckle and Garfield returned to YouTube, urging viewers to call a toll-free number to participate in a survey in which they record the number of sexual partners they've had. In '1 (800) 591-3274', Arbuckle asks Garfield why he is asking people to do this. Garfield's eyes glow robot-red, 'because … I hate Mondays.' In another video uploaded in 2017, John Blyth Barrymore (brother to Drew Barrymore, playing a fictionalised version of himself), looks down the barrel of the camera and philosophises about *Garfield* and its legacy for over an hour straight.

The final *Lasagna Cat* video was uploaded on Friday, 24 February 2017. In 'Lasagna Cat Telephone Sex Survey Results', Jon Arbuckle is seen reading a newspaper on the couch when he's disturbed by a knock at the door. Arbuckle interacts with the visitor, a mannequin voiced by a telephone recording from one of the survey participants, who reveals their number of sexual partners. The frame freezes, a large comic-book speech bubble hanging over the mannequin's head. Colours desaturate and the camera zooms out: the frame is now a photograph printed inside the newspaper Garfield is reading on the couch. There's a knock at the door and the same sequence of events plays out again, but with a different recording from the survey and Garfield answering the door. Next, Odie (Arbuckle's pet dog played by an actor in an imitation dog suit) is pulled away from his newspaper by a knock at the door. This sequence format loops for more than four-and-a-half hours as all the survey results are played out. The newspaper read throughout the video is emblazoned with the frontpage headline: 'TELEPHONE SCAM CHARGED WITH GROSS PRIVACY VIOLATION: UNFOCUSED JOKE GRANTED TOO MANY RESOURCES AND TIME—ULTIMATELY CONFUSES.' The video ends with Jon Arbuckle answering the door to himself as an elderly man. The elderly Arbuckle wanders off, disappearing into a feverish fugue state in

which he remembers his own birth. The final seven or so minutes of the almost-five-hour video are a gruesome display. As the elderly Arbuckle boards a bus with a briefcase stuffed with a taxidermy ginger cat, we hear the voice of Garfield's creator (and therefore Arbuckle's maker, too), Jim Davis. 'Some days I wake up and go "I am funny today", you know,' he says, as Arbuckle, now transported to a mountainous terrain, navigates Alpine boulders. It is here he is confronted with a monstrous Garfield, a grotesque hybrid of human and cat, who rushes at Arbuckle, the movement of his human penis in full view, pendulous in slow-motion. Then the film cuts to the final, graphic scene in which a high school student gives birth inside a toilet cubicle. Speaking in Polish, she tells us that she has given birth to 'humanity's curse' at a cost to her own soul: 'Sick joke. But no one is laughing. My blood will remain. Death isn't the end. I am in hell. This is hell.' She leaves the bathroom. A ginger cat walks across the toilet seat, revealing a baby Arbuckle semi-submerged in the toilet water, tangled in his umbilical cord, clad in his iconic blue button-down shirt. Arbuckle's eyes flash open and the screen does not cut to black. It cuts to orange, Garfield orange, or hex #ff9201 (emphasis on hex?).

31

[Dial tone]

32

Traditionally, long, looping video artworks wash over audiences meandering through art galleries. Instead, 'Lasagna Cat Telephone Sex Survey Results' shows up in viewers' private lives, on phone screens and on YouTube with an audience usually of one. The viewer's exit is not triggered by a self-satisfied attainment of the work's possible meanings without having to watch the whole thing. Instead, 'Lasagna Cat Telephone Sex Survey Results' causes the audience to make a decision about their consumption in a moment that, unlike the social spectacle of the public gallery, is entirely private. To commit (or submit) yourself to 4 hours and 33 minutes of marathonic absurdity quickly converts an individual's intention to experience the 'fullness' of an artwork into an act of consumptive endurance. This conversion feels inescapable, as involuntary as the body switching from aerobic to anaerobic respiration to keep running. You won't be experiencing the artwork but enduring it; enduring the orbital decay between your attention and your consumption.

33

The call is coming from inside

34

the historical maps of ocean currents in the Iroise Sea, combined with a study of the beach locations where Garfield phones have amassed over time, suggests that there are more wrecked caches out there, somewhere, whispering secrets to farmers in the past while stranding lost commoditythings on future shorelines, beaching relics of Mondays despised. A symptomatic reading of capitalism's insistence on the periodic release of Garfield phones upon a beach in France suggests a collaboration between capital and nature. This, too, is just another way capitalism cutifies its unrelenting barbarism. But a world less like Hell can be salvaged from the wreckage of the now; every time the sea churns and another surfing Garfield phone wipes out on the shore, capitalist gravity is perforated. The Garfield Personality Phone has become an unanswered call transferred from current-to-current, stuck on a loop, surfing the point-break of oblivion for at least the next 1,000 non-perishable years. Ask for Garfield wherever phones are sold.

35

The plaque marking where Grandad Bill is buried is framed by a well-maintained trim of buffalograss. Mud oozes from the lawn when it rains and leaves the plaque glazed in a layer of dust after things dry out. I notice a tyre track.

'How do you think that tyre mark got there?'

'That's how,' said Dad, pointing to a worker operating a ride-on lawn mower on the far side of the cemetery.

'Can you imagine how much longer a job like that would take if there were tombstones sticking up everywhere instead of these plaques flush with the ground.'

'No tombstones, no worries,' said Dad.

What We Make as Men

Brendan Killeen

Outside the taxi, it is pouring rain and Robert imagines that Copenhagen is passing by in splashes: alarming reds, ominous ambers, flasher greens, headlamp yellows.

He has an appointment at the Fluid Clinic and the aftertaste of those words lingers in his mouth along with the departing tongue kiss from his wife.

Despite the generous embrace of the back seat, the tight weave of the belt across his chest, Robert has an uneasy sensation of floating, as if on a boat in a growing swell.

He is listening to the audiobook of *The Brendan Voyage*, the epic tale of the sailing of the Atlantic in 1976 by a crew recreating Saint Brendan's journey from Ireland to the new world, in a leather-and-wattle boat, 1,500 years earlier.

Robert has become obsessed with the book and he braces himself as the narrator describes the waves coming in tight groups of three, or harrowing sevens or threes and then sevens, or tens. He braces because there is always one rogue wave slamming from the side, and the stitching of the leather boat groans in its realising.

The impossibility of this true adventure, fed through tiny earbuds and projected onto the back of his closed eyes, forces Robert to clasp his hands as if in prayer, as the boat, baptised *The Brendan*, now seven days and 100 miles out of Bandon, is hit by a fierce Atlantic gale.

He imagines the five-man crew dressed in home-spun woolly jumpers like off-duty computer programmers, fresh-faced and expectant. He imagines them in washed-out yellows, dark browns and extinct oranges, the way he remembers Tupperware, wallpaper, curtains and everything else from the 70s—the era of his boyhood.

Those modern sailors do not pray as their ancient predecessors surely had. Instead, they bend their thoughtful heads and join their pulling arms in a sort of supplication against the wind and sea as with each heave they believe in the strength of what they have made as men. They have no choice. Their families abandoned on the shorelines of Ireland and Norway and beyond pull with the weight of real prayers.

The taxi brakes suddenly and Robert opens his eyes wide. The driver shoots a look at him through the rear-view mirror, then focuses on the crawling traffic as he manoeuvres the car off the main road and into a slipway, ragged on the driver's side—with traffic bollards, locked bicycles and jutting parked cars.

Hooded, head-bent pedestrians dart from the blocks of old buildings on the right, leaning into the rain-drenched wind.

As the car crawls forward, Robert listens to the description of the design and the making of the replica boat.

The words of it, the tools—old, reassuring, manly. The painstaking processes. The smells. The physical endurance and the pain of it. All made more delicious for his lack of understanding.

Awl, flax, pinches, pincers and scribers. Half-moon knives, crimpers and edge-shavers.

Leather thongs soaked in jam jars full of sea water, rolled and dried, flexed and stretched, measured and weighed.

Ox hides trimmed of their upper shoulder and leg skin. Barbed-wire scratches on rejected hides. Warble fly bites on more rejected hides. Piles of good hides, stacked and then bathed in pools of oak-bark liqueur. Hides then dressed with cod oil, beeswax, fish oil, wool grease. Rendered things, distilled to their marrow—their essence.

Ideas, dreams visions even.

Leather thongs dried now, readied and used as lashing.

Scantlings of oak for gunwales. Ash for hull frames and stringers. Lashed with alum-dressed thongs, marinated in tallow and fish oil. Each stretched by hand to reduce elasticity. The hand-lashed hull frame then coated with wool grease.

The pure physicality of it is a taste in Robert's mouth. A smell up between his eyes.

Twenty-three miles of flax thread to stitch hides. Each hand-rolled from fourteen single threads; waxed with more beeswax and wool grease. Back stitch, double-handed stitch.

Then the keel made from oak. Fixed with half-inch copper rivets.

Leather skin tensioned over, rather than fastened, to the hull. Pulled over the upper gunwale, lashed to the lower gunwale with leather belting.

Oars of stout ash.

Robert recalls his last trip to a DIY shop and the splinter he'd gotten while absentmindedly rubbing his index finger along a length of wood. He thinks of this boat built of spittle and swear words and welts and chapped hands.

The taxi rocks again in the wind that has probably travelled all the way from the North Pole, across the ice fields, the northernmost Atlantic, Iceland, the Faroes, to here and now.

Robert's phone pings. It is a series of texts from his wife.

—WTF

—Have you made a bomb?

—This thing is going to explode

—Good luck today

—Love u

There is a video. Robert presses 'play'. The audiobook stops. On his screen he sees a shaky recording of his basement and volcanic bubbling coming from a brewer's bucket with a small airlock in its lid. The bucket contains 24 litres of apple juice that he hopes is turning to cider.

The edges and the lid of the bucket bulge before each great, sulphuric burp is released into the airlock and out from under a small red cap, dancing in the stale breath of the riot below.

'It *is* going to blow,' Robert says to himself, in awe.

The 'cider' has been inert since October. Sitting there, probably turning to vinegar or something worse. In desperation, he'd attended a 'real ale' meeting at a local craft pub. Twelve serious young Danish men came along with their brews and their beards. They had sampled gustily. Three of them had presented their homemade hooch in cans with lavish, commissioned art work. Robert was embarrassed that he was empty handed, that all he had was a bucket of fetid juice in his basement, but he eventually asked if anyone had advice.

The group took the question sportingly and one bearded, tattooed man named Hans Henrik gave Robert his phone number and said he would give him some very powerful yeast.

A week later Robert stood at the back of a dodgy dance studio where Hans Henrik worked—and possibly lived—receiving two small packages.

'Be careful. This shit is strong,' Hans Henrik said. 'Only use half a bag and see what happens.'

Robert thanked him profusely and walked away feeling like a drug dealer. He'd put one full bag into his brew straight away. Two days later he bunged in the second one. Then, as Christmas approached, he forgot about the bucket.

In the taxi, Robert now reruns the video. The bubbles exploding out of the airlock every ten seconds or so give him so much pleasure and make him feel vindicated in some small way. He imagines billions of yeast cells fucking the holy living life out of the sugars from the apples and spewing out great loads of alcohol in a base, bacchanalian orgy of 'making'.

The video ends. Robert looks ahead. He doesn't have the time to make a decision on the juice bomb. He puts his phone back in his pocket.

The windscreen of the taxi is being hammered by hard rain and the wipers whirr and shoosh back and forth, like the flailing arms of a feral robot.

The taxi comes to a sudden stop, causing the Christmas-tree-shaped air freshener to dangle manically from the rear-view mirror. The driver wordlessly reaches for the card machine for payment. This journey has ended.

Robert fishes out his credit card and taps it against the top of the machine. There is a noxious taste of air freshener. As Robert collects his belongings, the driver peers into the wing mirror, ready to push back out into the current of choking, crawling traffic.

Robert crosses the street and walks past a handwritten sign with the words 'Fluid Clinic' on it into a courtyard that is currently a building site, where stacks of scaffolding are being readied as another renovation project adds to the relentless gentrification of the inner city.

In a door and up some stairs and he arrives at a long, dark, narrow corridor that seems, in the midst of all this building work, to be a temporary waiting room, with wooden chairs lined up along the righthand side.

He walks past three anxious-looking young men, carefully spread out with empty seats between each of them, to an office with a counter. A young nurse greets him. She is wearing a mask but her eye-smile is bright and reassuring. She asks for his identity card. Robert scans it, the machine beeps, his appointment appears on the computer screen and the young woman nods.

'You are here for a fertility test after a recent vasectomy, right?' she asks, reading from the screen.

'Yes, that's correct.' Robert feels his face redden.

'Please take a seat and fill in this form.' She gestures at the corridor. She has a small, moon-shaped scar on her forehead and Robert wonders about the details of her life for a moment before he thanks her and turns and walks to the last chair, placed under a small window. He sits, facing the corridor past the three younger men. He thinks of his own sperm that are apparently diverted like traffic. Wandering about his insides looking for something to do until they are simply reabsorbed. Robert tries not to think about his lost sperm.

He sits quietly.

Eventually, the nurse comes out and asks the young man seated closest to Robert to follow her. This man stands, bundling his wet coat close to his stomach. He and the nurse stop under a rectangular sign, reading 'Room 4' and jutting out from the wall like a small bus stop. Underneath, there is a little green light.

The young man follows the nurse into the room, and the door closes. Five minutes later the nurse leaves the room, closing the door gently but firmly behind her. The light turns red.

Robert looks at the two remaining men. They are in their late twenties—which is when young couples are expected to procreate here.

These men are obviously waiting to find out if their sperm is healthy, brimming with life, or at least 'viable', while Robert is waiting to hear his seed confirmed dead. He feels pity for them but also a little for himself and this makes him slightly embarrassed.

The young men look like nervous sailors on a submarine. A submarine that is being hunted quietly at great depth. And like a Sean Connery captain-character in some afternoon matinee, Robert imagines himself addressing the young crew, saying something supportive but stern about their destinies and the future and not being afraid of the cards dealt.

Them standing in a line, shoulders back, erect, while Robert walks up and down, rousing them.

'Sea men,' he would say… or perhaps not.

'Sailors?

'Men.

'It is not… It is not what we ask...'

Christ, what was that great line about not asking something but the other?

Perhaps he'd conduct them in song instead. 'It's a long way to Tipperary'.

Perhaps not.

'Onward Christian Soldiers'—that was more like it.

An alarming drilling begins somewhere in the building and Robert's Sean Connery fantasy disintegrates. He takes the form the nurse gave him from the seat beside him and spreads it out on his knee. It is green, which is the same colour as the walls.

He had expected this process to be intimate or delicate but the form in Danish is frank and some of the questions seem ridiculous.

When did you last have sexual intercourse? Was that the last time you ejaculated? Was it less than twelve hours ago?

Robert fills in the answers with a pen he got at a conference. The ink is pink and looks rebellious, he thinks.

The final question is to be completed after Robert has 'finished' providing a sample: Is the specimen complete or did you spill any?

This question is too much and Robert will not answer it. He may be some sort of eunuch now but he still has an ounce of pride left, somewhere.

Robert folds the almost completed form and leaves it on the seat beside him again. He puts his pink pen away and crosses his arms. He pouts.

When he had told his editor in London that he was having a vasectomy in Copenhagen and wanted to write an article about it, she'd replied, 'Oh Jesus.'

There had been an awkward pause which Robert had decided to inhabit silently. It was something he was learning in Scandinavia: the art of the pregnant pause.

'Okay,' she'd finally mumbled. 'But make it funny. Okay?'

'Okay,' he'd replied.

When Robert had edited the magazine, she had been one of the ferocious young women journalists he had hired to set the place on fire, creatively. She had succeeded, emotionally immolating herself in the process.

He wondered how she would have responded back then if he had suggested she find the laughs in a pitch about getting her fanny worked over by needles, scalpels and a soldering iron to render her sterile.

'I promise, it will be funny,' he'd said, immediately regretting it.

'Great. Let's have lunch when you're back in London.'

'Sure,' he'd said with real enthusiasm because he had no plans to ever go back.

Now Robert takes his phone out and rewatches the video of the cider bubbling gustily in his basement. The contents of that bucket are the culmination of a lot of effort but the effort has been worth it. A satisfying industriousness associated with harvesting and gathering and turning one thing into another. A warmth flows through him and he wonders if this how Lutherans always feel.

Robert thinks of the lascivious apples, plump with rouged cheeks, dropping indecently all over their lawn, expecting to rot in an orgy of exposed flesh and spilled seed. To procreate. Not expecting to be roughly gathered and sorted into the deserving and the undeserving. The bruised and blotched rejected ones tossed unceremoniously onto the compost heap to fester shamefully in the shadows. The chosen ones lined up on the lower step of the wooden deck and made to wait to be hacked and put through an ancient apple crusher that the handle keeps coming off. Sticky juice and apple flesh and skin and seed sprayed everywhere. Then the pouring of the mulch into the beechwood cage of the old apple press and the song and dance of piling wooden plates and blocks, and the rusted red metal plate on top of all, the nut onto the threaded spindle tightened with the long-handled spanner till golden juice gushes out the spout into kitchen bowls of various sizes and shapes.

Robert had been surprised by the abundance of apples in Scandinavia. Even more surprised by the local apathy towards them. That these industrious peoples had never quite figured out what to do with their bounty. Dog-walkers kicked the rotting corpses off footpaths and under bushes, birds pecked at them half-heatedly, gagging. Slugs moved their body-tongues over them moistly, out of habit. Randy moose in Sweden ate too much windfall and got pissed as the mulch boiled in their bloated bellies. Ossified, they went off and humped garden furniture outside retirement homes and swing sets at kindergartens. They often had to be shot by army marksmen.

A door slams somewhere and again Robert looks glumly down the corridor at 'Room 4'. The first young man has not reappeared and Robert wonders what kind of psychological torture the poor sod is experiencing.

Robert reaches into his shoulder bag and searches until he finds a small metal box that had once contained hard-boiled sweets. Inside is a half-

smoked joint of exceptional quality, provided by a connoisseur friend. Robert had sneaked the first half to take the edge off before the taxi had arrived that morning. He realises now that he needs a new hit to take the new edge off what was becoming a morning full of edges.

Robert stands, puts the box in his pocket and walks to the end of the corridor where he locates a single toilet. It is tiny in a way particular to Copenhagen. However, it has a large window that opens out over the courtyard.

Robert opens the window, sits on the toilet and lights the joint.

He closes his eyes and tastes the deep southern tobacco mingle with the eastern promise of the weed. He presses his eyes further closed and sees blues and reds swirling. He takes another hit and then one more. He gives in to tetrahydrocannabinol glory. Swirling gently. Flowering. Painting. Eddies and crests and little boisterous waves.

Robert stands up. He flicks the roach out the window, goes to the wash basin and splashes water on his face. It gives him the sensation of being hit by a gust of rain-soaked wind. Water spills onto the floor and onto his raincoat. He reaches for a paper towel from a dispenser and dries most of the wet from his face. He tosses the damp tissue towards a waste basket and it rebounds in off the wall. He high fives himself in the mirror.

Robert walks back, head bent, to take his seat. He grasps his knees to balances himself. He observes the reds behind his closed eyes, turning bluish-greenish at the edges. Tiny exploding stars, then stark dark lines that begin to form human-like shapes. The colours and play of light are both real and unreal, and remind Robert of Harry Clarke's more fantastic scenes. He sees stained glass brought to a type of leaden life. A vision emerges of monks in a small boat. Robert realises that this is the original leather boat with the Saint navigator and his motley, filthy crew. And Robert sits amongst them, so close that he is almost overwhelmed by their stench.

The crew are agitated. They gesticulate wildly. Robert holds his breath and follows their pointing fingers. At the front of the boat, the Saint finally turns his proud head. He gives instructions in a strange language that Robert recognises as some form of Gaelic. The boat turns sharply.

A massive head appears out of the water.

The crew row manically away from the monster's deadly wash with grim, determined faces and bodies, and Robert wonders what other horrors have been visited upon them on their journey.

Craning his neck to keep the creature in his eyeline, Robert realises suddenly that the hideous leviathan is in fact a huge sperm. It rises, seems to stay suspended in the air for a moment, then collapses in a deluge, sinking headfirst into the sea but leaving its lashing tail high for several seconds.

'A whale sperm,' Robert gasps, clutching his expensive Gore-Tex jacket to this throat like a string of pearls as the monster disappears into the churning depths.

The nurse with the halfmoon scar touches Robert's arm and lands him back in the long, green corridor. He shakes his head like a wet Labrador. The nurse asks him to follow her to Room 10. He walks behind her, past the seated younger men, and keeps his eyes firmly on the back of her head.

'Thank God, it's not Room 4,' he says aloud, as they walk.

The nurse doesn't say anything and Robert assumes it is because she also knows that the room is cursed. He follows her into Room 10.

The room contains a table, a chair, a big, open window, and a TV that is fixed to the wall by a disproportionally large, metal arm. There is also a DVD player. Pornographic magazines sit in a neat pile on the table. A large bin is full of used tissues. There is a soap dispenser, a bottle of hand sanitiser and a sink. Nevertheless, the room feels bare.

The nurse opens a small wall cabinet. She takes out a plastic dish and sticks on a label already printed with Robert's details.

'When you are finished, please put this in the cabinet and close the door. You can then leave,' the nurse says.

'Okay', Robert says.

'You will get the results in your online medical record. Your local doctor will be notified to contact you to explain them.'

'Thank you,' he says, and follows her to the door, which he shuts behind her. There is no lock, and he imagines her activating the red light outside.

Robert returns to the table. He looks at the porn mags and wonders what circus of procurement results in the national medical system providing free pornography to its clients. He opens one of the magazines. The women on its pages are turned in all sorts of yogaesque poses, and he winces thinking of his own lower back problems.

He goes to the TV and DVD player. He pushes a button on the machine and the tiny TV springs to life. A young blond couple with sunbed tans

are fucking vigorously in a kitchen. The volume is turned up and the woman makes outrageous noises like a tennis player late on in a tense semi-final at Wimbledon. Robert lurches and eventually manages to eject the DVD, which pokes out like a dry tongue.

It is quiet now apart from the buzz of two long florescent lights above his head.

Robert collects the plastic dish with his name, date of birth and social security number from the cabinet. He smells the container and regrets it immediately. The other smells are of hand sanitiser and disinfectant and something that may be fear.

Robert pulls his trousers and underwear down in one go, opens his phone and finds a picture his wife has taken especially for the occasion but it is too personal. He goes to a website on his phone where ordinary women send photos of themselves doing all sorts of things, but still in some sort of innocent way. He selects an image of a 40 year-old housewife from Dallas called Cindy. But Cindy is too wholesome.

Robert closes his eyes and begins to breathe deeply.

A tear runs down his face. Another follows and he realises it is actually sweat.

'Awl, flax, pincers,' he begins to recite, rocking back and forth.

'Awl, flax, pincers and scribers.

'Awl, flax, pincers and scribers, half-moon knives.

'Awl, flax, pincers and scribers, half-moon knives, crimpers and...'

He stops incanting.

He imagines a neat rows of tools and immediately feels like a pervert at a Men's Shed.

The half-mended useless shit in vice grips.

Toasters lying in triage on work benches.

The hope.

The late-life camaraderie.

The desperation.

He looks at Cindy again, her cake-sale tits and her pleading eyes.

Robert knows he is in the danger zone, where success could easily become impossible. The ejaculatory equivalent of the doldrums. Cindy is his only hope. She seems uncertain and she has a beautiful smile and that combination works. Cindy works, God bless her. He will write her a letter of thanks via a newspaper or a Facebook campaign or Oprah. He focuses

fully, sweat falling like happy tears. His mission is accomplished and the sense of relief is enormous.

Robert puts the lid on and wipes the container with a tissue. He walks with his trousers still around his ankles to the cabinet. He holds the container in two hands in front of him, like an offering.

He understands profoundly now that he will never have children of his own. That this status will soon be confirmed by official email. The realisation lands deep, lodging in the knuckle of treacherous flesh that is his real heart.

He steadies himself and places the container on the shelf. He closes the door.

Robert dresses and leaves Room 10. Several of the other rooms have red lights now. The corridor is empty. He hurries towards the exit and down the stairs across the cobbled courtyard in the pouring rain and onto the street, where he hauls into himself one deep breath after another. He almost bends over with the effort.

Robert walks towards Nørrebro, the salty part of town, the streets busy with a mix of people not seen anywhere else in the city or the country.

At a red light, he takes out his phone and sees that his wife has added an alarmed scream emoji to the thread with the cider video. He thinks of all the essential life happening in that bucket in his basement. A universe of his making, but largely outside of his control.

Robert places his earbuds in his ears. He opens the story app and hits play on his rain-drenched screen.

He stares ahead, waiting to be transported to where the tiny leather-and-wattle boat battles another storm.

Robert thinks about the cider again. He imagines the spectacular Vesuvius of the possible explosion and it thrills him. Then he imagines the sticky mess all over their basement: the ceiling, the cement floor, the shelves. He texts his wife.

—Rip the fucking lid off.

His eyes stream in the wind and he wipes them with an old handkerchief, wondering if any of his lost sperm made it to his tear ducts. Wondering how much sperm these tears now contain. He imagines crying into a small vial and storing it in his freezer as some sort of totem.

Robert crosses the street under a green light just as his bus comes. He finds an empty seat at the back and closes his eyes as the bus moves into a line of traffic, rocking in the wind.

The waves come in tight groups of three, or harrowing sevens or threes and then sevens, sometimes tens. There is always one rogue wave and the stitching of the leather boat groans in its realising.

Robert sits with the Saint and his crew as they approach the seething coast of the promised land. His suede shoes have never looked more out of place. He tucks them under the rough bench.

The men speak to each other in raspy Gaelic. Brendan stands at the bow, looking like one of those long-haired, bearded maniacs you meet on commuter trains in big cities at five in the morning. The boat crashes through the frothing breakers as the rock-strewn shore approaches.

Brendan sets one foot on the rounded bow, sagging now after its epic journey, exposing his muscular leg to the high thigh. He pulls himself fearlessly up. He braces, squinting into the water, then throws himself into the sea. He wades through waist-high water.

The boat follows.

Robert watches as the Saint sets foot on the shore—heaven on earth. He notices the oily wash around the Saint's soiled feet. The Saint looks down and sees it too. Robert senses the doubt of the great man and knows that this is an unaccustomed feeling in his starved, holy belly.

As the Saint's feet are rinsed, a breeze blows off the land, laden with the sweet, fresh smell of grass and pasture and forest. The Saint's shoulders straighten.

Then a gust from the sea blows the stench of his crew landward and Brendan understands that before and around him is paradise, now befouled.

Tiny waves lap in gentle sevens, but for one rogue that hits Brendan side-on, knocking the holy man to bony hands and knees on the pebbly shore.

FEATURED POET

Rugadh Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha in 1994 agus tógadh í i gceantar an Lagáin in Oirthear Dhún na nGall. Tá cónaí uirthi i gConamara anois. Foilsíodh cuid de na dánta thíos ina cnuasach *Solas Geimhridh agus Dánta Eile* (Barzaz, 2023).

Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha was born in 1994 and raised in the Laggan in East Donegal. She now lives in Conamara. Some of the poems below were published in her collection *Solas Geimhridh agus Dánta Eile* (Barzaz, 2023).

Peter Sirr a d'aistrigh / Translated by Peter Sirr

Do Chailín Óg Nach Ann Di

A mhaoinín mh'anama, dá bhféadfainn d'fhónfainn.
—Máire Mhac an tSaoi

Gach a mbeadh i ndán duit:
stánadh na bhfear, rabhartaí fola,
thar m'fhulaingt a bheadh sé.

Is má leanann tú mise:
drochshúil, starrfhiacla,
's féith na feola…

Mallacht seo na colainne,
a luífidh ar do chúl rua:
an gcuirfinn ort é

ar nós cóta fearthainne
ar do bhealach chun na scoile,
a stóirín nach ann duit?

To A Young Girl Who Isn't Here

A mhaoinín mh'anama, dá bhféadfainn d'fhónfainn.
—Máire Mhac an tSaoi

Everything that's in store for you:
the stares of men, abundance of blood,
would be more than I could bear.

And if you take after me:
poor eyes, teeth that stick out,
struggles with the weighing scales…

This curse of the body,
that on your back too
will settle its score,

would I put it on you
like a raincoat
as you walk to school,

my little one not here?

An Capall, Critérium International 1997

they
Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy
'At Grass'—Philip Larkin

de ruthaig
léim an capall an geata
agus thuirling
de chlagairt
isteach i saithe na rothar

d'fhiar na clogaid
charapáis
siar uaidh,
an capall seo

a raibh
scead ar a aghaidh
chomh geal
le marcanna an bhóthair
ag rith ina measc

trostal na gcrúb
mar a bheadh cnaguirlis
a thionlaic
dord an rubair
agus ticeáil na spócaí

na cosa bhána in airde,
an ruball dorcha crochta
teas ainmhí
i measc ainmhithe eile

an capall
ar dhual dó rith

a aghaidh sa ghaoth
gan adhastar

ag rith le scaoth an rása
ag rith ar mhaithe le rith

The Horse at the Critérium International, 1997

they
Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy
'At Grass'—Philip Larkin

with a leap
he clears the gate
and lands, clattering
among the swarming cyclists

the massed helmets
veering away from him
this horse with his blaze
as white as the road markings
the horse

who's now in the race
the thud of his hooves
like a drum accompanying
the droning tyres and ticking spokes

white feet galloping
black tail dangling

his animal heat spreading
to the other animals
the horse
whose nature this is

face in the wind
unbridled
running with the swarm
running

for the joy of running

Faigheann Bean Lót a Cúiteamh

Ansin d'fhear an Tiarna ruibh agus tine anuas ar Shodom agus ar Ghomorá ón Tiarna. Dhíothaigh sé na cathracha sin, agus an gleann go léir, agus lucht na gcathracha go léir, agus a raibh ag fás ar an talamh. Ach, d'fhéach bean Lót siar agus rinneadh gallán salainn di.
—Geineasas 19

Bhí an eachtra sin le m'fhear céile
agus mo chlann iníonacha chomh fada siar
nach ndearna sé angadh dom a thuilleadh.

Lig mé gach rud le sruth: an fhearg,
an fealladh, an nimh, gach mothú,
go dtí go raibh mé salannbhán.

Agus sheas mé i mo liagán ansin.
D'úsáid na héin chreiche mar chuaille mé
agus d'fhág a gcrúba orm luan fola.

Ba mise an colún amháin san fhásach—
go dtí gur tháinig na Rómhánaigh.

Leagadh go talamh mé
meileadh go púdar mé
bhí tuarastal saighdiúirí le híoc.

Deirimse leat gur leáigh mé
i mbéal an oiread fear.

Lot's Wife Gets Even

Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and that which grew upon the ground. But Lot's wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt.
—Genesis 19

All that business
with my husband and my daughters
was so far behind me
that it didn't rankle any more.

I let it all drift away: the anger,
the betrayal, the poison,
until I was whiter than white,
until I was salt.

And then I became
a standing stone
vultures perched on, their claws
streaking me with blood.

I was the only pillar in the desert
until the Romans came.
They knocked me down
and ground me to powder

to pay the soldiers.
and this is my story:
how I melted in their mouths,
the legions of men.

Oíche Sheaca

Tá an sioc ag cnagarnach
faoi shála tanaí mo shlipéar.

Cheal scamall, cheal solais,
tarraingíonn an ghealach
scáth ó bhun mo chos
a shiúlann taobh thiar díom.

Drithlíonn an talamh
agus an spéir araon,
agus tá an t-aer chomh briosc,
chomh gléigeal sin,

go gcloisim laiste an dorais
i dteach i Ros Muc

go n-airím grágaíl an asail
sa gharraí i gCill Chiaráin,

go mbraithim solas tí á lasadh
i dtigh Val thall,

achan phána den fhuinneog
á líonadh le hór
ceann ar cheann,

agus sonraím ansin
mearcair an dáin ag ardú
i bhfeadán mo cholainne.

Icy Night

Frost crackles
under the thin heels
of my slippers.

Few clouds, little light:
the moon pulls a shadow
from the base of my foot
that walks behind me.

Earth and sky
both glittering,
the air is so brittle,
so brilliantly clear

that I hear the latch
of a door in Rosmuc,
that I can hear the braying
of a donkey in Cill Chiaráin

and feel
the lights coming on
in Val's house,

each pane of the window
lit by gold,
one after the other

and it's then I feel
the mercury of the poem
rising
in my body's glass.

Áit Dhúchais

Is ar éigean a thabharfá dó barróg—
tá
eadraibh
fál
ard
na
cúirtéise,

ach ina ghné agus ina chaint
athchruthaíonn sé duit an ceantar
inár tháinig sibh beirt i méadaíocht.

An cailín
a mhair san áit sin
ar feadh ocht mbliana déag:

brúchtann a gáire aníos asat,
deargann do ghrua lena fuil,
buaileann do chroí lena díograis,

agus éiríonn do ghuth
chomh ramhar le leite.

Ní hé go raibh tú i ngrá leis,
ná go bhfuil anois,
ach go gcuireann sé
i gcuimhne duit fós
an tusa a chónaigh tráth
i gceantar sin na gcnoc:

áit ar shín
na páirceanna eorna
ina bpaistí óir
thar fhíor na spéire,

agus ar lá gaoithe,
áit a mbíodh
tonnta órga eorna
ag briseadh ar aillte
na bhfálta …

Anois i gcathair an Iarthair
ina dtéann tú go scaoilte
le d'ainm bréagach,
le do chaint uisciúil
sa dara teanga,

bíonn dúil agat uaireanta
tiontú ina threo,

le sleamhnú
frí bhearna

i bhfál
sin

na
cúirtéise –
agus tú féin
a chuachadh,

i gcúinne ciúin
den pháirc eorna
a shamhlaíonn tú
ina chroí.

Home Place

You'd
barely hug him
    there's this
    thick hedge
of politeness
    between you

yet the way he looks
the way he talks
    he creates again
    the place you both
grew up in

the girl
who lived there
for eighteen years

her laughter
bursts from you
    her blood
    reddens your cheek
your heart burns
with her fervour

and your voice
     thickens
like porridge

    it's not
that you were in love with him
then or that you love him now
    it's that
he reminds you
    of the you
who once lived
in that rocky place

where the barley
stretched golden
    under the sky
or broke in waves on the hedges
when the winds raged

now in this western city
where you wander freely
with your made up name
and watery talk
in the second language

you sometimes want
to turn towards him

    to slide
through a gap

    in that
hedge of politeness

                and huddle
                in a quiet corner
                of the barley field
                you imagine
                his heart must contain.

Iarfhocal: ar ais ar an N15

Tá na cuimhní seo do mo leanúint
sa charr sin i mo dhiaidh.
Tugaim sracfhéachaint
sa scáthán cúil
agus is tú féin, a Chuirithir,
a shamhlaím ag an roth stiúrtha…

Cheap tú gur mhór mo mhíne:
dá bhfeicfeá anois mé,
doirse na gcillíní ar oscailt
agus muid faoi sholas an lae,

d'fheicfeá
gur garbh mo ghnúis,
gur ramhar mo chorp,
gur giobalach mo ghruaig.

Ghráigh mé
an leagan díom féin a chonaic
le solas coinnle do cheana.

Is uaidh sin
a ghoid mé uait
lasair an dáin…

Ná ceil é!

Is mé Liadain,
thug mé grá do Chuirthir.
Is fíor a deirtear.

Is an lasair a ghoid mé uait
le go gcuirfinn síos tine—
d'éalaigh an lasair ón teallach arís
blianta ina dhiaidh
ina craos tine
agus scoilt sí mo chroí
ina dhá leath;
is cinnte nach mbuailfidh sé feasta

Afterword: back on the N15

Memories tailgating me
in the car behind…
I glance in the rearview mirror:
is that you, Curithir,
at the wheel?

You thought I was so fine:
if you saw me now
the cell doors are open
and the stark light of day streaming in

you'd see
my face is rough
my body run to fat
my hair unkempt

I loved
the version of myself I saw
by the light of your affection

and from that I stole
the poem's flame

Don't hide it!

I am Liadain
I loved Cuirithir
what they say is true

and the flame I stole from you
to kindle my fire
years later
escaped from the hearth
in a fiery blaze
that split my heart in two
and will never strike again.

Translator's Note

On 27 November friends, family and admirers will gather in Gdańsk to celebrate the life of Paweł Huelle on the first anniversary of his death, aged only 66. Gdańsk is duly proud of this writer, whose work is often set in and around the city where he was born and lived all his life. Gdańsk was, however, his parents' adopted home. Like the narrator's parents in 'The Bridge', they were resettled after the Second World War in the newly Polish city—formerly the Free City of Danzig—where they met and rebuilt their lives after suffering harrowing experiences; as in many Polish family homes, the traumas of the past were not discussed openly. But Huelle had a unique talent for combining elements of family history and reality with pure imagination to produce extraordinary fiction. This story is made up; nothing of the kind ever happened to Huelle or his parents, though the gully where the railway line once ran is real, and also appears in Huelle's first novel, *Who Was David Weiser?* In 2013, a new railway line was built along the same route.

When I read Huelle's final collection of stories, *Talitha*, 'The Bridge' was one that stood out as a perfect example of his exquisite writing, among the very best Polish fiction I have had the privilege to translate. He is sorely missed but his work lives on.

Antonia Lloyd-Jones, November 2024

The Bridge

Paweł Huelle
Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

For Billy O'Callaghan, the best of the best Irish writers

The snow had various smells. The first, in November, when large flakes of it fell silently onto the withered forest litter and beech boughs, had an innocent freshness. It was like the crystal-clear air blown in from the mountains to the coast. The December snow heralded the Christmas holidays and contained other, domestic aromas: of cakes, cinnamon, nutmeg, fish swimming in a wooden tub, dried mushrooms, fir trees and candles. The January snow combined the smell of woollen hats, gloves, ski wax and sunshine on the slopes of Niedźwiednik, where my father and I schussed downhill, raising silver clouds of shining powder. Especially on Sunday mornings, when the sound of bells came flying over the hills, echoing again and again in the valleys. The worst snow was in February. It smelled of the burden of dull, hopeless nights, when the Russian tsar crept into my dreams, chasing shackled exiles through the blizzard. Awoken by Maria, the Kashubian, in the kitchen gloom I would swallow some loathsome porridge and head off to school, arduously sinking in snowdrifts and the greyness of the rising day. But the March snow smelled completely different. Even before the thaw one could scent reawakened streams beneath its crust, and on the surface that faint odour, only recognised by experienced senses, of leaf buds not yet there to be seen, but already set. So it had always been, but that year the spring came after a two-day hurricane at shocking speed in the first days of March. With no restraint or self-control it swept away the snow, woke up the birds, unfurling over the forest and garden not the smell of snow but of unfettered, damp, deep-breathing earth. I would go outside in my

galoshes to inspect the pitiful remains of my snowman. A small patch of grey-and-brown snow, a rotten carrot, lumps of coal for eyes and a hat made from an old basket—that was all that remained of Mr Maurycy, as the snowman had been named throughout the recent winter.

When the first rain fell, fog came crawling from the sea. Thick as cotton wool, it coated everything in a languid shroud. From my bedroom window the wall of the beech forest wasn't visible, nor was the road or even the garden gate. In this milky veil the engine of a lorry suddenly came wheezing and then cut out. I heard several male voices, including that of my father, who was clearly giving orders.

'Gentlemen, first the biggest one. But be careful, it's full of glass. This way, please!'

Across the porch and into the hallway two porters carried a large crate of the kind one sees at the harbour. They set it down on the floor and wiped the sweat from their brows. The difficulties began on the steep, narrow wooden steps that led upstairs, and on to the attic. At last, after some breakneck catches and dangerous moments when it looked as if the crate would go crashing down, the cargo came to a rest underneath the roof. The four crates that followed were much smaller. Diverted from our occupations, Mama from her sewing machine and I from my homework, we watched this operation in amazement. My father hadn't said a word about it earlier. Now he and the porters were standing in the hallway, from where the dining room and the passage into the kitchen could be seen through the half-open door. He was counting out some banknotes.

'You've got yourself well set up, Engineer,' said one of the men. 'A house like this, by the forest, what a dream.' As he spoke he was gazing at the sideboard, the large table and the picture above the sofa in the dining room.

'It's not a house, it's a cottage,' said my father, looking him straight in the eyes. 'Kitchen, dining room, two small rooms upstairs. Frau Burger had no one left anymore. She swapped it for our flat. Now she's close to the tram and the shops.'

'Did you have to pay a big top-up?' asked the other porter.

'None of your business,' replied my father. 'This is for the driver, keep the change.'

I was astonished by his reply. He never addressed anyone that sharply. Quite rudely. But at lunch he was brimming with good humour.

'Now I can start my tests,' he said, rubbing his hands together. 'They didn't want me at the polytechnic so I'll manage on my own.'

'But where are we going to dry the bed-clothes?' asked Mama.

'What do you mean? In the garden! We only have to put up a few more lines.'

'What about in autumn when it starts to rain? Or in winter? How do you imagine that?' Mama was plainly worried.

'Well, I'll do my work among the sheets and pillowcases. Like behind screens.' As he set about the cherry compote he glanced at me. 'You can help me to carry the table upstairs. The old one from the shed.'

Maria, who ate her meals with us without ever speaking beyond an announcement such as 'I'll fetch the cucumber salad', couldn't hold back this time.

'What are you going to test, sir, if there aren't any patients?'

My father smiled mysteriously and said: 'It won't mean much to you, but all right. For years I've been interested in chaos theory. In a way, the concept of chance. Theoretically. Now the time has come for some experiments. I got a belated annual bonus and a prize for launching the Kaliningrad, a ten-thousand-tonner. All that'—here he pointed at the ceiling—'was actually paid for by our Soviet comrades.' He all but sniggered. But Mama was not in a laughing mood.

'A new washing machine,' she began to list, 'glass for the growing frames, the porch steps, paint for the fence, armchairs, repairing the veranda, are you trying to say they're doomed? Unnecessary? I can't earn the money for all that by sewing.'

'Doomed, doomed.' My father sobered up. 'The washing machine still works, the growing frames have no holes, I'll make the steps myself in the shed and install them. I'll fix the veranda during our holiday—we agreed, didn't we, that we're not going away this year.'

'Right,' said Mama, rising abruptly from the table. 'Maria, would you please bring the tea upstairs? I'm going to read my book.'

Silence fell, except for the old German clock that Frau Burger had left us, measuring out the time with steady, slow-motion ticking.

For the next week my father vanished after lunch into the attic, from where various noises came. The house was filled with shifting, knocking, drilling and sawing as if the roof were being repaired. No one was allowed inside. But finally the day came when we were invited into his

new lab. Mama repeated several times that she wouldn't set foot in the attic, and that if the washing had to be hung up not even Maria would go upstairs—my father would have to do it himself. He wasn't in the least upset. He bowed in my direction, which meant both assent and an order, as if to say: 'You're coming after me.' I followed him up the creaking steps, which now seemed even steeper than usual, more like a ladder than stairs. Inside the lab there was mild semi-darkness; narrow streaks of light were making their way inside through the small windows, not entirely covered with black paper, and on the long table once used for carpentry, amid numerous small retorts, stood two transparent boxes resembling fish tanks; beside them was something resembling a glass icebox, a spiral one-and-a-half-metres high and all sorts of other mysterious devices.

Then in a loud voice my father said: 'Let's make it bright!'

At these words he flicked a switch, and just like at the theatre, down from the ceiling strong streams of light came pouring onto selected points on the tabletop. I glanced upwards in delight. There was a set of headlamps fixed to two rails suspended from a rafter. You only had to turn an ebonite knob, as on a radio, and the lamps shone more or less brightly.

'You can come down to total darkness,' explained my father, 'when it's dark outside, or light up the room, like this, to full brightness.'

'Like sunset and sunrise,' I said.

He cast me a glance of satisfaction at this comparison.

'Or rather sunrise and sunset,' he corrected me. 'That's the order of things. First the sun rises, and then it sets. Not the other way around.'

It took me a while to notice a fair-sized photographic camera standing a little further off on a tall tripod.

'This is the latest model,' said my father, unable to conceal his pride, 'with a set of lenses. It can take lab photos every quarter of a second. Can you imagine? And here,' he said, approaching the end of the table, 'you have two stopwatches with automatic setting.'

'But what's it all for?' I asked, shyly.

'In your own time you'll find out at least enough to understand a little. But off you go now. Mama will be cross with me for distracting you from things that really matter.'

That day, sitting for ages over a Russian composition, I wondered what things really mattered. When Mama came back from the Resurrectionists,

where with rosary in hand she could spend over an hour before the image of the Virgin Mary, my father would address her with irony.

'She's an old pagan goddess adopted by the Church, because that suited its purpose,' he would say. He only went to Mass twice a year, recognising just Christmas and Easter, if it was recognition, and not just compromise, a temporary capitulation to Mama. One time when I said that in religious instruction Sister Agnes had been discussing the creation of the world in the first book of the Bible, my father bristled.

'And which description did she muddle your heads with? In the first one, first of all God created the universe, meaning the sky and the earth with all the miracles of nature, and lastly mankind, Adam and Eve. In his own image and likeness! In the second version there's talk of how the earth was still barren when the same God moulded man from dust and breathed life into him. Which version is true?'

Yes, my father was always heated on the point of religion and science. He regarded the former as a muddy image, unclear and full of contradictions, and the latter as man liberating himself from a playpen full of fairytales and nonsensical childhood fantasies. But now—when he was building a laboratory in the attic—didn't it mean crossing from a feverish state into a state of madness? Mama had her secrets too, but she certainly wasn't at risk of insanity. I knew she had got her devout attitude to the Virgin Mary from the war. She also used to appeal to her—as woman to woman—for me to have a brother or a sister, who somehow refused to appear in the world. But these were not entirely hidden matters. Since we had come to live near the forest, she often went into the meadows and sun-drenched clearings, or by the stream to pick herbs. Aaron's rod, camomile, tansy, celandine, salvia, mint, gentian, fenugreek, St John's wort and many others I couldn't name. She dried armfuls of them in the attic or in the garden shed, depending on the weather, then put them in little linen bags that she supplied with a name and the exact date when they were picked, then hung up in neat little rows on a long pole fixed to the pantry ceiling. She didn't sell them, but if anyone of her acquaintance had an ailment, she could instantly offer help. Like this she cured my father's warts, my sore throat many times, and the Resurrectionist priest, Father Dudak's heartburn. The genuine mysteries included the moonlit nights when she would go outside to pick herbs in the bright, pale glow. On those occasions my father would tap his forehead, but offended by him, one

summer night Mama took me with her to a clearing studded with large stones. She looked like a sorceress holding a thick cane, on which she propped herself as she raked aside the grass in search of herbs.

'Do you know why it's worth picking them by moonlight? Listen carefully: when there's a full moon, they have the greatest power. The moon has an effect on oceans, women and herbs.'

I didn't know why the full moon should affect my mother, but I kept quiet, absorbed by the sight of her leaning low with her sickle to cut off longer or shorter stems, which along with punnets of flowers she put into a large canvas bag slung over her shoulder like an army knapsack, as the bright glow strong enough to read the newspaper headlines by, lit up her jet-black hair pinned back with a silver clip. The forest was full of mysterious sounds and signs—now and then a twig snapped under a roe-deer's hoof, an awoken hawk cried, or an owl hooted, while fireflies twinkling with golden light flitted among the hazel leaves and beeches. But Mama's real rituals involved trees. According to the season and the month she would tie a piece of red yarn around the trunk and mutter some words to herself. It was like a prayer, but—I thought to myself—if you can pray to the Virgin Mary, can you also pray to trees? Each one had its season. First, in spring, it was the birches with their net of green, newly sprouted leaves. Mama would walk around the white self-sown trees, tenderly winding her red yarn around their trunks, and then she'd stick birch twigs into the gaps along our fence, as if to barricade us from the rest of the world. In July for example she'd snap off hazel twigs—always in the shape of the letter Y—but earlier, in June, she'd worship the holly, and also the rowan tree, which she saw as special; she'd use its fruits to make liqueurs and preserves. Every year, when the summer holidays began and I'd start cycling to the beach, she'd walk around the old ash tree on the hill, and shave off a little stick of it, because ashwood gave protection from drowning. 'By the feast of John the water's getting warm,' she'd chant, as she strung a small rectangular talisman onto the Virgin Mary medallion around my neck.

That summer—being an excellent seamstress—she had been hired to work for the opera. In the holiday period they lacked professionals, and the premiere was to be unusually early, straight after the summer break. I liked to go there on rainy, overcast days, when there was no fun to be had at the beach in Jelitkowo or Brzeźno: three women leaning over a

lamp, sometimes spinning one, and sometimes three separate threads looked incredible. I usually waited for the moment when one of them would cut the thread with tailor's scissors. It would fall to the floor slowly, in flourishes. My father meanwhile—as if taking advantage of Mama's temporary absence until late in the afternoon, would plunge more and more deeply into extremely complicated theories, calculations and speculations, to which I had no access. But occasionally he let me into the lab to demonstrate an experiment or announce a new theory. I remember those two enormous fish tanks, now filled to the brim with water. From two containers, placed at identical points above each of the glass tanks and filled with the same essence the colour of brandy, in the same split second my father would release the liquid into both tanks and couldn't withhold his emotion.

'Just look,' he'd say, pointing, 'the temperature and composition of the water in both vessels are identical. The essence is poured into the tanks from the same height under the same pressure, because the height of the column of liquid in both matching dispensers is identical. And then what? Look! The fluid dissolves in each tank differently. You see? In the left-hand tank, as it disperses in the water, the dye takes the shape of a mushroom cloud. But it's upside down. In the right-hand one the dye takes other shapes that we might compare, for instance, to a Christmas tree.'

'It's like when your pour milk into tea. Or coffee. It's always different,' I said.

'Quite so.' My father smiled gently. 'But why is it always different? The planets revolve along predetermined paths. You can predict their precise future position to the very minute, hour, day, month or year. You can also determine their position in the past. For example you can tell what position Mars was in on the tenth of January in the year 49 BC, when Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Shortly after he was to clash with Pompey. Have you heard about that?'

'No, we haven't done that yet.'

'And you won't.' My father shook his head pitifully. 'The schools of today treat our history the same way as the exact sciences.'

I was tempted to pester him to explain what he meant by our history; I knew at least that that Caesar fellow was a Roman and lived in ancient times, when there can't have been any Poles yet. Luckily he went back to his main theme, now feverishly excited.

'Look again after almost a minute! In the left-hand tank the essence has already dissolved. In the right one it's still forming the last scraps of fantastical shapes. Unlike the motion of celestial bodies that I've just mentioned, nothing here is predictable, so in this case nothing can be established. As if it weren't matter. But it *is* matter, the same as the kind the universe is made of! Here we come to the crux! Combining these two liquids means turbulence, confusion, chaos. Every time it's different! In unstable systems, as with the liquids, small initial differences quickly lead to very large differences in the entire system. I've calculated it all on slide rules, look!'

I saw some large sheets of paper spread out on the table. They were covered in graphs, multi-storey equations, symbols and underlining—it looked like an unfamiliar foreign language that my father had only chanced to master for a while and had then been in a dreadful hurry to write down his discoveries and secrets in it. I couldn't make much sense of it. But the words 'stable' and 'unstable', 'chaotic 'and 'predictable' stirred my imagination and stayed in my memory forever. I was yet to learn the biggest secret, its time was bound to come, it was silently approaching, it was very near. Meanwhile my father was growing more and more taciturn by the day. Withdrawn. I discovered that at night, when we were all asleep—Maria in her little room, I in mine, and Mama in the bedroom—my father would slip out of the lab, where he slept alone more and more often, very quietly descend the stairs, and then leave the house for at least an hour, always with a large sack under his arm.

I decided to investigate. As if tailing a thief, hiding behind doors, I followed my father, who went through the garden gate and into the forest. He didn't go very far. A hundred metres further on there was a deep ravine, in fact the cutting for a defunct railway line that no train had run along since the war, and that for years had consisted—as here—of nothing but the abutments of blown-up bridges and viaducts. For a while my father stood motionless with his face turned up towards the sky, which happened to be starry, perhaps studying the propitious—or inauspicious—constellations. Suddenly I saw him take a rope out of the sack, roughly the kind that's used on a tugboat, tie it to the remains of a cast-iron railing on our side, roll it up and hurl the other end into the ravine; then he vanished into its gulf before reappearing minutes later on the opposite slope, which he slowly climbed, tied the other end of the

rope to the concrete abutment, froze again for a moment and stepped onto the rope. Slowly, very cautiously, he took his first steps. And walked across the chasm ever more confidently, with his arms spread wide, like an acrobat. I was petrified with amazement, not terror. I felt a sort of subconscious certainty that he knew what he was doing and wouldn't fall. And that he'd secretly made the crossing to the other side many times before. But what did it have to do with the attic? With his scientific experiments?

I didn't reach home in time. He stopped me on the stairs.

'What are you doing here at this time of night?' he asked.

'It's hot. I went down to the kitchen to get a drink,' I lied.

'Then why aren't you in your pyjamas? Why the trousers and shirt?'

'I went on reading for ages, I'm only going to get changed for bed now.'

'I didn't see a light in your room.'

'I was using a torch. Mama tells me to put out the light at ten.'

'Next time take a glass of compote up to your room. I'll talk to Mama. Now off to bed with you.'

But for ages I couldn't sleep. What I had seen above the gully filled me on the one hand with admiration and on the other with fear and trembling. Who was my father? Maybe he was a madman? If he hadn't lost his mind doing calculations and experiments, he had clearly lost it walking a tightrope across a chasm. Why did he do it? To prove to himself or to someone else…. what exactly? Perhaps I should tell Mama? Or let him know that I knew. But what would happen then? As far as I knew him, he never gave up on what he planned to do. So he'd simply carry on, but at odds with us. That wasn't a good solution. But for a while my quandaries were set aside. Two or three days later my parents exchanged remarks on the subject of my summer holiday.

'Take him somewhere for a week at least. To the lake or the mountains,' Mama insisted. 'You have overdue leave, not like me.'

'He can cycle to the beach with his friends. It's guarded, and he's an excellent swimmer.'

'The beach, the beach.' Mama was irritated now. 'How many times can you go to Jelitkowo or Brzeźno? What do you imagine? He'll get more and more bored. What's he going to tell them when he goes back to school? That he spent the whole summer at home?'

Surprisingly, my father agreed without further debate. A day later, with our rucksacks on our backs, we got off the tram at the top of Marchlewski Street, from where it wasn't far to the station in Wrzeszcz. I liked this street because of Mrs Wójcicka's lending library. After an overnight ride in a delayed train to Kraków we missed the Katowice to Rzeszów stopping train, but finally found a rickety old bus to Sanok. It drove along in a heatwave for hours and hours, until finally breaking down entirely, by a river. The sun had not yet set. Its long, diffused rays bathed the river and an old ferry in the sort of light that would soon soften the contours of the hills, trees and wooden cabins before they finally sank into darkness. In front of the ferry some women in headscarves were loudly talking to some tipsy youths. Now and then loud laughter rang out. A concertina began to play. The strong smell of the river that filled the air was streaked with shag tobacco, herbs from the nearby meadows and the odour of horses that were patiently pricking up their ears. On the other side of the river my father decided that we wouldn't go down the asphalt highway, but across a pass, spending the night in a hayrick. And so it was. We reached Koprownica the following afternoon. Beyond the village stood a large villa, in fact a small manor house, surrounded by oaks and linden trees. In a wild, neglected garden with forking paths I saw people in pyjamas, dressing gowns and old jackets. Some of them, walking along slowly, were making strange gestures. I watched them come to a stop every few steps, now staring at the ground, now at the sky. Some were led along by nurses, while others were sitting on benches, staring into space with a dull gaze. An old woman in a woolly cap was repeating a prayer.

'Until the war ended this is where I lived with your grandmother and my brother, in other words your uncle. This was our house. You've seen it in a single photograph. That window is my old bedroom. As soon as they threw us out, and we left with just one suitcase, they made it into a lunatic asylum. There are storerooms in the stable. Wait here, I'll go and find Dr Herkus, he's the senior registrar. I've corresponded with him.'

I felt ill at ease in the garden full of abnormal, unhappy people. An old man with three-day stubble and several front teeth missing asked me: 'Hey mate, got any shag?'

I did not. He grabbed me by the arm, and as if making a revelation, quickly, so others wouldn't learn his secrets, he started to explain strange things to me. About White Water, a miraculous land, to which I should

find a ford across the sea. There were more than a hundred Orthodox churches there. The people in this land were equal—there was no master and no slaves. The power was held by the priests, who even in winter went barefoot, and were so holy that not just at night, but also by day you could see the haloes above their heads.

My father still hadn't emerged from his family home, evidently mired in there with the manager of the asylum, while I, still listening rather inattentively to talk about the mythical White Water located on hundreds of islands somewhere beyond Siberia and beyond China, suddenly thought of Mama. Wasn't she just as crazy as my father, though in a completely different way? Where did she get her stories about the birds? Such as the one about the swallow: if anyone plucks out her children's eyes when they're in the nest, and she finds them blind, she goes and fetches herbs that she puts on their eyes and they instantly regain their sight. Or about the skylark: if you bring one to a sick person and the bird looks him in the face, it means he'll die. But if the skylark doesn't look at him it means he will recover. Where did she get this information? Not from observation. So where? The old man finished his sing-song tale.

'I am an envoy from the Holy and Highest Mountain, my name is Andrei Shiyemash. Will you remember, boy? Please announce it to the whole world. Before the world collapses.'

I was tired of this by now. Luckily my father was approaching.

'We're staying the night here. Dr Herkus has offered us a guest room. Tomorrow we'll travel on to Trzemboszka.'

I couldn't sleep. My father tossed from side to side and snored cruelly. From the neighbouring rooms and the ones on the ground floor I heard occasional groans, shouts, and knocking. Finally I dressed and quietly left the house. A crescent moon was shining. At the end of an overgrown path I found a shattered statue lying in the bushes. It was really just the bust of a woman with a beautifully shaped head. For ages I gazed at her face. Closed eyelids, full lips, a delicately shaped nose, and ringlets falling to her nape—it was all incredible. Slowly I knelt down before the Beauty, and even more slowly I kissed her, first on the cheek, then on the lips. The chill of marble ignited me, shot right through me. I knew I would never tell anyone about it, not even the priest at Easter confession.

Next day at dawn we set off from Koprownica, first along a rural road, then straight after an abandoned wooden church we went up a mountain

path. It was a sharp uphill climb, sometimes very sharp. Our rucksacks felt twice as heavy. But up on the pass I realised what the effort of mountain-climbing is for. The grass was lusher here than on the beechwood hills at home in Oliwa, with a warm wind from the south stirring them, and in all four directions—wherever you looked—from behind one mountain ridge rose the next, and beyond that yet another, and another, all the way to the horizon, as if a world existed with no dirty suburbs, smoking chimneys, factory walls, slag heaps, scrapyards, rubbish tips, ruined houses and burned-down granaries. As if this were the third day of the world's creation. But where was the truth? If not in mathematical equations, if not in trees and herbs, where could it be found? On a mountain pass these questions spring to mind of their own accord. But I didn't want to put them to my father: silently lying there with his feet propped lightly on his rucksack, a blade of grass in his mouth, he was gazing at the cloudless sky. Is that the look of a man who's contemplating chaos theory and chance? Is that the look of a man who walks a tightrope across an abyss at the site of a non-existent bridge? This second thing was bothering me more and more, I felt I must untangle it, unlike the turbulence and unstable systems that keep the scientists busy.

Just like Koprownica, we reached Trzemboszka late in the afternoon. Here my father rented a room from a farmer with food for four days. We ate our suppers by the light of an oil lamp, with moths circling around it. Wholemeal bread with home-made butter, potatoes, blueberry pancakes and sour milk. On the first evening my father unfolded an old Austrian army map of the area on the table and drew a finger along the routes of our planned hikes. But first of all, early in the morning, we went to the edge of the village, beyond a crossroads, where at the foot of a hill a stream flowed out of a karst spring. The quite large rectangle of a former orchard with rows of pear, cherry and apple trees gone wild was thickly choked by self-seeded saplings. Amid all this abandon the foundations of a house remained. Close to, we could see cellars covered in moss, and at the corners, leftover bits of wooden walls destroyed by fire, then snow and rain.

'This,' said my father, 'is where your mama lived.'

'What happened to the house?' I asked.

'It's not there because evil people burned it down. And they killed all the residents. Everyone except your mama, who managed to hide at the last moment. In this cellar. Behind some shelves full of jars.'

'But why has she never told me about it?'

'For the same reasons why I haven't said much about my former home. It's not good knowledge. Bitter. Nothing comes of it. Except that everything turns to ruins. For now you're too young to understand. What you've seen is enough.'

When we came home from the mountains, I wondered if one day our house too, close to a deceased railway line and a severed bridge, would be turned into a mental home or burned down by evil people.

Meanwhile—as our trip had dragged him away from his research—my father got down to his experiments with even greater passion than before. It was mid August, the water in the bay was warm, I'd come home from the beach late in the afternoon, when Mama was still slogging away at the opera. Maria would give me my dinner. I'd water the garden with a hose, and the growing frames with a watering can, and then I'd read Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, the first sentences of which—'Are we going up again?' 'No. On the contrary; we are going down!'—I repeated from memory before each chapter. Invited more and more often into the lab, I could admire the machine for creating snowflakes. Yes, it was the strange icebox with glass walls that I'd seen early on, but only now had I understood its function. At the bottom, steam was rising from a gently heated container. When it stopped moving upwards, snowflakes fell from a small cloud onto the now empty container, which—abruptly frozen—took them in, until they had formed a thin layer of powdery snow. Both the snowflakes in flight and those already resting at the bottom were recorded by the photographic camera at a speed of one frame every quarter second. The flakes fell slowly, whirling, thanks to a special blower that imitated wind at a temperature that could be regulated, from minus three to minus half a degree Celsius. This incredible spectacle, this winter in the middle of summer, was like a glass globe with a little house, reindeer and Santa in his sleigh, in which snow falls when you shake it. But only up to a point: the snow in the glass globe was artificial, but the kind in the machine my father had made was real.

'See that, just look!' he said, getting more and more excited. 'It's exactly the same as in nature. Identical! Look at the photographs. Although the flakes are so similar, no two are the same. Now imagine billions, hundreds of billions, trillions, quadrillions of snowflakes. But not a single twin. Do you see? They fall in America, in Europe, even in Greenland or at the

North Pole. It's a bit like galaxies. After one the next one, after that the next, then another one, and one more, and so on and so on, ad infinitum. The number of snowflakes at any given moment would be countable, just like the grains of sand in the whole world, if you had the tool for it. But our Earth, which contains such a large quantity of grains of sand, our Earth, which receives such a vast quantity of snowflakes, this Earth of ours, viewed from the perspective of endless galaxies, is smaller than the proverbial grain of sand. A quite imperceptible speck. No idea, not even mathematical, can come close to it. Yes, I've galloped ahead, my dear,' he said, placing a hand on my arm, 'I've gone a long way from snowflakes. What was I saying?'

'That no two are identical.'

'Oh, yes. But do you know why? It's like with the essence released into the two tanks. The same initial conditions produce different effects. Turbulence. Disorder, chaos that cannot be predicted. That's it, it cannot be predicted. That's how it is inside an atom. It's impossible to predict the position of the smallest particles. But you'll learn about that in your physics class. In year eight. Or the first year at high school. For now it's too hard for you.'

'But what's too hard?'

'The uncertainty principle. It was discovered by a scientist, long ago.'

'In the days of the pyramids?'

'In 1927. But for you that's almost the days of the pyramids,' he said, laughing. 'That was the year I was born.'

So I was too young to understand all sorts of things. For example what sort of people burned down houses in the mountains. Or what happened inside an atom that worried my father so much. Finally I was worried by something else: his nocturnal expeditions to the blown-up bridge. Two vast abutments stuck out on either side of the cutting, like the broken ribs of a mammoth. I called it a gully, because it was deep. The tracks of the former railway line had been dismantled, neither the rattle of coaches nor the whistle of a locomotive ever rang out from here. Overgrown with couch grass, fat hen, nettles, ivy and wild vines that by some quirk had ended up here, these brick structures, especially at night, were like ancient ruins coated in volcanic dust. Or a city abandoned by its inhabitants, like the seat of the Mayans, which I'd seen in a black-and-white photograph in the grey, one-volume German encyclopaedia, also left behind by Frau

Burger. On the next few nights when my father began to slip out to the non-existent bridge more and more often, I discovered one more detail. As if wanting to say farewell to life, or to tempt fate, my father was applying a clear principle in this eccentricity. Every time, the rope had to be just a touch thinner than the previous one. By now it had come down to the thickness of a washing line, the kind quilts, sheets and pillows are hung on. Then to a line for lighter things—shirts, blouses, socks. Then it would be like a fishing line for dragging nets full of fish on a lake. I felt that a moment was bound to come when my father's passage across the chasm would depend on a string as thin as garden wire.

At night I couldn't sleep. If only there were a spring spouting from one of the steep sides of the gully. Copious and forceful, like the one in the mountains. Then a river would flow there. And even if he went gliding down, my father would fall into its current. Fortunately deep, though rapid. But the river couldn't be wide. My father, an excellent swimmer, would reach the bank in two or three strong arm strokes. And when at last I fell asleep, in every dream I saw the roaring river that would save him. Sometimes rafts sailed out to fetch him. I could see how expertly the raftsmen steered their course. Two—one on the left, the other on the right-hand side—wielded immensely long poles. A third, at the stern, plied a sort of oar set into thick, wooden forks. Racing at unusual speed, the raft was about to crash into the riverbank when at the last moment the raftsmen steered it back into centre-stream. It was like a zigzag, now in one, now the other direction. On waking, I thought with alarm: what would happen if my father fell onto such a raft? I was counting on his common sense: before setting foot on the now invisible rope, he was bound to look up the river to check there was nothing sailing towards him. But what direction would the current take? It depended where the spring would spout from, one night or rather at dawn. These thoughts wouldn't let me rest, especially as they were fantasies, and what my father was doing, walking across a chasm to the other side of a gully—though crazy and inexplicable—was very real.

One day, when I took *The Mysterious Island* back to Mrs Wójcicka's lending library, I saw on a shelf a handsome album, *Bridges of the World*.

'Are you interested in civil engineering?' asked the owner. 'I thought you still liked adventure stories.'

But I did get the book. It was a review of the world's most famous bridges. With photographs, a description of how they were built and lots of technical details: length, height, building materials and construction principles. I was instantly thrilled by the Golden Gate in San Francisco, the Pont Alexandre in Paris and the one over the Neckar in Heidelberg. And the incredibly high arch that spanned the river Neretva in Mostar, Yugoslavia. I read laboriously, with dictionary in hand, that it linked the Christian and Islamic districts. It didn't mean much to me; in those days I'd never seen a follower of Mohammed in my life before. But the fact that the local boys performed dives, head first off the stone barrier, thirty metres down into the mirror of the rushing river—this made a vast impression on me. How many metres could it be from my father's tightrope to the bottom of the gully? Ten at most. The non-existent bridge over the deceased railway line didn't have to be as towering as the one in Mostar. So although neither the Neckar nor the Neretva flowed beneath the former railway, or any other river beyond the one in my dreams, if my father did eventually fall from too thin a rope, maybe it wouldn't be in the middle of the crossing, but at the start; so on weighing up the circumstances, I thought he wouldn't fly to the bottom of the gully, but onto the slope of the cutting, which offered the hope that the impact would be softened by thick grass, nettles and broom bushes, naturally assuming he didn't dive headlong like the boys from Mostar, in which case he'd undoubtedly risk breaking his spine.

All these speculations gave way as I leafed through the final chapter—'Bridges in the Spirit World'. The bridges from Dante's *Inferno* weren't very interesting. Nor was the rainbow bridge. The ice bridge the Siberian shamans sang about was quite another matter: after death the soul had to make haste to climb the bridge of ice before sunrise. Otherwise the sun's powerful rays will melt the crossing to the spirit world and the soul might never get there. But these bridges had nothing to do with my father's insanity, at least not at first glance; only when I came upon the Chinvat Bridge in Iranian mythology did my heart skip a beat. On the bridge sits the angel Serosh—guardian of prayer, viceroy of the supreme god Ahura Mazda. The beautiful girl Danea, the epitome of conscience, guides the souls of the just to the other side. The sinner's soul encounters a witch—an old hag. During the crossing the bridge narrows at lightning speed to the width of a sword blade. The evil souls fall into the abyss of eternal hell.

Was this what my father was practising? How to cross a bridge as narrow as a sword blade? But even the thinnest rope is not sharpened. And if my guesses were on the right track, it could only mean one thing. That my father had grave sins on his conscience. But what sins? All right, he didn't go to Mass every Sunday. That was a mortal offence on pain of eternal damnation. But the same Sister Agnes, who kept reminding us of it in religious instruction, the same Sister Agnes spoke of God's boundless mercy. You just had to express deep remorse before you died, better still, go to confession and take the sacraments, and the path to paradise lay open. But my father wasn't willing to do any of those things. So maybe he did have other secrets? The terrible sins of his youth? What were they? That I couldn't imagine. I had one remaining option: to enter his lab uninvited and ask him directly what was the purpose of his experiments. Not the ones with snowflakes, liquids, turbulence and chaos, but the ones with the thinner and thinner rope, along which he crossed the gully, and that without a balancing pole—as acrobats do it—just with his arms outspread.

August was running to its end. Its hot breath, which contained the entire torrid summer, was starting to shake off the wilted leaves prematurely, the ripe acorns and beechnuts too quickly. Not a single cloud was floating in from the bay. In the city the exhausted trams moved ever more slowly, leaving oily black grease stains from their undercarriage on the tracks at each stop. At night stars were falling above the forest and our house. I hardly had the courage to go straight to my father and put the simplest, most vital question to him: 'What's really going on?', but I sensed that this was the final moment, that maybe on the night ahead the inevitable limit of his madness would be reached. To stand before him without warning, on my way up to the attic I took off my sandals so he wouldn't hear my footsteps on the stairs. This time I found him not at his devices, but leaning over a fat book bound in marbled covers, from which he was writing out some mathematical models. He noticed me come in, but didn't even nod.

'What exactly are you doing, Dad, above the blown-up bridge?' I asked quietly. My voice was shaking.

'Don't distract me now,' he said, without tearing his eyes from the book, 'I have urgent, more important matters. If you like, sit down and wait.'

But I could tell my words had reached his ears. The minutes went by like hours. It was hot in the attic. I watched, as without ceasing to make

notes, now and then he wiped beads of sweat from his face with his shirt tail, hanging out of his trousers. He had to lean slightly forward to do it, and it looked as if he were bowing even lower over the book. Finally he glanced at me. In his eyes I noticed a sort of fever I'd never seen before. The words he uttered had nothing to do with my question.

'Imagine an atom. An imperceptible dot, like the Earth in the cosmos. But inside the atom smaller and smaller particles of matter are found. And there are more waiting to be found—so small their existence can only be deduced by equations, because no microscope can ever perceive them. They're no longer particles, just bundles of energy. And so on into infinity, descending downwards. So what's it all made of? Matter has a fabric inside it that's no longer matter.'

I couldn't make much sense of it. His monologue was more and more chaotic, the sentences obsessively revolved around the same theme, constantly repeating, breaking off dramatically, only to return a second later to even greater confusion. My father had fallen into a sort of mental illness, that was clear. I was close to tears when suddenly he fell silent. His eyes, as blue as a clear sky when the sun is at its zenith, gazed at me.

'And don't you dare sneak after me to the blown-up bridge,' he almost shouted. 'I've known for ages that you follow me. If you squeak a word to Mama, something unfortunate might happen. Go now, don't disturb me.'

As I was going down the stairs it began to dawn on me. If particles of matter could be invisible, an insane idea had arisen in his mind: he'd cross the gap between the bridge abutments on an invisible rope, or in fact not on it, just in thin air. Of course it was impossible, but did the riddle of chaos have any solution? Did anything he'd worked on that summer make any scientific sense? Probably the fact that he hadn't got a job at the polytechnic in the past, and had had to earn his living at the shipyard had caused him to adopt some ludicrous ideas. He had to be saved. I must tell my mother the secret. But how could I describe it? Tell her that at night my father walked a tightrope above the railway cutting? I prepared myself point by point: when I had first seen his strange activity; how many times I had detected it; and the ever thinner rope.

As usual on coming home from the opera, Mama was tired. She drank the soup Maria served her in the kitchen, and was going to take a nap before sitting down at her sewing machine to work on the autumn orders. But when I entered the bedroom and began to speak, first she hid her

face in her hands, then instantly wanted to go to the attic, where she hadn't been since my father had set up his laboratory in there. But on the stairs she stopped, turned to face me, and putting a finger to her lips she whispered: 'No, I have another way, if what you said is true.'

It pained me that she didn't fully believe me. Would I make up such a story? Why on earth? My father was mad, not I. I really did want to save him. But Mama revealed nothing. She only said that from now on we would divide the night watch into two shifts: up to and after midnight. And that we'd set out together, also that we'd sleep in our clothes to be able to follow him out of the house quickly.

Over the next few nights my father didn't go to the blown-up bridge. Maybe his sixth sense could feel something? Though neither of us let it show. I underwent dreadful agonies. If my father—for reasons known only to himself—had dropped his nocturnal escapades, Mama would think I was a big fat fibber. That would be hard to bear. Until finally one evening my father went off to the garden shed. I had never actually discovered his hiding place, but it was a sure sign that he was preparing a new rope for a night crossing. I felt anxious. Next day the school year was beginning, events over the gully could end in an unexpected way, and on top of that at around 9 p.m. it began to rain. So the rope would be dangerously slippery; so far my father had never made his crossing in the rain. What could be worse? The heightened risk, or the chance of my father giving up on this rainy night? The downpour increased. First it rang in the gutters, then gurgled non-stop. From the garden came the murmur of the streamlets the paths had become, and from the forest the murmur of leaves under a thickening veil of countless drops of water. The stairs creaked beneath my father's footsteps. He came down from the attic. As soon as he put on his jacket and galoshes on the porch and headed towards the shed I knocked on Mama's door. She wasn't asleep, she was ready. We had no rain protection to hand, so we had to find her cape, my anorak, rubber boots in the cupboard and torches. It took an unbearably long time—meanwhile my father could already be up on the first bridge abutment, tying his rope to it. So we ran across the muddy road, splashing in puddles. It took me a while to notice the old backpack under her arm. I hadn't seen when or from where she'd taken it, but in our mad rush she hadn't slung it on her shoulders. At the abutment, the one on our side, the knot was already tied. We saw my father climbing the opposite slope,

unrolling a rope as usual. Out of the backpack Mama brought a hatchet for chopping logs and a pair of garden shears—the bigger ones, not for the roses or the hedge but for branches. My father only noticed us when he finished tying the knot on the opposite abutment. Without hesitation Mama struck the thin rope with the hatchet, but it slipped. She dropped it to the ground and applied the garden shears. With a single snip she cut the rope, which fell into the gully.

'What are you playing at?!' shouted my father. 'You're mad! What are you playing at?' he repeated, putting his hands to the corners of his mouth to make himself heard against the downpour. 'You're mad!'

'I'm mad?' Mama shouted in the same way, cupping her hands. 'You're mad! You have been from the start!'

'From what start?' replied my father.

'Since our wedding! I knew it would end badly one day. Get down from there this instant. You hear me? Go home! Unless you don't want us anymore. But in that case don't show your face at home again! Never! Never!'

'I'm not a madman!'

'Yes, you are!'

'I love you!'

'No, you don't!'

'I do!'

'You don't!'

During this shouting match I was pulling the rope out of the gully, and when its wet end jumped onto our abutment, unable to undo the knot on the railing, I cut it with the shears.

'I'll explain it all to you!'

'Here?' Mama was on the edge of tears. 'If there's anything to be explained, do it at home. This instant!'

The downpour had changed into a cloudburst. They could hardly hear each other and were getting hoarse. To make himself audible, my father took a step forwards, put his hands to his mouth again, but never let out a shout. Some bricks came loose from the edge of the abutment, he lost the ground beneath his feet and fell—luckily not to the bottom of the gully, just onto the steep slope, racing down the grassy side of it on his back to where the trains had once sped by. He didn't get up. His feet came to rest in a large puddle and, tilted to one side, his head was covered by his jacket hood.

'Stay here,' said Mama calmly, 'and wait.' Soon she had slithered down the slope and was leaning over my father. She put an ear to his lips. She turned towards me, shouting. 'Hurry home and call an ambulance! The number's on the notepad! They can drive here from the direction of the church. Explain it carefully. Got that?'

I waited ages for a connection. Then I spent more time explaining which blown-up bridge the accident had occurred under, how to get there, and who I was in relation to the injured party. My report was accepted, but I'd woken Maria, who stood by the phone and wouldn't let me run back. She made me remove my sopping clothes, get straight into a hot bath, put on my pyjamas and hop into bed. Before that say a Hail Mary, Our Father and the Angelus… for the benefit of my parents. I whispered the prayers, my teeth chattering. I was shivering as if I had tonsillitis. Maria brought me tea in bed, a hot water bottle and two analgesic tablets. I refused to go to sleep until Mama came home with news. I was sure of one thing—that I wouldn't be at school tomorrow for the start of the year. But when I did fall asleep, the blown-up bridge with the river flowing beneath it wasn't made of brick, but stone, like the one in Mostar.

The next few days went by in a trance. My father was lying in the Navy Hospital on Polanki Street with a minor collarbone injury. Mama went there every day, promising he'd be home soon. But after a week I guessed it was something more serious. I insisted on being allowed to visit him. I wasn't allowed, so my suspicions grew. Finally Mama had to say it. He'd been transferred to the psychiatric hospital in Srebrzysko. For observation. I couldn't go to visit him there either. Only Mama went to see him, but not every day now. She was troubled, reticent, withdrawn. The commission at the opera had come to an end, and she was sewing more and more at home, often late into the night I could hear the whirr of the machine, the clank of scissors and the hiss of the iron. Without my father, even without his eccentricities in the attic lab, the house was sad and empty. I did my best not to think about the tightrope walks across the deceased railway cutting. That would mean admitting that he really had gone mad. But I was more and more certain that its causes had nothing to do with his harmless hobby in the lab, and my inquiries on that topic were absurd. My father's illness might be endless. One time I heard Mama talking on the phone: 'We might have to sell the house and move into a block. No, he's no better at all.' I was seized by even greater sorrow at the thought

of moving house. But for now just the lab moved out. One day, three men went up to the attic and packed the equipment into crates—the same ones in which it had arrived. Next day they carried them off to a lorry and drove away. All that was left were the lamps suspended from the ceiling. Mama had stopped picking herbs and even the garden flowers had ceased to interest her. Maria was subdued too. If we did move out, she wouldn't come to live with us in a block. I knew she had no one to go back to in the countryside anymore.

In roughly mid-September came a turning point. My father, who had only supplied scant information at the Navy Hospital, and had dried up completely at the psychiatric hospital, without a word to anyone suddenly announced that he would undergo treatment, but only in Koprownica. Mama's hopes were raised. However strange the doctors found this caprice, finally they agreed to transfer him a long way south, to Dr Herkus's asylum. I was allowed to visit him before he left. Packed and dressed, he was in the admissions ward, waiting for transport. He was solving a chess puzzle in the newspaper. In the care of a nurse he'd be taken by train to Rzeszów, and then on by ambulance.

'Everything's fine,' he said. 'Can you cope?'

I nodded. Tears sprang to my eyes.

'Just don't ask questions. Take care of Mama.'

'There's one thing I must ask.'

'Go on.'

'When are you coming home?'

'When God wills it,' he said, smiling. 'But I'll be back.'

An ambulance drove up, and patient and nurse walked to the vehicle.

'May I ride with you to the station?'

'No way,' said the driver.

My father stopped and kissed me on the forehead. He never did that, just as he never said: 'When God wills it'. The door banged shut. This time I couldn't accompany him on his journey south. But I soon began to get postcards. Written in his small, neat, calligraphic hand. At first matter-of-fact, they soon became playful and always ended with a quote from a philosopher, mentioned by name. For example Democritus—'We know nothing in reality, for truth lies in an abyss.' Or Aristotle—'If X is equal to A, then X cannot at the same time be B.' I didn't write back often. But I wrote about many things: school, religious instruction, the new priest

at the Resurrectionists or Mama's autumn occupation—she had started to collect bark from various trees and was making medicinal ointments out of it. To my question if there was still a prophet called Andrei Shiyemash among the patients, he didn't reply. When I asked if the marble head from the statue of a beautiful woman was still in the garden he wrote back that there'd never been one there.

In early November, after All Saints' Day, I was wondering what sort of Christmas card to send him. Ideally depicting a glass globe, in which Santa was riding up to a little house in a sledge drawn by reindeer, a globe where snow fell inside. But I wasn't sure I could find a card like that, so I decided to make one myself, cut out of newspaper; I'd find the required pieces among the colour illustrations and stick them together on a single piece of card. But it proved unnecessary. On Monday my father made a trunk call to say he was coming home in two days' time. Not on a temporary pass, but for good. He was hungry for home cooking. So as he entered the house and greeted everyone, the smell of roast meat, rissoles, Ukrainian borscht, blinis and cheesecake wafted from the kitchen. Maria was laying the table. My father, tired and a little gaunt, lay down on the sofa.

'Just for a short while,' he said. 'I'm tired after the journey.'

Mama came into the dining room with a suit hung over her arm.

'This is for you.' There were trousers, a waistcoat and jacket. 'I made it myself. Stay there, lie down until dinner, I'll hang it up and you can try it on later.'

'I've been cured,' announced my father, 'and at my own father's house. I'm getting up now.' He rose from the sofa. 'I'm going to wash my hands.'

When he went off to the bathroom, Mama quickly rolled out a wheeled closet from a corner of the room. There was a Tesla television set on it. Once at the table, my father had a surprise when he suddenly noticed the flickering screen, followed by the announcer's face and voice. We ate our dinner in front of the first television news to be broadcast in our house. Everyone watched the screen; the conversation wasn't particularly animated.

'It's for Christmas,' explained Mama.

'On hire purchase?' asked my father.

'No,' came the reply. 'Ah, and one more thing,' Mama continued. 'Dr Białkiewicz from Srebrzysko, the one who arranged for you to go to

Koprownica, firmly advised us to get rid of the laboratory. I should have written to you about it, but somehow it wasn't right. I didn't want you to be upset there, or angry.'

'I guessed as much. Dr Herkus often talked about it too. They seem to be keen on closing down laboratories, as long as it's not their own. Yes. I partly went mad over that. But only partly. Well, never mind. I've got some new ideas. When I go back to work.'

'Ideas,' Mama repeated timidly.

Over the coffee and cheesecake he became pensive. He stood up, took the suit from its hanger, and left the dining room without another word. We could hear his slow steps on the stairs. He was heading for the bedroom. The old wardrobe door creaked, the one that always made a noise, with an inside mirror. Maria and Mama cleared the table. And then through the window I saw the first snow. I went into the garden. Large flakes were falling silently onto the withered forest litter, the beech boughs, the pear and apple trees and the growing frames. I tilted my head to catch them in my mouth with my eyes shut. The November snow smelled like the crystal-clear air blown in from the mountains to the coast. I knew the December snow would bring something different: the scent of candles, fir trees, dried mushrooms, fish swimming in a wooden tub, nutmeg, cinnamon and cakes. The January snow would bring a new ingredient, the clouds of silver powder my father and I would raise as we schussed down the slopes of Niedźwiedznik, the smell of sunshine, ski wax, thick woollen hats and gloves. With the February snow would come the gulf of oppressive nights and dreams of exiles hounded across Siberia by decree of the tsar. As for the March snow, I could never be sure; its volatile aroma and consistency depended on the first thaw, and that could come very early—as this year—or late, on the threshold of April. In the ever-thicker whiteness surrounding the world I rejected the idea of asking my father—once we were alone by the Christmas tree—about the blown-up bridge. I realised that for me it would remain an unexplained mystery forever, just as the tiniest atomic particles of unpredictable position would remain one for him. One thing I knew for sure: the snowman I'd make this winter would have the name Damazy.

Interval (in which, snow)

Cool air surprises us awake,
has dried our puzzle
of bare limbs above the covers.
We must've drifted
after. Your bus due. Soonish.
In the interval, moon

I reckon by the light
but no. Snow is dicing down,
it settles and melts
and trapped voices carry
improbably far across
blinding gardens.

We get decent. I can't speak
much. At all. Anyway
snow damps our decibels,
arrests resonance
on this road we are
negotiating gingerly

down the middle.
We only overhear ourselves.
Just each other to
brace against
for traction. To lean
for painless purchase

on this earth and I cannot
walk you all the way.

Dean Browne

I Once Saw a Beautiful Place

Eimear McBride

In the summer of 2005, I went to Sudan. And it was so white everywhere, the light and the heat, that for a short while coherent thought all but jumped ship. Rattling from Khartoum Airport in a white *boksi* Toyota Hilux to our white breeze-block flat, my eyes just moved from moment to moment. The white jellabiyas of men filling water urns on the streets. The little white mules pulling vendors' carts. Even the white plastic bags of rubbish street children burned on waste ground for a tip. In fact, it took a stint of lying on the white tiled floor, beneath the white ceiling fan, for that first shock of heat and white blindness to fall back. But once it did, the blistering colour with which I now remember Sudan began its kaleidoscopic reveal.

But the first was black. All the burnt-out buildings and cars lining the streets in the aftermath of a three-day riot following the helicopter crash death of South Sudanese rebel leader recently turned vice-president, John Garang. As we picked our way through the debris, my husband—who'd come to Sudan earlier, so had been there when the machete-wielding protesters poured onto the streets—related tales of people panic buying as the army rolled in and curfew was imposed. Then of the long, boring—yet frightening—hours spent locked in with no reliable news or working phonelines, while outside thirty-six people were killed and the city burned red in the night. Safe back in London, I'd spent several anxious nights of my own relying on Al Jazeera's patchy reporting but eventually he'd gotten a call through, and now I was in Sudan as well.

But we hadn't come as politicians or peacekeepers, aid workers or members of the press. We were there for the less noble reasons of love and nosiness. Specifically, love of a novel: *Season of Migration to the North*, by the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih. First published in 1966, it tells the tale

of Mustafa Sa'eed, a clever boy from a Sudanese village who gradually becomes—via exposure to upper-class British education and society—a poster boy for, then monster of, post-colonialism. Banned and unbanned on a rolling basis throughout the Arab world—by the religious for being pornographic and secularists for its lack of ideological purity—it's also been critically lauded and, by readers, revered. It was numbered by Edward Said 'among the six finest novels to be written in modern Arabic literature'. So that was the love. The nosiness bit was my husband's theatre research project into the world from which the novel had sprung. Tayeb Salih had given his blessing; the Arts Council, a small grant. He'd worked in a basic Arabic language course and I—with reason to be interested in post-colonialism myself—couldn't resist escaping my temp job to tag along. But, as Westerners not putting up in embassies or hotels, meeting with diplomats or striking energy deals, we were an anomalous pair; Sudan not being known, now or then, as a fun tourist destination. But, perhaps because of our oddity, and certainly because of our admiration for Tayeb Salih, we found ourselves welcomed everywhere.

The Three Towns

Despite Sudan's history reaching back to the start of civilisation, from ancient Nubia to the pharaonic Kingdom of Kush, the conversion to Christianity and the Islamic one following it, Khartoum was only founded in 1821 by the Ottoman governor and military leader, Muhammad Ali Pasha. Then the British and the Egyptians moved in, with varying degrees of control, until 1956 when both were hefted back out. If lacking in antiquity, however, Khartoum was built on al-Mogran, otherwise known as the confluence of the Nile, making it one of Africa's great geographical sites, and all for its colours, too. Standing on the White Nile Bridge, you can watch the two Nile colours mix as the slow, silty White Nile wends up from Lake Victoria to blend with the swifter Blue Nile sweeping in from the west. From there, they flow on as one into Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea beyond. Because of those Niles, Khartoum is a city made up of three: Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman, all connected by bridges and known as The Three Towns. Our tumbledown flat was in Bahri, near Omdurman, locally famous for its supermarket—a one-room shop whose star attraction was six jars of Nutella, to which the shopkeeper drew our attention with pride. I think we bought one too, although mostly we ate from street sellers, with their piles of *kisra* flatbreads and cookpots of bean

ful served with sprinklings of hard-boiled egg. But that first day, after dropping my bags and enjoying a brief moment of on-the-floor cool, we headed into Khartoum.

The bus journey was a frantic affair, involving crumbled bank-note fares passed forward through the hands of strangers. Ours reached the front only to be refused because one of the said strangers, who did no more than nod, had already paid for us. Much to our mortification, this was a recurring theme—Sudanese hospitality being, we were to discover, generous to the point of shame. After the first few incidents, we realised refusal was rude and the best response was just to say *shukran*—which, with my inevitably Irish pronunciation, also seemed to provide some form of repayment in the hilarity it caused.

In the centre, and despite the still smouldering detritus of civil unrest, Khartoum was already up and at it again. With my eyes finally adjusting, the whelm of colour also began, first infiltrating via the vivid winding tobes of the women. Then by the men's crisp white turbans. And, as we made our way out in circles from the grand mosque, the different hues of post-colonial dilapidation mixed with modern apartment blocks. Each era's white, blue and mustard walls desiccating in the crippling heat, helped on by the damage of army coups and civil wars, economic sanctions and the violent imposition of sharia law. Khartoum was a city upon whom history's hand had worked hard and whose buildings, along with its varied peoples, had paid a heavy price. It wasn't long before we heard the local joke about 1998, when Bill Clinton sent fighter jets to bomb Khartoum North's Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in order to prevent bin Laden acquiring the nerve agents supposedly created there. So, the bomber pilots arrive above Khartoum, look down, then immediately turn around, convinced someone else's bombed it first. For Khartoumians it was 'funny because it's true'. But, despite the poverty and decay, it was all hustle as we made our way from Al-Gamhurriya Street to the Souq al Arabi. Clothes and bags strung beneath arches. Stalls sagging with foods, spices, pots and pans. Busy people too. Shoppers and hawkers. Tea ladies and taxi drivers. Businessmen rushing from A to B in the moped ricksaws which took no prisoners. Children begging, sometimes getting a clip round the ear, though mostly a dinar or two. Then the covert beer sellers. But Sudan being strictly 'dry' then—and the penalty for handling alcohol, a flogging—mixed with my already considerable dehydration, I fancied a

cup of tea at the old Acropole Hotel. Except just then the sun fell, the call to prayer sounded and people unfurled prayer mats everywhere.

Night came so quickly. From bright blue day. To purple. Then black. And the city all quiet until the muezzin's broadcast stopped. Quickly after, streetlights were lit—mostly bulbs connected to car batteries then propped up on sticks. The dim made more navigable by the outdoor braziers on which falafel and kebabs were cooked. And we wandered through it, unafraid. Objects of curiosity but accepted. Everywhere invited to cinnamon coffee or hibiscus *karkadeh*. Asked how we liked Sudan and who were we? Tinny radios blasting out songs as mosquitos began to bite and sacred ibises shook out their feathers down by the Niles. While men's sociable puffing on water pipes made the air smell like nowhere before.

And so some days were spent looking, walking everywhere or in the local taxis who divvied us up between themselves, so each got a turn at the fare. In Omdurman, we visited the silver-domed tomb of Muhammed Ahmed: the Mahdi, and great Sudanese hero who, in 1881, proclaimed himself the living representative of the Prophet, turfed the colonial powers out (for a bit) and, briefly, built an Islamic state whose political influence remains. There was the National Museum, with its relics of Kerma and Kush, the frescoes of Christian Nubia and Egyptian temples salvaged from the flooding of Lake Nasser when the Aswan Dam was built. My main memory of the Republican Palace Museum is the line of presidential luxury cars and the snaggle-toothed piano of General 'Chinese' Gordon; he to whom the Mahdi gave the chop. We took a ferry to Tuti Island, in the heart of the Niles, and risked a rickshaw for the sight of its more traditional life, unchanged by the cities around. On the steep banks we took a tumble and if not for my surprisingly reactive right leg would've landed in the Niles ourselves, but the island was worth the bruise. We wandered through markets, soon learning that camels spit, and often were followed by people calling out '*Khawaja*'—Westerner/stranger—and blessing themselves as a means of asking if we were Christian? Considering it less troublesome for all concerned than explaining 'lapsed Catholic' and 'Jewish', we decided on a universal nod. Down a side street, in a very old bookshop, a very old bookseller spoke to us of the years of terror, the imposition of sharia law in the north—over all people, Muslim or not—the slaughter and enslavement of the Dinka people, the 1988 famine during which a quarter of a million people died. Of the Islamist

Hassan al-Turabi and President Omar al-Bashir's creation of a police state, with the torture, amputations and summary executions that followed. Of al-Turabi inviting every terrorist in, from Carlos the Jackal to Hamas to Osama bin Laden, further excluding a poverty-stricken Sudan from help from the rest of the world. Of the endless political purges and coups, and the genocide unfolding, as we spoke, in Darfur. How his little shop had survived these things but not without scars. And as the days went by, we saw plenty more of those too.

In this way, my understanding of the world of Tayeb Salih's book opened further and deepened, albeit in reverse of its time. Previously, I'd found common ground with Mustafa Sa'eed's sense of displacement. How it was to leave your homeland and be changed by the land which had once changed it. That afterwards you could never go back, not really, and be the same. But now, the novel's other pressure points more clearly showed. How much of Sudan's difficulty, and tragedy, had grown from a tangle of contradictory roots. The struggle between an Arab and African identity. A religious versus secular society. A long-colonised land grappling with an independence its successive regimes had betrayed. Yet also, paradoxically, how Sudan's unique cultural riches derived from this same great variety, along with its ability to feel both ancient and modern at once. As if, in its crucible, peoples and eras compressed so that even the distant past remained present. Those lives almost touchable, if no longer seen. And while these huge oppositions had wrought destruction, elsewhere those same seeds grew in imaginations and flowered productively.

Nowhere was this more tangible than in the work of artist Rashid Diab. Over at his studio in Khartoum North, he envisaged multitudes of worlds and then layered them, old with new. I remember canvases of women walking through expanses of sand. Going far out. Too far to turn back. Tobes fluttering in the desert breeze but their inner lives mysterious and destinations, anywhere. His paintings, sculptures, and prints alike thrummed with African and Islamic influence, all poured through the colours of Sudanese life while remaining alive in times and places of the artist's own view. After tea, conversation and a drive, we got a sneak preview of his new, ambitious project. A place for dreams and ideas to meet: his soon-to-be-opened cultural centre, and first of its kind. Dedicated to 'eradicating cultural illiteracy', Diab aimed to provide artist residencies, exhibition spaces, children's classes, open forums

on everything from art and history to environmental concerns. A free place and an art place, wrapped up in one. Eschewing the then widely favoured breeze block and concrete, its buildings were constructed along traditional designs which could more naturally withstand Sudan's mighty heat without recourse to air-conditioning and its waste of electricity. And it was so beautiful. Detailed. Rich in colour and coloured glass. Cool in the day. Warm in the night. A place where thought and imagination, not bodies, could riot. I could have stayed for weeks. But time grew tight. We'd soon have to be off, leaving the cities we'd only begun to love for the place *Season of Migration to the North* was set, up in the desert: Tayeb Salih's home village of Karmacol.

A Journey North

An incongruous adventure, hooked up, as we were, with Sudan's best-known actor. Ali Mahdi Nouri became famous back in 1976 for his lead role in a film adaptation of *The Wedding of Zein*, another novel by Tayeb Salih. *Ors Zein* (sometimes *Urs al-Zayn*), by the Kuwaiti filmmaker Khaled Al Siddiq, remained in 2005 Sudan's most renowned film, having played in Director's Fortnight at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival. By the time we met, however, Ali Mahdi had other things on his mind. Namely, running the Al Bugaa Theatre in Khartoum—whose primary focus was working in conflict zones, staging plays with former child soldiers and developing folk techniques for theatrical use—while also running the SOS Children's Village Sudan charity. Luckily for us, he too had recently been thinking about Tayeb Salih again. Of, maybe, making a follow-up to *The Wedding of Zein* and so, coincidentally, he was also planning a location scout up north. Generously, we were invited to join, as long as we were happy to tag along on whatever stops he'd need to make. Funnily enough, we were. And this is how, that strange August, we ended up in a convoy of Sudanese actors and film folk, travelling into the Bayuda Desert.

We made an unexpected stop before the mercifully air-conditioned trucks had gotten far beyond Omdurman. Spying a green tobe'd tea lady at the side of the road, we all went to sit on her upturned cooking oil cans while she boiled up ginger coffee in a clay *jebana* pot. As glasses were passed, she doled sugar out and the actors explained that Ali Mahdi, in his charitable capacity, had stopped to speak with local community representatives: the local 'community' being residents of the so-called

'Peace Camps' behind the fence, where nearly half the population of Khartoum had been relocated in the early 1990s. Almost all were the Christian and Animist South Sudanese. Fearing them as potential rebels, President Omar al-Bashir had conveniently branded them 'squatters' and dumped them out on the fringe of the desert surrounded by armed guards. And here they remained, stuck in barely habitable huts, or tents, scratching what livings they could. Now, the government was demolishing these shanty camps too, hoping to force these twice-displaced people to return to their ravaged homelands in the south. There we sat, on that sunny day, hearing this while drinking our coffee. And when we asked for a translation, were told the fence signs read 'The taking of photographs is strictly prohibited.' Then Ali Mahdi returned, and we set off again.

The landscape soon opened out on either side. Desert unfolding to beyond the horizon. As we rode the sandy roads, our companions took comedy delight in informing us how they had all, allegedly, been built by Osama bin Laden during his Sudanese stint from '91 to '96. The roads heading up to the Atbara, where we were spending the night, were pretty good all right, especially in comparison to everywhere else. That said, it was hard not to think bin Laden's presence, and the ensuing sanctions, had wreaked more havoc on the lives of the Sudanese people than any nice road could be worth. But between the jokes of the actors and their continuous playing of the music of folk singer, poet and humanitarian Abdel Karim al Kabli—to this day I can't hear a note of his without miles of sand spreading before my mind's eye—the outside world began to recede. Became only flat yellow and hot. Interspersed sometimes by the odd nomad leading a camel. Or by scrub. Sometimes massive anthills rose into view. Sometimes they were so monstrous even the Sudanese were awed enough to investigate. Then we'd all stand, gawking at the riddled red rocks towering above and I'd really hope no apocalyptic swarmings were about to occur. On this leg of trip, I soon became aware of my ambiguous position in the group. For a start, I was the only woman and, being Irish, supposedly exotic—not a take I'd ever experienced before, certainly not in 90s London when being Irish was anything but; but, unlike the few other Western women around, I was very covered up. More to save myself sunburn than a moral opposition to shorts, but from manners, too, and this difference seemed to confuse. They asked a lot about who in the marriage was the boss. I mean, I had a ring on but I was also out and about

in the world, which played very strangely to them. However, I knew the matter had been internally resolved when, on pulling up to a roadside hut for people to relieve themselves, I was ushered inside with everyone else. Apparently it'd been decided between them it was best to treat me as an honorary man which did nothing for my vanity but did, ultimately, make for an easier life. That said, I remained somewhat shy about joining the communal piss so waited until the hut had vacated before heading in to squat where they'd stood.

Eventually we arrived at the roadside station outside Atbara, incredible with heat, where we were putting up. I remember how grateful I was for the cold bottle of Stim: an orange fizzy drink, whose high sugar content allowed my lightweight energy levels to cope. After dinner we all sat about on daybeds, watching the Egyptian soaps beamed in on satellite. But after dark I went out to look into the black and vast sky, filled with silence and stars.

The next day we pressed on, the occasional detour requiring a stop during which village officials would appear with tea and sweets. We weren't supposed to photograph them, or any government buildings, so it's all memories of uniforms, pale green mosques and slender minarets. Or men offering commentary from plastic chairs. Women lugging jerrycans from wells. Camels and donkeys and the call everywhere of 'Hey *Khawaja*, Sudan *tamam*?' *Tamam* meaning good, or perfect, or fine. All of which could be true, or not, depending on whereabouts you were stood.

By evening we reached Karmacol, having first driven through it, there being no signposts anywhere. As soon as we stopped all the villagers appeared, eager to know what was going on. Ali Mahdi immediately became our ambassador, as men who remembered him from years before welcomed him like a returning son, while women pulled fresh dates from the doum trees and urged us to eat. Once they discovered why we'd come, a child was dispatched to fetch Tayeb Salih's cousin. Luckily for us he was amenable to his fifteen minutes of fame and led us through the sandy alleys to the writer's childhood home. There was nothing to show he'd lived there. Its few mud-walled rooms long abandoned and empty. Yet, on being ushered through its pale metal gate, I caught sight of the palm tree, still growing in its courtyard, and the world of the book was right there. Its modesty, as much as its poverty, present in the wire bones of a discarded bed and decaying litter of sandal remnants, but Salih's own

nostalgia survived there too, in the on-cue cooing of a turtle dove and soft breeze passing in from the river beyond, just as described and as I had imagined it. Characters whispering off the page across the faces of their descendants, like all could exist there at once. Like no time was ever truly alone. When the shadows grew long, our time grew short. The villagers led us out to pay our respects to the burial place of their sheikh. His *Gubba* a huge hive rising out of the sand. Haunting in the evening light. It's my lasting memory of the poor and beautiful spot Tayeb Salih memorialised as 'that small village at the bend in the Nile'.

Our mission accomplished then, in the days after we went where we were taken. One day to the Merowe dam, still under its controversial construction. Built to address Sudan's chronic energy deficit, it resulted in the forcible removal of 50,000 people from their farming villages and nomadic lands. Most were under compensated and dumped out in the infertile desert, while their homes were bulldozed and profitable date palms burned. Wandering in the ruin, we found a solemn-faced boy stroking a ripped-up doum tree. He'd been from here, he said, but now lived in a displacement village. And when we asked why he'd made the long journey back, he said that he missed the trees.

Another day, the trucks pulled up and a gaggle of our number headed off to piss against the 3000-year-old pyramid at the side of the road. This was Nuri, a royal cemetery of Kush. Its steep, small pyramids cropping up around us, all eaten by their fantastic age, yet free of the tourist chaos synonymous with their cousins in Egypt. Instead they just stood there, deserted, like pieces of forever under the relentless sun.

From there we travelled on to the holy mountain of Jebel Barkal, with its huge sandstone column louring in the shape of a snake. Once believed by the Egyptian pharaohs and the Kushite kings to be the home of the God Amun, it was the hottest place I'd ever been. And the strange aura of the mountain, coupled with the savage heat, reminded me of nothing so much as the start of *The Exorcist*. Suddenly I understood why ancient peoples worshipped the sun—the evil-feeling terror of it (I'd never experienced that before and didn't again until climate change began to make London burn). Once I'd investigated the statuary at the mountain's foot, and the dark temples carved out of it, my head started to hurt and I began to feel sick. So, lightweight again, I took refuge in the air-conditioned truck until

the others returned. And by the time the Merowe ferry had crossed us back over the Nile, I was ready to leave the desert behind.

IBM

Another Sudanese joke was that the country was run by IBM. ***I****nshallah*—with the help of God. ***B****okra*—tomorrow. ***M****allesh*—sorry. Each of which we heard many times, and taught us to be less prescriptive about planning, making those last days in Khartoum a jumble of see-what-comes.

What came was an invitation to dinner at one of the actors' homes, where he lived with his wife, children and parents. It was low ceilinged and traditional but for the plastic covered suite, and we were welcomed like old friends. Given the best seats. Served a communal bowl of *molokhia* stew and, with polite discretion, shown how to eat it without looking like savages. Afterwards, my equivocal status bestowed the unexpected gift of being asked behind the curtain, into the women's world.

There, two generations instructed me in the impossible intricacies of wrapping a tobe. The doings of pre-wedding henna nights were also told, including of the *Dukhan*, during which incense was burned and the bride-to-be's body bathed in it. Then they henna'd me for good measure and, while it dried, our quiet conversation turned to *Zār*: a form of spirit possession, mostly practised by women. Its underground ceremonies were said to involve food and drink, with unverified rumours of alcohol and weed. Against continuous chanting, drums were played until frenzied dancing overtook the women's bodies spontaneously and answers, from the spirits, were solicited. Such disinhibition was considered un-Islamic by some, so the ceremony could only be spoken of in a hush. But deeply rooted, and still valued for its relief of the afflicted or possessed, Sudan's *Zār* cults, supposedly, remained.

And those stories proved not so very far from what we witnessed on our last Friday there—the mystical Sufi ritual of *dhikr*. Islamic in nature but unorthodox, Sufiism is a more relaxed, very Sudanese, expression of belief, performed by a local brotherhood under the watch of their sheikh.

First up was a poor man's *dhikr*—so we were told—held in the late afternoon. We joined a crowd of locals out on wasteground, hanging back with the women as the men began walking in circles and children ran about, tooting plastic horns or gawping at us, wondering why we were there. Circling faster, the men began repeating the names of God. Some

bore ancient ghetto blasters aloft, thumping out galvanising beats. Others beat hand drums. Yet others, pot lids. Some chanted and clapped but the cacophony only increased in intensity. Getting faster and louder. Then louder and faster again until one man swung free, spinning ecstatically as though losing his mind, calling out words we could not understand but knew he was powerless to control. Another joined him. Then another. On and on until the whole rubbish-strewn plot was a-whirl with religious fervour. Next to me a woman dropped on her knees calling out there was no God but Allah. Others followed. Some seemed to faint. People were shaking. Locked in trances. Or shrieking their faith. My heart began pounding for fear I'd join in and maybe because memories of the old Charismatics were surfacing. Those long-ago prayer meetings in my Tubbercurry childhood when otherwise sensible women would begin speaking in tongues. But *Dhikr* was deeply affecting in ways the Charismatics could only dream.

Later, we attended the 'rich man's' *dhikr* in Omdurman, whose whirling Dervishes were a well-known attraction. Held in a clean courtyard, where the women had chairs. We were offered tea. The sheikh wore robes, red and black; the participants, red and sacred green. The clapping was accompanied by clashing cymbals and the circling began. But if this *dhikr* was less wild than earlier, its comparative formality had a power of its own. The reactions of the prayerful no less sincere, and its colours beautiful in the orange fall of evening. Shadows casting up the white walls as the men spun and the women cried out their divine connection. All dizzying and intoxicating until the day went right down. Orange. Purple. To black. Everyone dropped to their knees, answering the call to prayer. Once again peace descended on fulfilled obligations and the togetherness of a community praying under the eye of their God.

That night is often with me now as Sudan's civil war gathers pace and those places where once was ecstatic worship are being used as shallow graves. All its flaming colours burnt back to black. All those voices, and their music, turned into silence. Where are the children who stared at me then? Fearing the starvation of children of their own? And the women, in their tobes, raped in the streets? How will the *Zār* spirits ever make them free, or safe in their bodies, again? What of the millions running for their lives, from their homes—Rashid Diab among them? What can they hope? That their Niles will, somehow, stop running red? Or that the

world will turn to look at them? That all the protesters will demand their governments intervene before the call to prayer sounds and there is no one left to reply?

Back on our last night, twenty years ago, in the late, bearable heat, we spotted a tea lady under a doum tree. While she boiled up our last ginger coffee, we discussed all we'd seen and Tayeb Salih. But, on attempting to pay, we got a strict '*La*'—no. Then she pointed to the ragged man who'd just left. Turning, we saw him rejoining his fellow nomads, in their lorries, preparing to travel south. '*Shukran*' we called after. He called back 'Sudan *tamam*?' When we said it was, he and his companions threw up their arms and, laughing, mimed for us to take a photo of them. Which I did, in their travel-stained jellabiyas and generosity. It's how I remember our strange trip's end. Of course, it only ended for me, not for them. Their country got progress, then regress, and now much worse again. For beautiful, ancient, ravaged Sudan, can there never be better than this? *Inshallah*. *Bokra*. *Mallesh*.

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The Bullring

I saw them standing in a semi-circle by the old bridge.
I could hear words indicating absence but didn't blame them
as I too saw the town in past tense. Someone asked
about the blind gate. *It used to be…* I turned my head.
We were standing on the former former where the dogs
pinned the bull's peppered snout. *A practice known*
as… Where was the bull? In this very place
or so very almost. The whole town had an almostness
to it. But the blind gate was further back and the two
were not related. I wanted to know what the blind gate
was for. I wanted a blind gate for the bull, so his snout
could be spared. I almost asked, but someone
mentioned the hangings. That was later, difficult too
to believe. Nowadays we believe in demolition
and dual carriageways. Everyone laughed.
Nowadays, nowadays, nowadays.

Leeanne Quinn

Blind Gates Of

Being a complete stranger I didn't see the gate.
In order to qualify a town must have four
of the following… Why was I imagining an orchard?
It must have been a memory of stolen apples.
On the medieval map I counted the number of gates,
certain ways in, certain ways out. There was no book
called *Blind Gates Of*. It was a given. The aerial
views were supposed to clarify but only obscured
the reassembling. My eyes were drawn to grey silos
filled with grain, or was it wood chip? Was this my first
skyline? On the eve of St. John there were several
monstrous bone fires. Being a complete stranger
I couldn't stand the stench. It was better to think
of apples lying full in the thick grass, red moons
circling red moons, apples circling apples.

Leeanne Quinn

Drop... Drop...

says the physiotherapist as she eases
her finger into my rectum. Because
I seal myself tight as a tin of sardines
she's teaching me to relax my pelvic floor
in a cubicle so small I'm breathing the curtain.
Drop everything you have been holding.
I was a changeling, found by an estuary,
wind-stung. A distorted reflection,
a shape in a cow's eye, liquid and pale.
Or the cow, udder swollen with mastitis,
shuffling the edges of a field. The steak,
deep red, riddled with E. coli, oozing
into plastic grass on the butcher's counter.
Not human, born wrong—it didn't matter
what people did to me. *Drop*
all that nonsense, says the physiotherapist
and as I tremble on the narrow cot
she scrapes out all my lies.

Rosamund Taylor

Carrier

Rowe Irvin

From inside the sack he calls for how much further for where. For please a little water. From the other only the in the out of the breath coming hard. He can hear the other's mouth how it must hang open like a dog's in full pant. To hear the effort of his carrying rouses in him a sympathy as when his father sucks through his toothgaps at the sore dipping of his knuckles into the sage bowl.

The other's back is warm and damp. He smells the sweat on it. He supposes he must be a heavy load to be lugged along. Doesn't his father prod him in the softness of the gut and call him lazy. Doesn't he sneak his extra share from the pot. Isn't he a boar-pig hog-boy lay-a-loutish son-of-a-sow-bitch like his father tells him he is. Like his father tells his mother he is. Like his mother with her downkept eyes agrees. Only yesterday he and Mabb lifted the hive to cut from underneath a thick drippy slab. That worth the sting he got though he smoked the cow dung the way he knew to dull the hum. How the comb stickied up their palms how sweet. He had the glut of it. They honeyed themselves sick and after made a spitting of the wax pellets. Sweet inside the rough sack to remember this sweet only yesterday.

A little water please a little food. His carrier keeps a steady pace. That his carrier is a man he is almost certain from the roughness of the rare grunt or hhem as to clear a catch in the breathing. His father makes a sound like that when he heaves and strains as in the axing of wood or in the giving of blows. After that the sage bowl and only after his father has soaked his hands and only after dropped onto the mattress does his mother come with a dipping rag for his own aches, his split places.

There it is the rare grunt-hhem of the other. As to clear a catch in the breathing. As his father. And he did think at first my father. At first being bundled into the sack my father. He thought this is my father he is bundling me into the sack. He thought I have done some careless clumpish thing and now I will be taught the meaning of justice. He thought yes the sack has to do with justice. In some ways a reassuring thought and this why he did not struggle but went limp and accepted the bundling as his just fate. This why he did not yell out as he was carried away. Only with some carried distance the gathering of his thoughts and with the gathering the small cold panic that all was perhaps not as it ought to be.

That tread too steady for his father's step. His father whose stiff leg ever since the cow's hoof left a knot of scar below the knee has dragged behind the better leg. He thinks often on that knot. How between himself and the knot there exists a kind of kinship. They two the misfortunes his father bears. Between himself and the knot his father truly is a burdened man. To think on his father's burdens rouses in him a sympathy as for this other who pants so in lugging over the shoulder the heavy load of him.

Against the warm damp back of that other he is scrunched. The walls of the sack can they be called walls. The walls of the sack are close enough to hold his limbs tight as if bound. Still it is better than how they began he and his carrier and the sack. They began with the sack pulled over him from behind. He was crouching so the sack went first over his head. Headfirst in like a backward calfbirth. His head ended up at the bottom of the sack with his feet above where the sack pinched shut. He does not miss the weight of his body squashing down onto his head. And jolting with the other's run for the other was at first running. What a misery of squirming to turn himself upright. What relief what honey-sweet when finally righted. To be bent as he is now is comfort in comparison to how he began. He must remember this though his knees touch his chin and there is a cramp. He must remember and be thankful.

He wishes to unfold his legs to rid the ache. He says I wish to unfold my legs to rid the ache. Once it's rid I will climb back into the sack myself he says. I will fold my legs back up you won't even have to bundle me in. He says it without hope of an answer and gets none.

An itchy heat comes from the sting that welts the centre of his palm. He closes his fist around it and squeezes. Was it yesterday the hive Mabb the honey the bees was that really only yesterday. It seems to him he has

been carried days and nights but not once in his carrying has the sun let up its light. The sift of it into the sack shows him a dapple of his own close forearm. Though the sun can see in he cannot see out. At least he would not call it seeing. At least his eye right up against the sack wall can it be called a wall. At least his eye up against the sack wall knows only a vagueness of tilting colour as of the ground swinging up and down steady with the other's pace. This thin seeing not enough to grasp the shapes of things or even the features of the land over which he is carried. He asks then for how much further and for where. From the other an answering grunt. At least he takes it for an answer. So he asks again. How much further and where. When no grunt comes he thinks perhaps the grunt then had nothing to do with his question and really it only seemed to him an answer coming as it did in the immediate after of his asking. As a dog begging beneath the table thinks the spilled crumbs are for him.

In the only-yesterday morning he had filled the pail with milk. He had gone with the coins to the women making their baskets. One of them a girl younger than he. Her tiny fingers wondrous to see threading fast the willow shafts. He had gaped until one perhaps the girl's mother for they shared a chin asked him what was he for. His hand out bold with the coins he had told her stern as his mother had told him there's half here now and the other half coming when the mask is made. At their laughter the shame-heat common enough in him but still a small swift misery for this new humiliation. He held the coins and burned. They saw his pain and were kind then to take his coins and shake his hand and call him goodman as he has heard his father called. Little goodman. Inside the sack he mouths them to himself these fine words.

They are travelling uphill. For a while now he has thought it so. He feels with each step and jolt against the damp back a slight lift and so for the ground imagines a slope. What strain for the carrier who heaves him. No wonder the panting and there again the rare grunt-hhem that clears the breath. There is a spit. That is new. His carrier wouldn't he like a short rest. He asks wouldn't you like a short rest. Hearing no reply his ears turn instead to the other sounds that make for him the world outside the sack. The ground. It crunches with the other's tread. As when he and Mabb snorting laughter the stony field sliding under their run topple and gash their knees. From inside the sack he has heard a rustling as of leaves moved by wind and so he knows there are trees or at least bushes.

The rustling not thick enough for a forest but more as if dotted sparse or gathered into small clumps like the patch of dogwood where he will sometimes sleep when the knot under his father's knee begins to twinge. He has also heard somewhere outside the sack the shook-up rattling of a bird he knows by its sound to be black and the more distant ticking trill of another he knows to be brown. Inside the sack he can picture these to himself for some little amusement. Beyond the other's breathing the grunt-hhem he has heard nothing like a voice. He imagines the stony slope empty but for them. Else he imagines crowds and crowds of people all stood still. All silent watching them pass.

He is thirsty and hungry. For smell he has the oniony reek of the other's sweat and that the strongest of the scents that find him in the sack. Once or twice a brief sweetness as of flowers. Before he was in the sack he was crouched in the straw behind the cow. The scents then were of hide and dung and faint burning. The change of scents had been the first thing. Even before he understood himself to be foot-over-head lifted sack-blind he had thought where does it come from that sudden smell. For the sack has its own sackish smell. He thinks it like spoiled grain or the corners of the house that grow damp and soft with the cold wet air of winter. But it is summer now and summer ripens all smells including his own, moist in his pits and groin.

It had been Mabb's idea to scoop the comb. From the basketers he had gone to the strip of field where Mabb bent with her mother and father. Seeing him she had shunted her jaw to one side and let her eyes roll loose in their holes. He had answered with some horrific face before bending beside her to help pick stones from the soil. Mabb's father showed them the unearthed topskull of what looked to be a goat. Mabb's mother asked on his mother. And your father how is he. This mention of his father made with brittleness and frowning. More than once she has tended to his bruises. To her asking he replied my father's knot pains him.

To the wood after. He and Mabb on a thick alder limb. She unwrapped a small cheese and after they had eaten she wished loudly for a scoopful of something sweet. Ah for some sweet thing she said.

His carrier stumbles. He hears the stones slip from beneath the feet. All at once the steady tread unsteadied. All at once the weight of his sacked self swinging forward and down into a hardness that jangles his bones. From somewhere beside him a thump and with it the uph of a chest losing

its wind. His head no longer rests on his carrier's back but on the stony ground and with this change he feels an odd remorse as for a thing lost. He is unharmed but for the slight throbbing where he landed. Anyway he has had worse. But here a pair of hands on the other side of the sack wall and wall it is for he can think of no better word. Through the sack wall the hands find his head and probe it. He is reminded of the way his father's hands move over the hives. How carefully he lifts to check each in turn. A thumb in the eye pokes from him an ow. From the other side of the sack wall a sigh as of relief.

Upswung once again to dangle at his carrier's back. Some comfort in that now familiar. Only after they have set off again the steady pace the pant resumed does he think ah there it was there my moment to run.

Not for the first time he wonders where this carrying will end. Into his mind he calls up all the things he has seen carried in sacks. Potatoes. Grain. The cut-off heads and feet of birds. Breathless puppies. Earth things dead things. Things on their way from or to the ground. He knows he is not a thing dug up so it must be that he is to be buried. He prods feebly at the cloth which is tough and sturdy and will not break. He cries quietly and longs for that only yesterday the honey-sweet dusk. He and Mabb cackling off with the stolen golden comb. Mabb would not have allowed herself to be sacked up. She the strong-as-a-horse bull-girl bellower who can lift a fieldstone the size of his head would already have kicked her way out. He the weak and cloddish junt will go meek and unresisting to his end. What small snuffed life. What puniness. Oh basket-weavers oh his flowering dogwood shelter.

Once smaller than he is now. His father had shown him how to smoke the bees. The dry cake of dung kept for the purpose and this wafted among the hives. They think it wildfire his father had said. They get so busy preparing for it they don't even notice you. From behind the round flat basket face of the mask his father's voice murmuring gentle to match the hum. Behind his own makeshift linen mask he held his cough and watched a bee crawling along his father's wrist. Always stamp out the smoke his father said.

A new sound that of trickling. His dry throat swallows almost chokes for water please a little. They near the sound and the trickling becomes a gushing. He thinks not buried after all but drowned. He thinks both amount to the same thing. He says a silent goodbye to Mabb to the cow

to his mother to the little girl who he thinks must now be quick-finger-weaving the new mask he gave the coins for. The mask that was to be his. He feels his carrier bend. He hears the glug of a vessel being filled. His carrier straightens. Ear to the warm damp back he listens to the gulps moving down inside. Dry as he is he could weep again for please oh please a little water. And like a sudden rain it comes pouring into the sack from above. Down onto his bent head his cramped knees. He lifts his chin to the stream as his carrier empties the vessel over him. Mouth up against the pinched sack roof he drinks. He thinks this the greatest kindness ever done to him.

By the other's walk he is rocked. How warm the sunned sack. How heavy his lolling drowsing head. He rolls into the soft red behind his lids where the beating of his carrier's heels into the ground becomes a steady soothing thrum. Where he is weightless and falling all at once. Where there is sweetness on his tongue and the little weaver girl is making a basket tight around him and his father's hands are lifting the basket and tilting and turning him ever so gently. Tilting and turning him ever so gently.

After some time he does not know how long he wakes with a small cry for his sore legs. The burning in his lower belly tells him his bladder is full. From his carrier the grunt-hhem spit and how glad he is that he woke in time to hear it the rare sound that makes way for the steady breath. How great the comfort of this one sound when it reaches him inside the sack.

Some change has come about. For a span of his carrier's paces he cannot grasp what it is this change. Then he realises the sun is no longer glaring in through the sack wall but dimmed. And so he thinks it must be at its point of setting. Yet there is a flickering quality to the light and with it a sough as of wind through leaves. In this sound a fullness which he hears as forest. The change then not the sun but the landscape over which he is carried. Another change the levelling of the other's steps and so a flattening of the ground. He imagines branches spread above. His faceless carrier moving between trunks. And sure when he presses his eye to the sack wall the colours outside are greens, browns. And the ground. That stony crunching gone from beneath the other's tread. That replaced by a muffled thud and scuff the odd soft crack as of a twig breaking or the bones of some small creature snapping underfoot.

He needs to relieve himself. He does not want to piss the sack as he pisses the bed. The straw of the mattress so often soaked through and his father's displeasure at the stench. Piss-wallowing spawler what would his carrier think of him. Greater than the need to piss the urge to stretch his legs. My legs he says. And in place of the silence or rather the in the out of breath broken only by the grunt-hhem to which he has become accustomed he is now answered with two words. Two words for his own two. Not yet. Says his carrier not yet.

So startled he inside the sack by these two words that he forgets his legs their aching. His carrier's voice is low and rough. He thinks a man. Of this he cannot be certain although he does think of his carrier as a he. Not yet. The two words he thinks hold knowledge of an end to his carrying. Not yet but later or perhaps even soon there will be an end to his carrying. An end to the sack. Until now he had not been sure of that. And only now can he admit to himself that a part of him had wondered whether he would continue in this way forever or at least until he starved and died. The sack his legs the carrier the breath the grunt-hhem and no more the field the dogwood with its white flowers the honey-sweet. No more his father's knot.

On being bundled into the sack there had been no doubt in him that his carrier intended harm. But the poured water. The hands that felt for him. The sigh like relief at finding him unhurt. In these things there is care. Unless the harm is still to come. Unless the sack though cramped and uncomfortable is not itself the harm but only the way to a harm that is waiting somewhere up ahead. Not yet. He grips himself around his full bladder and presses his thumb into his bee sting. He knows his father will not miss him but he thinks his mother might. He wonders what the harm will be. What punishment. Some dread in him at that, at the thought of that.

For he had done something hadn't he. Why else had he been crouched like a thief behind the cow. Why else had he fled to the dogwood with hands still sticky from the comb. Why else Mabb's frightened look as she had left him. The air sweet and crackling.

Surely that is the sun setting now. That fading and cooling. The gloom outside the sack now such that he cannot even make out the differences of colour. Either night is falling he thinks or else I am being carried into the mouth of a cavern. He imagines again crowded watchers. Their still and

silent bodies lining the walls of some dark space. He imagines the little weaver girl among them.

Only yesterday the honey. The sweetness and thrill of wrongdoing worth the sting to his palm. Worth too the walloping that would come if his father noticed the missing slab. There was always the sage bowl. He and Mabb squatted in the high grass. They licked the honey from their fingers. They spat the wax. In the grass they lay with tight stomachs. Him glutted and contented eyes shut until Mabb's hand closed around his arm. Look she said. Oh look.

In the growing darkness he calls for how much further and for where. For this he gets no answer though he thinks perhaps his carrier's pace has begun to slow. Is it his imagination or has his carrier's pace begun to slow.

He had looked. He had seen the smoke above the hives. Even from where they lay in the tall grass they could hear it. The buzzing. The crackling. In his nostrils the sweet scent turning black as he ran.

Yes they are slowing. They will stop soon.

Under his dogwood that night only last night he had lain curled in his dread. In his dread he slept and when the dawn came he wondered whether he might have only dreamed it. And so he crept back. The smoke gone but still the smell. The burned-out husks. Somewhere in all that wreck the charred clot of dung he'd left unstamped. Perhaps his father had not yet seen. Perhaps his father would not set the blame on him. As he stood thinking this his mother stepped out holding the pail. Her face on one side swollen and dark. She saw him and the eye that was not squeezed shut between lid and cheek opened wide. She spoke to him this one word. Go. So he went. In his panic to the cowshed. Crouching behind the cow he heard his father. With a door-bang from the house his father. When I get my hands on him. When I get my hands on son-of-a-sow-bitch him. He heard his father's dragging walk moving away up the track. He felt relief for not yet his punishment. And then the sack.

They are in darkness now. His arms his knees all swallowed up. His carrier stops. At the end of slowing stops. The hard breath the in the out. The hhem the spit. He inside the sack. In the sack he is lowered to the ground. The roof of the sack as yet pulled taut by the heavy carried load of him now falls slack. In the sack he lies and listens. He hears his carrier's breath close by. He feels the loss of the carrying as a babe set down by its mother misses the arms that cradled it. The breath of his

carrier seems to be becoming fainter. Is it his imagination or is the breath of his carrier becoming fainter. He calls out are you still there. Are you still there. The burning in his belly sharpens. He pisses himself and it is warm and familiar.

The air outside has cooled but his sack shelters him. His sack yes for hasn't he come to think of it as his. And really isn't he grateful to have been carried away from it all. Isn't it good to be in his sack. Isn't he glad of this space that is all his. His legs no longer hurt. He can hardly feel them.

Are you still there are you.

His hands at the sack wall yes for what else can it be called but a wall. He unsurprised then to find in the wall a door. A door that swings inward when he pushes and on the other side a long room lit with torches. He steps from darkness into light. Here a great feast laid out on a table. Here a chair where he might sit. And figures rising to greet him, saying little goodman, little goodman you are most welcome here.

Pit

Tim MacGabhann

At dusk, the big marine, Jonathan, would yawn and stretch his legs until his knees popped and say, 'I think there's a game on', and Juanito or me would say, 'All right, *mi jefe*', and give the nod to the smaller marine, Alacrán, to pull the TV away from the far wall and over to the middle of the room in front of the holed and arse-battered sofa, and we'd watch Pachuca get leathered by Querétaro, or León grind out a draw against Xolos, or whoever against whoever, never anything big, never anything decisive, and Jonathan, the big marine, who was so gentle, so soft-spoken, almost so girly in his address that you'd swear he was gay—and, hey, that's no problem with me—would be up swearing and hollering at the screen and waving his arms like he was coaching the fuckers. Sometimes our boss, Eleazir, would come up to check things over, walkie-talkie on the table squawking and buzzing, and he'd tut and shake his head, arms folded, saying, 'Yeah, I can see how you were a real one out there, Jonathan.' But, ordinarily, Eleazir and Jonathan were as quiet as each other. You'd have to call Jonathan full-on shy, honestly, a big shy lunk with a soft lilt of a voice and a little self-excusing laugh every couple of sentences, a real country boy, which made me laugh, too, of course, since he'd grown up in Mexico City and I was from the sticks and I sounded more like a *chilango* than he did. 'Too much TV, young man,' he'd said to me, then laughed, when I'd commented on this.

Jonathan made a chessboard by marking the squares with a stick of blue chalk and Tipp-Exing letters on the lids of Coke bottles. Eleazir liked that. He'd play the odd game with him. Eleazir was a formal type, pretty stern, forever squinting, hands in his pockets the whole time. I suspected he must have been a detective before he had gotten into this, for whatever reason he'd gotten into it. Why he felt the need to check we were doing

our job all right, I've no idea. Jonathan and Alacrán minded themselves. We could have turned them loose and they'd have just set up a stall in the village down the road, where Alacrán could bicker at Jonathan, and maybe Jonathan could set up shop selling mushrooms preserved in honey to Australian tourists, giving his sidelong nod and half-smile, nodding like he really understood their English when he was just polite and good at hiding shit. The pair of them would probably even end up with enough for a proper chessboard. But, well, orders are orders, so that's not how it shook out.

We came upon them, or, rather, they were handed off to us, after an ambush that you probably saw on the TV—seventeen marines killed, a helicopter downed, you know the one. For weeks the *gringos* talked about sending troops into Mexico. Jonathan and Alacrán were brought to us with heads bowed and wrapped in loose black sacking, wrists zippertied behind their backs, and Juanito and I couldn't believe it. Usually we kept Hondurans penned up in here. This was a step up, we thought, especially when they pulled the sack off Alacrán's head and he squinted around him, clicked his lips and tongue like he was tasting the air, and said the name of the townland we were in, then got a sock in the chops from Eleazir for his trouble. He toppled over with a string of blood and mucus breaking from his lips, but, when he landed, just spat, smiled, and said, 'Now I know I was right.' Eleazir glowered down where Alacrán lay on the apron of concrete just outside the shed and Jonathan, the bag still on his head, told him to stop shooting his mouth off, saying, 'Many a man's tongue has broken his nose, chief.' They put up no attempt at resistance, not even when we filmed them on their knees in the mud, holding up their dog tags, reading off their names and numbers and the location of their capture, in calm, steady voices. It was weird seeing them read the names and numbers. They'd know them off by heart, obviously. But that's how bureaucracy is. Even in school they got you to read your birth cert out loud, as though you might otherwise make it up. And that's what I thought of, watching them, listening to them: school. It was easy to picture how they'd have been at school. They'd have been the good kids. Alacrán would've been shoving his books around, coughing out sighs, shaking his head. But it'd have all been for show. Anyone could see he was letting on. Anyone would see right through him.

*

The *señora* who brought us food and cleaned and cooked kept the charm set to high the whole time, but Jonathan had a sidling, big-lunk kind of magic he liked to work on her: the sort of play-acting he probably tried with his granny, missed doing, I don't know; doe-eyed, Elvis-looking carry-on. That evening when she came down the mudslick of the drive, Jonathan was up and out of the plastic Corona chair from where he'd been watching oil-stain colours of sunset spreading through the puddles, and straight over to her, taking the bale of firewood from her hand by its twine, 'If you'll excuse me, *señora,*' smiling at her like a waiter in his first week on the job. She recoiled and said, '*Ay, Dios*', and clapped a palm to her chest, hobbling back on her *huaraches*, but not for so long that she couldn't rally herself, tut, and, with a jut of the chin at me and Juanito, say, '*Ya ves*, not here a day and he's already helping out. What's your excuse?'

'He's shown us right up, *señora,*' Juanito said, scratching at his tooth with a cocktail stick and ruminating a counterattack in his game of bottle-cap chess against Alacrán.

But that was her and Jonathan off to a great start. Within a couple of days he'd even have a head start on her, chopping vegetables, heating kettles, breaking twigs over his knee to keep the fire going. She kept up a fierce spate of jabber the whole time she was near him, who'd been seen with whom outside what dance, where her sons were, how her sons' wives were behaving, all of it breaking over his smiling, nodding silence. It was a nippy winter, winter like it used to be up around here, which is to say, dreadful altogether. We'd a fire going every night. Jonathan, being from the city and unused to the frigidity of these parts, I assume, was attentive to that operation the whole time. The *señora* even got him in on that trick of gathering the embers onto the lid of the stove to heat the pans for the morning. He got good at coaxing a glow through them, enough to form the nucleus of a new fire where he'd sit and toast himself the whole day, a wet-dog smell rising from the mealy soles of his socks. Tasks were his way of talking, I suppose. He must have been good at what he did out there, whatever they had him doing. But it'd take a lot more than Juanito and I were capable of to winkle that out of him.

When he wasn't helping the *señora*, Jonathan would ghost around the safehouse, the only sound out of him the clop of the bottle-caps on his

chessboard. If we'd played for anything bigger than matchsticks he'd have fleeced the lot of us: certainly he gave Alacrán a good going-over, since Alacrán never shut up long enough to concentrate. Even Juanito got the best of Alacrán. Juanito had done a semester and a half at the *escuela normal* before sliding into what he'd slid into, and was never one to pass up a chance to show that he had once been smart, issuing a barrage of claims and counterclaims and questions and hypotheses thick enough to exhaust Socrates—the source and model, Juanito claimed, for his method of irritating the fuck out of Alacrán, whose big thing was defending religion, traditional roles, that kind of thing. Men in the field, women in the home so that they didn't turn into a load of deceiving I-won't-say-whats. This he pressed to a degree that made even the *señora* over by the stove pucker her lips and look at him from under her eyebrows as if to say, 'I'm not so sure about that.'

'Why do they even call you Alacrán, anyway?' I asked him one of the evenings.

'Because it's the blond scorpions you have to watch,' Jonathan answered for him. 'And he's blacker than petrol. Harmless.'

Alacrán shot him a dark look and clicked his tongue.

'See?' Jonathan said. 'He doesn't do a thing.'

One evening a storm put out the generator, left us to have our *café de olla* in the flicker of the paraffin lamp, its feathery stutter going ninety, in sync with the storm. The *señora* had retired for the evening, going back down the humpbacked trail through the bluish pines towards the village—long before the deluge, thankfully. Eleazir came in out of the storm with his dark detective head on him and kicked the drops from his boots. He sat over beside us and I could feel a heat I'd never noticed before pulsating off his look towards the two kidnapped marines, one that told me his hatred—concealed, or perhaps gestured at, by the convivial bouts of chess against Jonathan that he both so enjoyed and so savagely pursued to victory—went well beyond the cops-and-robbers distinction under which we all together laboured. As well as the storm, an argument was going full pelt between Juanito and Alacrán about a reality TV programme they'd had on before the generator conked out: something about how to tell if your girlfriend was cheating on you.

'It's not something I worry about,' Juanito said, with a bob of a shrug. 'If she's going to run off then she's going to run off. I stamp my foot about it and I look like even more of an idiot.' He'd fought with his girlfriend because she hadn't been talking to him nicely, and he was trying not to send her a text before he'd cooled down, in case he said something savage.

'Women,' went Alacrán, with an insuck of air that, set against the nasal whine of his voice, summoned about him all the frightening grandeur of a pissed-off hog, 'are all the same. You need to apply the Law of Amazon to them.'

'What on earth,' Juanito said, 'is the Law of Amazon?'

'Three days of nothing,' Jonathan said before Alacrán could, and thocked over my bishop with a diagonal step of his pawn. 'And then, out of nowhere, you turn up.'

Alacrán clicked his tongue and shook his head at the floor.

'That's abusive,' said Juanito. 'It's manipulation, pure and simple.'

Alacrán said, 'Let her come and get you, idiot. Because you *know* she will. Because all she wants is to find out how tied up she's got you.'

Juanito laughed. 'Oh, she knows how tied up she's got me. What do I care? It gives me a sense of direction.'

'Oh, you like it, do you?' Alacrán flapped his hand. If we'd had a real chessboard I feel sure he would have flipped it. 'And I suppose you believe all that feminist nonsense, don't you. Those idiots out there spraying paint all over the statues of our forefathers.'

'Our forefathers?' Juanito laughed again, more gently this time, and somehow that was even more maddening. 'Not around here, they're not. Whites with Spanish accents. You can shove your *patria*. Am I right, Jonathan?'

'You're right, chief,' Jonathan said, and got up from the game to peer down at the paraffin lamp, at the criss-crossing lines of light and shade that stippled the cotton netting. He smiled a little, and tilted his head towards the barred window, and said, 'Rain's easing off.'

Eleazir followed his gaze and said, 'I'll be off, then. Good to see you well.' He caught my eye. I put up my hoodie and slid my hands into the front, gripping the revolver. I often forgot it was there; I'd stick my hands into the hoodie to warm them and dunt my knuckles off the revolver's cold weight. At that point in my life it still gave me a jump to realise it was there, an actual gun, crazy.

'And I suppose your girlfriend makes you all that soy stuff that makes your titties grow,' Alacrán was saying to Juanito, who merely nodded and said, 'Yes, she is practically a lesbian now. And so am I, by extension, more or less. Who could credit it?'

I wasn't missing anything. I followed Eleazir out into the rinsed cool of the night. The S of the path shone silver under the starlight. The birds were going ballistic, chittering on and on about the storm, I supposed, the way people will talk all sorts of bollocks out in the street after an earthquake, just happy they've survived. I was able to smell the woodsmoke coming from the chimneys on the village's main street, see the fishbelly shine of their corrugated roofs. Eleazir stopped short all of a slap, the soles of his boots rasping on the asphalt. He stood scratching the back of his head. I thought he was about to say something about the view, about the peace of it, the serenity of it, and I was readying to agree, maybe say something about the birds, about how the woodsmoke petering up was probably my favourite smell in the world, but instead he came out with, 'We got word. There was another operation. A helicopter shot up a villa. One of ours.'

'One of ours?' I said, trying to press my laugh down. The likes of me and Juanito and Eleazir had never and would never darken the arches of a villa anything like those our bosses owned.

Eleazir nodded. 'You can expect to be out of it pretty soon.' He looked back up the way we'd come. I saw the whites of his eyes. 'You've done well up to now. Finish it out the same way, there's a good lad.' He nodded and was gone, off down the road, shoulders hunched against a wind that wasn't blowing. I watched him round the curve of the road. I kept waiting to feel something. The inside of my skull was the hole left in an avocado when you drive in a knife-blade and flick away the stone—that clean, cool gap.

When I got back they were still going. Alacrán was talking about the Aztecs, about the a novel he'd read, a new one, the one by Luiselli's ex-husband, and how in that novel they'd keep prisoners spoiled and cosseted and out of their gourds on shrooms and peyote for a whole year getting blown and overfed while eunuchs played flutes to them and all that shit, treated better than they'd ever been treated, and how they'd be led on their last day to the great bloodstained steps of the pyramid through the crowds with people holding crippled babies and leprous old ones and all that kind of thing out to them like celebrities walking past the crowd up

the red carpet, hoping for a healing brush of their hands, while Juanito lounged, back to the fire, his temple resting against the 'L' of his finger and thumb, a half-smile on his face that told me everything about how much of a pain in the arse he must have been in that semester and a half in the *escuela normal*.

'All of which is to say,' Alacrán, with an inhale that suggested he was winding up, 'that all relationships are like this. They want you to be something you can't possibly be. And why they beam up at you all Bambi-eyed and drooling at the beginning is because they're not sure they have you. And then when they do have you it's because they see how you are, they see your limitations, they see your buttons, they see your pressure points, and they jam in their fingers, and they bring you down, down, down, all the way to your knees, unless you fight back at them.'

'So what you're saying,' Juanito ventured, the smile still on his face, 'is that we need some kind of men's rights movement in this country. To take back what we've lost.' I looked at where he had his other hand, and I could see the shape and weight of the gun there. Jonathan was looking at it too.

Alacrán stood over Juanito, swaying, eyes blazing.

'She has you castrated,' Alacrán said. 'She has your balls around your neck like a pair of wet red Christmas baubles. And the worst of it is you like it.'

Juanito laughed and came out with something—I can't remember what—and they went at it again, and it was a long time after midnight before Juanito got bored enough to lock the two hostages in the shed at the back and take up his position on first watch, seated by the door. The transformer came back on with a loud *thoom* and all the lights flicked on as I was coming back up the hall. Juanito got up to turn off the lights and as he was coming past my camp bed I told him what Eleazir had told me. Juanito's forehead creased. He looked towards the shed door and said, 'One way to win an argument.'

Sleep didn't happen that night. All I could picture was an adobe house glowing with firelight where Jonathan and Alacrán were cooped up, wearing warrior head-dresses and loincloths and jade necklaces, Alacrán chuckling and ogling dancing girls wearing not much more than they were, while Jonathan smiled in meditation at a fire glowing in an alcove.

Next morning I couldn't face them. Hearing the *señora* gossiping at Jonathan turned my stomach, and his warm, dumb smile made me want to shake him. It was a good thing that the transformer was working and we could put the TV on, because otherwise I don't know from where I'd have found something to say to them. Jonathan didn't seem to feel anything untoward. He stood over the kettle with his hands behind his back, content to wait for it to start bubbling, and then he mixed in *canela* and *piloncillo* just like the *señora* had taught him. Alacrán had his jaw set and a hard gleam of triumph had come over his gaze. He was crowing at Juanito, saying, 'Nothing to add? Couldn't google anything feminist last night? Couldn't win the argument? Time to go back to college, maybe?'

'Leave off, would you,' Juanito said, sitting on the couch in front of the flatscreen, remote in one hand, the other supporting his temple. On the screen a woman was flipping her hair and brushing her fingers down the chest of a burly kid in his early twenties. The kid's responses were of baffled revulsion. In the corner was a second camera angle showing his girlfriend watching this test of his affections. He was passing the test but her expression didn't seem to reflect this; brow furrowed, arms folded, tapping her foot, like a football manager watching his team close out a cagey win.

The day died slow, and hard, but it died, and it was a relief when the *señora* said, 'Well, that's me for off!', and waved to us from the dusk-lit frame of the door.

'Shall we?' Jonathan said, shaking the jar of bottle caps: white Peñafiel lids, red Coca-Cola ones.

'Alacrán and Juanito first,' I said. 'A reconciliation bout.'

I didn't expect it to happen but that made both of them laugh, and the sag I felt in the floor of my stomach, seeing Alacrán mime a jab and then pull it while Juanito mugged and ducked, I don't know, I didn't have the words—didn't have the time to find them, either, because it was right then that I heard Eleazir's boots grating over the S-shaped path: the worn heel of the left boot, the harder belt of the right one, as though using the heel of his longer leg as a crampon to haul him along. I got up and met him at the door.

Okay,' Eleazir said. His face was red and there was sweat on his cheeks. I thought of bacon frying in a pan.

I wondered if a heart attack wasn't about to fell the cunt where he stood and I felt electric with the hope that one would, but of course nothing of the sort happened. Beyond him, by the gate, was a black pickup with a young fella in a red gilet sitting in the passenger seat looking at us. Two heavies sat in the back—lighter skinned than we're used to seeing round here.

'You're to film all of it,' Eleazir said. 'Take them to the first clearing. There's a hole dug. It's on you to fill it in after.'

'And use what?' I said. 'The revolvers?'

Eleazir looked at me like he felt sorry for me, and then he shook his head, and held something out. I took but couldn't feel it, my body was that numb with the dread of it all. I looked down and saw the same black sacks as the poor cunts had been wearing when they'd come in. Eleazir was already climbing back into the front seat of the pickup. I turned back towards the three of them sitting by the fire with their chess game. They were looking up at me, their faces flicker-lit. My heartbeat shook my throat. A compost smell of sweat was rising from my armpits and my legs felt like they had eels swimming up them. When Jonathan saw the bags I was holding he shrugged. Alacrán looked at Juanito with a mute blankness that was harder to take than outright pleading would have been. Juanito himself looked calm enough. He was holding the revolver levelled at Alacrán, and all of the life seemed to have dropped out of his eyes. The relief I felt, seeing his calmness, I think that fills me with more shame than anything else, looking back.

Every step we took into the forest made the world shake. We kept the light of our phones on them. In their hoods, they stumbled, and with the zipper ties around their wrists a fall would mean a broken hand. The hand holding my gun was too sweaty for it not to slip but Juanito's was level. Uplit branches reached out from either side of the track, pale in the ghost whiteness. When we got to the clearing a cairn of reddish muck stood beside a smooth-walled crater. The weeds were phosphorescent in the light of our phones, the caught rain white upon them. And—blades sunk in the soft earth, half-hidden by a tussock of grass—two long machetes winked.

'Turn around,' Juanito said, when they'd walked to the rim of the hole. 'And now, on your knees, if you wouldn't mind.'

They did so. I watched the damp spread in dark maps on the knees of their fatigues. My palm ached around the stock of the revolver. I flexed my hand. The weight made the barrel nod forward.

'We'll give you a chance to pray,' Juanito said. 'If that's something you'd like.'

Alacrán turned his head towards Jonathan. The sacks must have been thin enough to see through, because Jonathan shrugged, and then Alacrán turned his head towards us and said, 'That won't be necessary.'

'Or perhaps a last message to send?' I blurted. The way Juanito looked at me made the skin of my scalp pull tight.

'What a way to win an argument,' Alacrán said, and Juanito shook his head, handed me his phone, its camera now recording, and strode across to the lip of the hole, whipped the sack from Alacrán's head and the machete from the ground with a clean deep *chung*. Chopped grass flecked the light. That's the last thing I saw before I shut my eyes, but I heard everything else. When there was something like silence I opened my eyes again, saw Jonathan turn his head towards the noise. For a second he looked like he'd forgotten about the sack on his head. Juanito's chest moved up and down, hard and fast, and I could see by the tension in his cheeks that his teeth were clenched together. That flinty look was still in his eyes but his forehead was creased in a way that suggested his look was more a matter of concentration than a truly felt numbness.

With the balls of his wrists pressed against each other, Jonathan took the bag from his head and tied it across his eyes. 'If that's okay. Sack's a little thin.' He gave a sideward jerk of the head. 'He's not quite done. Give him a bit of a hand, would you?' I shot Alacrán in the head from where I stood—point and click, easier than I'd thought, easier than a videogame, even, because the response time's faster—and saw his head wobble and burst, heard Juanito yell, and for a moment thought the bullet had gone all the way through and caught him in the foot. Birds flew screeching from the trees. In the heavy wettish clapping of their wings I saw again the paraffin lamp, its mothlight.

'Much obliged,' Jonathan said, over the fading boom. Juanito hauled Alacrán to the lip of the hole and pushed him over the edge with the side of his foot.

'Anything,' I said, breathing in and out, trying to steady the words, 'anything you want to add?'

'Not really,' Jonathan said. 'All I have is my sister. She lives by Parque Lira. Well: we both did. Now it's just her, of course. I had a wife but she went off with someone Alacrán and I both know. It was easier to take shelter with my sister than it was to begin again.' He gave that hesitant laugh of his. 'I think Alacrán was angrier about it than I was. He didn't always used to talk about women that way. Loyalty for you.'

Juanito was looking at his boots, at the wet gleam of his boots. He lifted the machete. Jonathan laughed again, a new lightness in it, and he said, 'Think I'm as ready as I'll get.'

A strike to the back of the neck, where spine meets skull. Jonathan went easy on Juanito: he went over like a felled cow, but in two pieces. Rain was coming down now, wind in it, too, making the whole clearing roar like we were inside the paraffin lamp. Then I walked to the rim of the crater to get the shovel. Juanito was looking down at the first body, the heap of parts that had been Alacrán.

'What a way to win an argument,' he said, with a shiver in his voice like he was trying to laugh, trying to laugh the way Jonathan had laughed, and the half-smile on his face could have been Jonathan's, too. If I thought about it too long I'd get sick. I handed a shovel to Juanito and we got to demolishing the cairn of red mud, throwing it in on top of the two dead men before it could melt under the stun of rain, red-brown trickles all down the folds in their uniforms. All I could hear was the rain. The phones' light was weak and the suffocation of that darkness was a fist shoving wad after wad of velvet down my throat. The birds settled in the trees, not saying much: the guns must have scared them less than the storm the night before.

Once we had smoothed over the grave we went back the way we had come, along grass still creased and gleaming from the weight of us walking through it, however many hours ago it had been—two, two million, it made no difference. We left the machetes and shovels propped by the door for the rain to clean. The kitchen was still warm from last night's fire, and seeing the *señora* back already gave me an even worse feeling of dizziness about the time that had passed, or not passed. She turned when she heard us and, when she saw that there was only the pair of us, and the state of us, she rose, her mouth opening, and the breath caught in my throat.

'Scrub that off, won't you?' I got myself to say, waggling a finger at the blue chalk squares Jonathan had etched on the floor, way a teacher would—the way teachers *had*, I supposed, telling me to fix stuff, else I wouldn't have picked it up at all. I watched my hand shake out the order as though that hand belonged to somebody else. 'And you can throw those cunting bottlecaps out as well while you're at it.' Juanito pushed past me and walked, shaking his head, across the fireplace and towards his room. I saw him pan out on the camp bed with the heels of his hands pressed to his eyes, knees up, covered in blood and muck. I turned my back on him and stood at the door, watching the stars fade into a predawn haze of yellows and lilacs and deep, dark reds, and after a little while I started to hear the scrape of the *señora* working her sponge against the stone. I had nothing in my head. I watched the stars go out one by one and listened to the birds wake up and I watched the rising light make a smooth silver gleam of the roads connecting one nothing to another, and I sucked all of it down me as though it were rainwater, because I knew that this was the last time I would feel so calm about anything ever again. I had underprized the lot and now it was leaving me for good. Rain patterns dried and faded in the broken surface of the driveway. I watched the last of them shimmer off and then I went in to wait for Eleazir.

The Liffey Banks, Claddagh Records, 1972

I found them in a skip outside a dodgy gaff on Fumbally Lane—
a score of vinyl albums amid bockety chairs and broken slates.
I lugged them home through the city's chartered streets, the full moon
flitting puddle to puddle on my long and windscoured path.

Only three survived intact—an unlikely, not unholy trinity:
there was poor dead Jimi Hendrix mangling 'The Star-Spangled Banner'
in the name of voodoo children on Seattle's wounded streets;
Sandy Denny dead at thirty who knows now where the time goes,
with migrant birds across the winter sky; and there you were,
Tommie Potts, enshrined in vinyl. The daily life had scrawbed,
the diamond needle gouged, too many hops & skips & jumps—until
I reckoned the scratchy skittering must be channelling the possessed
and dispossessed alike. On bird-companioned cycles by the Camac,
dear palindromic tributary to the Liffey's longing for the sea, the sea,

you caught the tune of the wild trout in a bright exuberance.
There where pops of bullrush, watercress, hazel, willow, ash, segued
into granite walls that hold the river to her courses. You pulsed
the sonic currents prospecting for the motherlode, to fathom
the exact depth of the wound, an ur-wound part composed
of famine, the oxymoron of some brutal civil war, the bombings &
the beatings & all that local bother. And there you stood—shining,
humble, indefatigable, true—you sophisticated snatcher you
of a musical phrase from church, from concert hall, from out the guts
of an old valve radio, from some bar where jazzheads congregate,
from the black spinning moons on a Dansette, some
version of an old tune ornamented by a whore for the rococo.

In the quiet of the archive now I find you, Tommie Potts, dustmotes
settling in springlight, safe in the certainty of your immortality,
the young musicians lit by your artistry. You are tinderspark!
You are cure and guarantee against historical shame.
Because we trust a man who'd walk through fire to save his friends.
Because those lost friends shaped your soul. Because you carried
their death even unto your last mortal breath. Because

when you lifted your fiddle to play, your tears were blessings,
every tune offered in their names. Because the very same hands
that tended your sorrow garden, that tended your seedlings devotedly,
could wrest tunes from the void, could carry our griefs home.

Paula Meehan

Outlines

Lowen Reilly

Every dawn, when he took the dog out, and nightly when he took her out again, they'd gather him in, like the grip of a cunt; the zoneless spaces, the places where the beginnings of the forgetting could be felt. Abandoned railway lines overcooked with undergrowth. China clay works as hollow as skulls. Anywhere he could trace the outline of erasure. When a twenty-tonne sperm whale washed up on the Bluff, Lev couldn't keep away, was there every week, to bear witness to the undoing, the rot and decay, until there was nothing left but an ellipsis in the sand. Even on a lazy afternoon when he took to the graveyard two streets over, he'd stop to guess the name on a fogged-up headstone; the guts of a life, eviscerated from view.

Hard rain—and it rained hard a lot—drove him up to the dog field overlooking the bay, and there he'd trade the othering of his bones for fretting about the direction the town was going as his eyes fell upon the cranes looming over the latest beachside development. Ankevi House. A chrysalis of concrete and amazing glass. He called up to enquire once, when the letting board went up, asked the woman on the end of the telephone who qualified for an affordable. He couldn't unsee the Mega Bowl, he said, trying to connect. She'd follow up with management, let him know, and the line went dead as the dog squatted in the low grass to squeeze out another turd.

The quiescent high street was no different whenever they ventured into town. The craft store and the chandlery he'd visit with his sister both boarded up, awaiting the slow unfolding into something else. There was only one club in town these days, one club and three pubs, but he could still smell the ammonia in every doorway that he passed. It was all restaurants and exclusive hotels now, where a bottle of fizz cost the same

as to see Man City and screen prints of ghostly engine houses and gutted pilchard works lined the stairwells and landings.

The pilchards I get. That's close to ya 'eart, but that other stuff? his uncle argued that evening, when Lev went off on one again, ranting out back in the garage where he helped to fix up bikes for the speedway. If they wanna bury our backbone only to excavate 'ee and mount 'ee on the wall, let 'em, more fool them. You can't break water, they'll see.

A race was playing on the tablet, propped up on the tool chest, and Unc paused for the carousel and then went on. What do you care anyway? Old man was a Janner for fuck sake. You bang on like ya St Piran returned. Rock up dressed as the 'obby 'oss next.

You and fucking 'oss, Lev said, running the inspection light over the four-stroke, the single cylinder pressed in gold. Saw a Super 8 of a bloke getting fucked by an oss once, 'ad 'air like you.

Unc, bald as a coot, sipped his tea, raised his eyebrows over the mug, smacked his lips. Very good.

The boy came in then, bare-chested, wearing trackie bottoms and eating cereal, and plonked himself down in the beanbag in front of the screen. He finished the bowl and then started skinning up, sprinkling some dusty-green homegrown into the fat-lip paper.

All right? his dad asked.

Yeah and you? the boy replied.

Done what ya mother asked?

Course, the boy shrugged. Unc motioned for the spliff, took a drag and passed it back.

You still off it? he said, looking over to Lev. Lev nodded.

Everything he knew about bikes he'd learned from his uncle, who'd learned everything he knew about bikes from horses. Unc was fading and grey now, some would say scrubbed out; down the Anchor they said that he walked like he had a glass dick, and that much was true, but it wasn't always the way. He'd not had the shakes of it, was all, and spinal damage in his thirties had pressed him further into his years, like a thumb tack in a wall. It was his mistake and he owned it. The colt had been cooped up too long, weaving in its stable, and he thought he could win it over, but he didn't and he paid for the hubris with a two-year bed sentence and came out the other side another man.

The boy was skinning up again, eyes on the tablet, one bare foot on a half pulled-out drawer, spanners beheaded in the gloom of the chest. He sparked up. Unc leaned over his shoulder, pinched the spliff before the boy could get his lips on it, took a drowsy-eyed toke and handed it back. The racers were coming to the finishing straight. Even Lev was watching now.

There, Unc said, leaning on the boy's shoulder, pointing at the screen. That ridge, there. That little one, right there, that looks like a queer's fucking 'air. Turn, 'ard, there. That's where he got ya.

He right, Lev? the boy asked, over the burr of the engines and the cheering of the crowd as a lad in a frog-green helmet crossed the checkers. But Lev wasn't watching any more, he'd turned away, and was checking his pockets for his keys and wallet and phone.

Listen to ya old man, he said, lifting the garage door to leave. That's me gone.

Lev was obsessed the first time he went to the Midway. The scent of the petrol mingling with the crisp, sun-baked dirt. The howl of the engines. The oval circuit, a form of return. When Unc put an arm on his shoulder and told him to give it a go, he soon learned that he had pace in his guts, as well as in his legs, and it all went from there really. He found it easier than anything else he'd ever done; even breathing was complex next to racing. But speedway isn't about bravery, like everybody said. Like life, it's about being braver than the rest. Some racers simply don't get that. Lev did. Could tell in a beat what boys would have it in them to clip the apex, or attack the blinds, and the ones that would cook the brakes instead. It was all about the cues: the loosening of the hands, the thinning of the eyes, the stillness of the feet. He knew more than his fair share. Not that he ever let on, or offered these cues up, not even to the boy. They were his, he'd earned them; down payments on his place in the world.

He was flying high for a while then, raced all over: the Black Country, Kent, Scotland, Wales, even went out to Spain once, raced in sunshine as oozy as egg yolk. Then, on the eve of going pro, sponsorships set to be signed that night, he fish-tailed on a double apex, downshifted too fast, and ended up in the barriers with a fractured eye socket, crumpled, like a bad idea in somebody else's hand.

Do you miss it? the wife would ask him when they started to knock about—holding out on him, not knowing that he was holding out on her

also—in his uncle's kitchen, with her hands doing a disappearing act in the suds in the sink and him running the cloth around the bends of the dinner plates, dreaming of the curves of the Midway.

He'd say, Nah, the past's a foreigner innit, and leave it at that, and it was only later, years later, in fact, after the scare and the tissue they took and all that, when she asked why he'd lived with his uncle all these years, and about his sister and that fella she were with, that he confessed to her that racing was the one good thing he had, besides Unc, and the green he grew in the back. That was the night they went up to the house, beneath a sky slashed with vapour trails and a sun bleeding out, and picked their way through the junk, like they were walking on glass. Like a bomb site, she said, and he made a face like that would've been kinder and when he showed her the burnt-out skeleton of his father's bed, with the fatty deposits beneath it, like a crude sketch of a scarecrow, she reached over and held his hand and in some ways she had never let go.

A week on when a wad of post finally arrived he carried it around in his coat pocket all morning and then went down to the harbour, unlocked the shipping container, heaved it open and stood in the doorway looking at his investment for a while before he went and sat amongst the box-fresh machinery, which was glimmering in the half-light, offering no shape or form. He thumbed through the post, expecting to hear word, found nothing but bills and threw them to the floor. Everything he owned he'd poured into this place, would pour in blood, spit, tears, if he thought it would help. It was a smart idea, he still believed that, with or without a licence, though he knew he needed one and despised that he did. A canning plant for pilchards too small to sell to chefs. Two fancy delis had already signed on and he had a farmers' market on the hook. Tinned produce was the future. Nobody bought fresh fish any more, especially ones they had to pick free of bones. That said everything you needed to know about the state of the world, he thought, getting the dog to sit for a treat, as he slouched back in his seat hating on the mirrored water through the crack in the door.

When he got in there was a plate in the microwave and he had two mouthfuls and scraped the rest into the bin. He caught up on the football, Argyle three points from the drop, let the dog out for a piss and went upstairs. The wife was asleep, turned away on her side, and he used the

light from his phone to guide him to the bed and slipped in carefully next to her, like a knife returned to its sheath.

In the morning she was gone, as always. Up at four, out by five. The hanger on the wardrobe relieved of its St Luke's smock. A tea was on the side and he warmed it up in the microwave while he got changed, forgot about it, and only remembered it was there when his stomach grumbled down on the beach while he was watching a mini digger take more scalps from the town, wondering what made a crater: the dirt that was taken away, or the dirt that remained?

He took the call beneath the awning of the ice-cream booth, hung up and felt hot shadow on his face, went to the water's edge, spat the taste from his mouth.

Days went by with nothing to be said. He'd held out for years before, what was a week, or a month?

On the second Friday he went over to his uncle's. The boy had won his first big race and his mother had made a fuss even though he didn't want none. Cake, fizzy pop, sentimental words. Afterwards, Lev followed his uncle up to the garage and once Unc had lit the oil-lamp he turned to his nephew in a way he never normally would, placed a hand on his shoulder as he had at the Midway all those years back, then quickly took it away.

I was breaking in a colt once, out Trewyn. Watch the gaskin of an 'oss when 'ee fighting, looks like the sea it does. Like there are waves in 'ee, waves wit' nowhere to break. He had a rag in his hands and he was working out the machine oil from the lines in his palms as he spoke. You get what I saying to you?

I get what you're saying to me, Unc.

Good. You geddon then, and he pulled down the garage door after them and it screamed against the concrete.

He went to the beach after that, took a can and sat on a boulder and watched the swell, turning over what his uncle had said. He threw the ball again, closer to the sea this time and watched as the tide chewed it up before the dog rescued it in her jaws and brought it back to him. It was getting dark. A trawler drifted by in the distance, fishing for squid between the lights, and he watched as it slipped behind the headland, which rose from the sea, like the back of a spoon. He thought about the whale. The strange instrument of its spine, its dumbstruck, cut-throat jaw.

He thought about his father's house, his sister and her fella, the finishing straight, the fracture, the vice-like grip of love. And when he got up to walk, throwing the ball for the dog along the line by the silverback water, for the first time in a long time he recognised a feeling in himself, and he turned and looked back up the beach, where the sea was becoming sand and the sand was becoming mist and the mist becoming sky. He'd been walking and walking and he'd lost sight of where he was. Around his ankles, he felt the go of the waves, knew there was nothing in his hand to throw and so he closed his eyes, gracefully, and turned his ear to the mothering shush of the tide.

Smoke and Mirrors

Dulce Maria Cardoso

Translated from the Portuguese by Rosa Churcher Clarke

For many years, I smoked. When I was little—so little that I didn't even go to school yet—and they asked me 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I answered 'A thmoker.'

They laughed. I was used to them laughing at my mispronounced speech. Only later did I come to realise that in this particular case, they laughed at my vocation. 'You want to be a what?'

'A thmoker.'

My dad smoked and I wanted to be just like him. I adored my dad. He was elegant, powerful and good. And he was even more so when he smoked. He knew how to smoke, my dad. If I closed my eyes and thought 'Dad', invariably I saw him smoking. I still see him smoking when I close my eyes now. And eleven years have gone by since he died.

There was no hesitation in my decision: when I grew up, I'd be a smoker. So as to be elegant, powerful and good. According to my infant logic, I was convinced that we are what we display to the world. Or that we display to the world what we are. It was as if there were some kind of easy-to-read corporeal and gestural code by which any individual might faultlessly perceive just who and what another is. Within that code, smoking as charmingly as my father did equated to being powerful and good. Smoking with such elegance in one's gestures had to represent the fusion of goodness and power. I wouldn't be at all surprised if on the seventh day, God had pulled out a cigarette and, leaning up against the world's doorframe, with his eyes half-closed against the smoke, he'd taken a moment to contemplate his creation, the cigarette falling away in flakes of ash. God leaning up against the world's doorframe, smoking

like my dad on Sunday mornings, leaning against the kitchen doorframe, watching me play in the yard amongst the papaya and custard apple trees, seeing my impatient wish to grow up quickly in order to become 'a thmoker'.

And there they all laughed. Because of my lisp, or so I thought. The rest was all absolutely right. So absolutely right that I didn't mind them asking, time and again, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

I thought that the question held extraordinary promise, the promise that I could choose to be whatever I wanted to be. With no restrictions of any kind. That question meant that I could assemble myself according to my design, and according to my design my life would be a series of fascinating adventures which would all turn out just fine. I didn't know that I would never have enough information to guarantee that my choices would be the right ones, and even if I'd known, I wouldn't have worried. The future was eternal and generous, and there would always be time to correct any mistakes. But there wouldn't be any mistakes. I was perfectly certain: 'A thmoker.'

Being a smoker—or rather the gesture of smoking—would not only define me in the future, it would also transport me to that future which enticed me so. There are gestures which hold or gain that power. They're ricochet-gestures which allow us to go off in search of forgotten pasts or futures-in-the-making. When I dreamt of being a smoker, my past barely even existed. I had still lived so little that it was always towards the future that I moved.

All this was more sensed than felt. Back then, my intuition still hadn't been tamed by reason, and it directed—or misdirected—almost exclusively, what I was. In any case, I believed from a very young age that I could assemble myself.

And over the years, I went about doing just that. Or I transformed, at any rate.

The truth is, often enough, the transformations came about without me wanting them to, or without me controlling the direction they took. These transformations almost always came about slowly, with the new me gently pushing up against the old one until it took its place. Once or twice, I was shaken by convulsions which made me transition more abruptly between what I was and what I became. But however it happened, the process was always the same: one me gives way to another me and then to another

and another and another. But we never lose sight of one another entirely, I believe.

I was in Year 9 when I started smoking. I had smoked before but it was when I was in Year 9 that I started actually buying cigarettes. I remember going into Cascais Station café and imitating an efficient, adult tone:

'SG Filter, please.'

I smoked for thirty-four years. I smoked until my lungs were spent. It's been nine months since I last smoked. If smoking is constitutive of me, as I naively or wisely believed as a child, and if each new me we become has a gestation period of nine months—just like the first me—then whichever me I come to be is only now making its way into the world.

'Who is this me that I am right now?'

'Me?'

A few years ago, a friend of mine became ill. He was always sad, never wanting to do anything, not even the things that normally brought him joy. He was diagnosed with depression. The illness altered his mood but my friend was still recognisable in the way that he spoke and acted. Until one night his wife called me, concerned. My friend had got it into his head that he had absolutely no money for anything. He sat in the dark because he had no money to pay for electricity, he didn't eat because he had no money to buy food, he didn't wash because he had no money to pay the water bill, there wasn't a single resource not about to run out. My friend's anxiety was ill-founded and his family tried to make him see sense, proving to him that they had more than enough funds. In vain. My friend carried on claiming that he had no money. Then he also began to say that he was 'rotting inside'.

Worried by what I'd heard, I phoned a psychiatrist I trusted. As soon as I told him that my friend was obsessing over a false state of extreme hardship, the psychiatrist interrupted me: he needn't hear any more, my friend was suffering from a major depressive episode; he'd have to be taken to hospital, where he'd most probably be sectioned. I didn't know if his diagnosis was right, but all that alarm seemed over the top to me. The psychiatrist added details that emphasised the seriousness of the illness and its complexity, but I remained sceptical; it was an excessively catastrophic scenario.

I convinced myself that a second opinion was needed, and was about to bring the phone call to an end, thanking him for his time, when the psychiatrist mentioned that my friend could also come to claim that he was 'rotting inside'. I couldn't believe my ears. How had the psychiatrist guessed at such an extravagant fear as the one haunting my friend? It had never even occurred to me that a person could 'rot inside'. Indeed, it went on seeming impossible. Obsessing over a state of extreme hardship corresponded to a problem that was possible, even if it didn't correspond to the reality of my friend's situation. But 'rotting inside' was too metaphorical to be taken seriously, too unreal for anyone else to have thought of it.

And yet not only had that fear and its exact description—'rotting inside'—taken over my friend's mind, the psychiatrist had also anticipated it to the letter. He'd anticipated it not because he was any kind of clairvoyant capable of reading my friend's thoughts, but because it's what comes written in medical textbooks. And the person who'd written it hadn't been any kind of mystic either, nor a prophet, much less God himself. The person who'd written it had simply been someone who'd paid great attention to people sickened with the illness that my friend had succumbed to, someone who had witnessed and recorded this fact that now terrified me: anyone who fell ill with the malady that afflicted my friend would experience those very same thoughts.

'Me?'

Does that make us indistinct from one another, or are we in fact already indistinct? Sickness closes us in on ourselves, we become less capable of maintaining the masks behind which we hide. Perhaps, then, when we get ill, we lose a large part of our ability to give an original form to the mask we use to conceal the fact that we are all one and the same. One and the same, disguised by a whole bundle of different memories. Each of us with our bundle of memories and, for that very reason, each of us with a sense of being unique.

Our sense of being unique is so strong that it is painful to think that we could all be one and the same. But the truth is that we have no way of knowing whether, rather than individuals, we're not simply an illusion created by an excessive accumulation of memories and excessive composition of character. Mere disguises of that same mechanism that an illness can, in the blink of an eye, unmask.

'Me?'

I can't, therefore, be certain of the existence of a me, of the existence of something core and essential in myself, different from the respective cores of others. But in order to speak of a me, I need to believe that a me exists. If what is commonly known as me is just a mask for something else—something identical yet other—to analyse it would mean being left empty-handed, given that to analyse is simply to strip the analysed object of all and any artifice.

Let's imagine that a me exists, that there's something more than just one single self, which is perhaps the same as saying: let's imagine that there's something more than a God scattered around like a handful of breadcrumbs, one crumb in each of us.

'Me.'

I often experience a sense of non-belonging. I sense that I only really belong to my thoughts.

We belong to our thoughts. In order to escape what we are, we must think differently. But we don't control a lot of what we think about. We're condemned to what we are capable of thinking.

And I only don't say that we *are* our thoughts because there's also the body. The body also makes us individual. And it seems to exist independently of thought. Autonomously. It's a mystery how our bodies and thoughts align or misalign, how they coexist or negotiate with one another. We also in fact belong to our bodies.

'A thmoker.'

I smoked as long as my body would allow me to. In my head, I must go on being a smoker because when I dream, I'm often smoking.

I hadn't yet started smoking when a PE teacher, at the start of one lesson, explained the importance of physical exercise at our age. While our bodies were growing, physical exercise created extra blood vessels from the heart, channels that would help the aorta in distributing blood to our furthest reaches. When our bodies stopped growing, physical exercise would continue to strengthen them, but it would no longer be capable of creating new blood vessels from the heart. The heart would be altered no more. For as long as we lived, the heart would only have use of the channels developed before adulthood. What the PE teacher didn't tell us—perhaps he didn't know, perhaps he didn't want to scare us—was

that the same happens in relation to almost everything: life, in general, develops according to what is determined during adolescence.

Over the years—the teacher went on explaining—age or other factors could cause the walls of the aorta to thicken, limiting or blocking blood flow. With no other way of flushing the blood from the heart, we'd be doomed. We'd die.

I don't know if it's true or if the teacher made up this theory. I've never attempted to confirm it, but I've never forgotten it either. I didn't follow the teacher's advice to do physical exercise and my body carried on its lazy growth. Now, each time I feel a pang in my chest, I imagine my aorta blocked, my heart ready to burst, my blood flooding me internally and I think 'Will this be it?'

So far, it never has been.

The heart has always intrigued me. The real heart, the heart that the PE teacher was talking about, not the other heart, the metaphorical one, whose sickly-sweet existence I was never particularly charmed by. With the muscle-heart, it's the opposite. I like to feel it beating in my chest. I like to feel it beating in the chests of others. But I've always been somewhat baffled by the break in symmetry that the heart represents. When we look at others or when we see ourselves in the mirror, we see bodies that are symmetrical along a vertical line: right eye and left eye, nose and mouth in the centre, right arm and left arm, belly button and genitals in the centre, right leg and left leg. All that is visible of us exists in pairs—right and left—or else it's positioned symmetrically in the centre. Except the heart. It's true that you don't see the heart. But you feel it. There are other organs within our bodies that mess up any inner symmetry, but the heart is the only one that makes itself constantly and continuously felt on the outside: ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum. Tirelessly. Our bodies exhibit perfect symmetry, and the heart, the little drum which runs it all, sits just off to the left of the chest. Intriguing.

And even more intriguing than the heart is the corresponding space on the other side of the chest. What might exist there? Apparently a silent void, indifferent to the symmetry that the rest of the body seems to insist on. What might exist there? Nothing.

'Nothing?'

I don't know when it was that I understood—or else decided—that that space couldn't simply be empty. It was obvious: what we know of

ourselves consists of body and thought. If on the left side of the chest there is a heart, the motor-muscle for the body, the right side of the chest must surely house the motor-muscle for thought.

'Me?'

Yes, me. On the right side of the chest, me, my self, the motor-muscle for thought. Silent. Discreet.

'Me.'

And if the heart is fortified by physical exertion, the self is fortified by exercising thought. That must be how it is. Exercising thought must surely create other channels from the self, channels which are alternatives to common sense. Common sense is the channel with which the self comes equipped at birth. It's via this channel, or others which develop in the meantime, that symbols—words, images—flow into our thoughts. The symbols travel at astonishing speed and build the delicate architecture that is thought. A spiritual architecture, as opposed to the material architecture provided by the body.

Over the years, routines, tiredness or other factors might constrict common sense or other important channels created in the meantime. At that point, if there are no alternative passages, the self languishes. It dies. The body might go on functioning, but thought remains forever repeating what has already been thought and rethought. And there, what you really do find, on the right side of the chest, directly opposite the heart, is a void.

One of thought's advantages over the body is that it isn't forced to stop growing at a certain age. Which is why other channels from the self can always be developed, the self can go on changing forever. Sometimes, the rather labyrinthine web of those channels amplifies a voice which seems not to belong to us.

'Who goes there?'

Perhaps it's only the self's echo. Or perhaps it's the traces of selves which we no longer are, or hints of selves who we are yet to become. Or else perhaps it's the revelation of another Self—God making Himself—His Self—known to man. 'God?'

Following adolescence, my adult body went on making itself a little too comfortable in the spaces available to it, it went on not liking to exert itself or move around too much, it went on not being bothered. With my thought, however, the opposite was always true: I don't recall ever having been free of discomfort, without something off-kilter, something amiss.

'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

When I was a child I lied a lot. But when I responded 'A thmoker' I was telling the truth. And it wasn't to make the adults laugh that I repeated it over and over: 'A thmoker.'

It wasn't like when they prompted and prodded me: 'Say stomach.'

And my wayward tongue: 'Thtomach.'

They laugh.

Say mouse, and me, mouth. Sauce. Thauth. Scissors. Thithoth. 'Say. Say. Say.'

I said whatever they asked me to. Without them asking me to, I also lied. I didn't lie to deceive others, nor to deceive myself. I lied to deceive and relieve my boredom. Because as a child, time is sometimes unbearably long and drawn out. My mum and the women from the neighbourhood, from one balcony to the other, chewing over the same conversations, every single afternoon, and there was me with no one to play with, not knowing what to do with the time which passed so slowly, ever slower and slower. If I didn't interfere with reality, if I left it to its own devices, there were afternoons which would never come to an end, which would never bring my sister and the other girls back from school. As long as the afternoons didn't come to an end, my dad also wouldn't come home from work to take me out for a spin in the white Mazda with the special tyres.

'We know how to have fun, don't we?'

I was happy at my dad's side in the white Mazda with the special tyres. My dad on the left, me on the right. We knew how to have fun.

The afternoons were so slow to pass. Whether I climbed the mango tree, scratched the stove with a knife, or ruined my sister's books, there was always an excess of time. So I made things up. Like the story of the miscarriage.

I didn't know what a miscarriage was, but I knew it was something serious. Because my mum and the neighbours asked 'What if Zezinha has another miscarriage?'

They prayed to God to let things go right this time. Zezinha had a belly that was bigger than a house. She was going to have a baby that would come from Paris, carried in the beak of a stork. I had never seen a stork, nor did I understand what was inside Zezinha's belly. It had to be the stork. It must be hiding away in there until it was time to fetch the baby.

'Itha thtork in Thethinha'th belly?'

They laughed.

One afternoon, time slowed and slowed until it came to a stop. I'm sure that my mum, the neighbours and me would have a stayed stuck in that afternoon for all eternity if I hadn't decided to go down to the end of the road in order to come back shouting, after waiting a few minutes out of the sight of my mum and the neighbours:

'Thethinha had a mithcabbage, Thethinha had a mithcabbage.'

My mum and the neighbours jumped up in terror: 'Oh good God.'

The flock of women running down the road to Zezinha's house and time finally flowing in a torrent. Just like the neighbours arrived back from Zezinha's house in a torrent too:

'If it was my daughter, I'd beat her black and blue.'

'She be hanging from the ceiling by her ears by now.'

'I'd sew up her lying little mouth.'

Not long after the miscarriage episode, I learned to read. A blessing for me, and for the whole neighbourhood. The lies in books were just as engaging as the lies I told. If not more so. From then on, a fair part of my life took place in the world that others had invented and that I created as I read.

Me. As I read, it was me that was creating.

Later, much later, I decided to write all that my mind went on inventing. 'Say. Say. Say.'

The person writing isn't me in a mask. The person who wrote my novels wasn't me in a mask.

'Who goes there?'

It was me ceasing to be me; me, already someone else.

'Me?'

Neither Rui, nor Afonso, nor Violeta, nor Eva's ex-husband—none of them are me. I am none of them. I *was* them. Them and all the other characters.

Fiction—certain fiction—is perhaps the most powerful way of exercising one's thought, of speeding up the slow reality of daily existence. Written or read, fiction sculpts us on the inside, opening up new channels for the self. It re-tunes us from what we were. And it's no different whether we're the ones writing or the ones reading.

One winter afternoon, I went to the psychiatric hospital to visit my friend who fell ill with the sickness which made him think the thoughts

that came written in medical textbooks. I was in the courtyard when a madman came up to me. He asked me for a cigarette and told me about his life. He spoke very quickly. The cigarette had only burned halfway down by the time the madman reached the end of his life story. His eyes bulged, as if he were frightened, but there was nothing so very terrible in the story he told. Until he concluded: 'And all that I didn't live, I read.'

As if that were the secret of his madness.

Me too; all that I didn't live, I read.

Or wrote.

Living, reading or writing, I was there.

That was me.

And sometimes I went mad too.

'Me?'

Perhaps a researcher somewhere has already plotted all my thoughts, just like that other one was able to map out the thoughts of my sick friend in advance. Perhaps in a forgotten library somewhere in this limitless world there's a book containing all that I've ever thought and all that I'm yet to think. If so, when my heart stops, I—me—my self will live on.

But the day will come that someone will open that book for the last time. From that day on, what's written there will begin to be forgotten.

Then the creatures will come. And time. And the book will be devoured. And eternal erasure will wash over all that is me.

Charm for a Sudden Stitch (Remixed)

After weeks of coughing, I feel the twang of muscle,
a slip in the coastline of my ribs. I start hacking up
phlegm in the tender shade of daffodil stems.
My parents live in another town and in another season.
I am surrounded by students in a prefrontal fugue.
When I was a child learning about the past, the old days
were never quite defined. Once I told my mother
I believed in god but only during an emergency.
Consider how many people never made it to twenty.
The sound of pneumonia is my roommate's humidifier—
she's a soprano and it's funny because I survived.
This is a pain that dazzles and it makes me lie down.
I hear a thundering army. No, it's my friend who
lives in the room below me. She opens the door.

Milena Williamson

Eternals

In *The Eternals* a London bus explodes
and becomes a cloud of red rose petals:
a surreal English image in so many ways—
let me not count those, but Orwell's joys

in Woolworths roses' anarchic labelling:
a 'Dorothy Perkins' (white, yellow-heart),
a 'yellow' polyantha that grew ruby red;
his double-yolker Albertine. All sixpence:

then, a pint and a half of mild, ten Players,
or, 'twenty minutes of twice-breathed air'
at the flicks: say, two Pathé war newsreels,
A *Canterbury Tale* up to The Hand of Glory.

My Dad, ex-Irish Army, tried to recruit me
when I was young to help with his garden,
tend his Irish Fireflames, but I only cared
for fire roses exploding from guns in films.

Orwell scorned an Irish peace Dad guarded
but could come up with beautiful surprises,
like his Woolworths roses. I love his prose,
and flowers, silly films, and I miss my Dad.

Ian Duhig

Long Term Parking

James Young

There's a scene from *The Sopranos* I can't stop thinking about. It's from the 'Long Term Parking' episode, when Christopher, explaining why he's late for a meeting with Tony, says *the highway was jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive*. To which a pissed-off Tony replies, after a beat, *oh, you gonna get fucken cute now*?

There's so much to unpack here—like if you had the body of a guy you'd just whacked in the boot of your car. First, does Tony know where the line is from? On the one hand, of course he does—everybody knows 'Born To Run', especially if they were alive, and living in New Jersey, in the 70s. And Tony was born in 1957, which would have made him 18 when the song came out. And he often listens to rock music in his car, on his way home from the Bing, or from having sex with one of his goomahs.

But on the other hand, he gets a lot of things wrong, like when he thinks Cap d'Antibes is an old sea captain. And Christopher often laughs at him behind his back. So maybe we're meant to think Tony *doesn't* know the line, and just thinks Christopher is being a smart alec. Which would mean the joke's on Tony.

I honestly think there's room for doubt.

Then there's Christopher. It's not quite the kind of line he usually comes out with—it's a touch too witty, too perfectly delivered. He gets plenty of things wrong himself, so to nail it, word perfect… well, it makes you think.

And then there's the fact that Sil is in the room—and as *everybody* who watches *The Sopranos* knows, he's played by Steven Van Zandt, who used to play guitar in the E Street Band!

For me, the line is a moment of genius—especially because none of the characters says anything about it. It just hangs in the air for a second, and

then they get on with discussing what to do about the whole Tony B and Johnny Sack mess. It's not exactly meta, because Christopher really *might* say it, but as a viewer, you know you're getting a joke that exists on a level beyond what the characters could know (the Sil angle, for example). And so when you see it, you just think *woah*! and, like I said, there's so much to unpack.

I was thinking about it again today, in the café, while I waited for X and Y, maybe because Springsteen—though 'Hungry Heart', not 'Born To Run'—was playing. They were late, and when they turned up I could tell they'd been arguing—the timing of their sentences was off, and they weren't making eye contact with each other. Y's limp had gotten worse; he was using a cane, and his breathing was strained. Once we'd ordered—we all asked for poached eggs and smashed avocados—I started telling them about the *Sopranos* line. They didn't seem that interested, but I persevered, adding how it was even more clever because a few of the storylines in the episode were about characters either running away, or wishing they had.

'Well,' X said when I'd finished, 'that's five'—she looked at her watch—'no, six, minutes of our lives we're never getting back.'

Y laughed, but it turned into a wheezing cough, and his eyes started watering, and he had to cover his mouth with a handkerchief. The two young women at the next table—one of whom I thought might have been listening when I was talking—glanced over.

When he'd stopped coughing—though his eyes were still red—Y said he thought Tony must have known the line was from 'Born To Run'. That living in New Jersey—'I mean, Jesus'—living in the USA—'I mean, *Jesus*'—living in the *world*, all the characters, even a moron like Paulie Walnuts, would have heard the song hundreds of times.

Pleased he'd at least been paying attention, I agreed he was probably right.

'Can we,' said X, as our food arrived, 'please talk about something else?'

Y and I exchanged a glance, and he said we could, and X started telling us how she was worried about the latest round of redundancies at work; 'for the others, I mean, not for myself' (a tight little smile). There was a speck of yolk on her chin, next to the small scar she'd got from falling off her bike when she was a kid, and I wanted to reach over and wipe it off; not just because it was bothering me, but to have some kind of physical contact with her. But I knew I couldn't. Instead I had to make do with a memory, one I returned to often, so that whatever she was saying melted

away, along with the murmurs of conversation around us, the music, and the sound of the traffic outside, which had seemed, a moment earlier—or perhaps it was my imagination—to be getting louder.

When I came back, Y was talking about his daughter from his first marriage, who'd 'suffered a setback' (she'd been struggling with addiction for years). The previous Thursday afternoon, he said, her son's school had called, asking if he could come and get the kid, because his daughter hadn't turned up at collection time. He did, and when they got to her flat, he found her passed out on the sofa. She'd been sick, and the smell was terrible, he said. He dumped the kid with a neighbour, then called X and asked her to come and help. Now the kid was living with the two of them while his daughter 'straightened herself out'. I told him how sorry I was, then excused myself and went to the bathroom.

I stayed in there for a long time, thinking, and when I came out X was on her feet. 'It's time,' she said. Just then a ray of sunlight fell across the table, illuminating our plates, smeared with egg yolk and avocado, the dark pools of coffee at the bottoms of our mugs. 'Look,' I said, 'a Vermeer.' Y laughed, but X only rolled her eyes, told me she'd paid, and started to move towards the door. Y said he was going to the bathroom too, and that he'd see us outside.

On the street X stood with her arms folded tightly across her chest, as though it was cold; in fact it was a pleasant, if cool, early May afternoon.

'Nice day for it,' she said, and shivered, and held my gaze for a long moment. Just as I was about to say something, though, or reach towards her, she turned away and pretended to study an advert for gong bath sessions in the café window. Then Y was limping through the door, apologising for taking so long, though he hadn't at all.

We decided to walk across the park, because the sun was shining, and there was time. We went slowly, because of Y, and also because the path wasn't wide enough for us to walk side by side. I found myself in front, and had to turn my head awkwardly to join in the conversation. As we walked past the boating lake—there were a few boats out, including an empty one floating off on its own—X started telling us a story about a friend of hers.

They'd met around twenty years ago, she said, at university in Manchester. In the summer after their finals, she'd gone to visit her friend in her hometown—she couldn't remember the name, only that

it was a depressed former industrial town, somewhere in the midlands (Northampton, or Nuneaton, I offered, but X didn't reply).

'My friend met me at the station,' she said, 'and we walked around for a while, but there wasn't much to see: a park with a few scrawny trees and graffitied benches, a shopping centre where half the shops had closed down. We got sandwiches for lunch, ate them in the park, then went to the pub.'

I'd got tired of turning around, so I looked ahead, to where a child was tottering after a bright yellow football, and listened to X's voice rise into the air like birdsong. If she was especially anxious or troubled, she gave no sign. Y, meanwhile, was concentrating on walking, grimacing and sweating from the exertion.

'A real drinking man's pub, it was,' X said. 'Old soaks by the bar, a fruit machine beeping in the background.' She and her friend drank snakebite, and, every few rounds, tequila slammers, and smoked roll-ups, because you could still smoke in pubs back then. They talked about everything, she said—politics, their lecturers, lads at college they'd slept with, lads they'd wanted to sleep with but hadn't, their plans for the future. Eventually—when it was early evening, and they were both drunk—her friend started talking about her family.

'She looked around,' X said, 'as though to check nobody was listening. And then she leaned over, and whispered in my ear—I could smell her breath, sour and coppery from the booze, which I found attractive, because she was very beautiful—that her dad was a spy.'

'What?' I said, because I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. In the same moment, I noticed two policemen up ahead, both wearing body armour, their helmets tucked under their arms, talking to a man on a bicycle. They were some distance away, and weren't looking in our direction—why would they?—but something about them made me nervous.

'A spy,' X said.

'Wow,' I said, and laughed. 'Shit.' I turned back towards her, and felt a twinge in my neck as I did so—an old tennis injury.

'Yeah. *Shit*,' X said. From somewhere she produced a packet of cigarettes—*I thought you'd given up*, I wanted to say—and lit one with a refillable silver lighter. I knew, even without seeing it properly, that the lighter had the name *Paul* inscribed on it. I'd borrowed it—stolen it, I

suppose—from some guy, on a night when X and I had been drinking Jägerbombs in Soho.

'So we sat there,' she said, giving me a look that dared me to mention the cigarette, 'and she told me the whole story, though she said she "totally wasn't supposed to". All the places her dad had worked—Russia, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland. He was a real James Bond type, she said, always jumping out of planes, and stabbing enemy agents with poison pens. He was away at the moment, and she didn't know when he was coming back. *If* he was coming back.'

'Wow,' I said again, turning to see X blow a tube of smoke in the air. 'That's incredible.'

X shrugged. 'He always brought back great presents, apparently.'

The path widened at this point—we'd left the boating lake behind—and so we started walking three abreast: Y on the left, X in the middle, me on her right. I sensed X stiffen beside me; she'd noticed the policemen too. She nodded at me, then at Y, then, looping her arms through ours, led us towards a narrow path that ran down to one of the side gates of the park.

'At about nine o'clock, my friend came back from the toilets pulling a lad by the hand,' X said, taking a drag on her cigarette. 'His name was Steve, she said, and she'd met him by the fruit machine. She told me they were going back to his, but that I could still stay at her house. I didn't mind; it was the kind of thing we did in those days. And so I took her key, and that night I slept in her room. There didn't seem to be anyone else at home, but there was a photo of a middle-aged man on her bedside table, in a frame with *World's Greatest Dad* written on it. He wasn't like I expected: fat, and short, with a red face and glasses. The next day I got up early and left.'

I remember thinking it was a long story, longer than the one I'd told about *The Sopranos*. But I wasn't about to interrupt X. Not today. 'We stayed friends for a while, though I never visited her again,' she continued. We'd left the park, and were on a leafy road of tall Georgian houses, converted into flats and bedsits. There were signs of decay everywhere; a cracked window, overflowing rubbish bags, a child's bicycle lying in a scruffy garden, missing its front wheel. 'Eventually we lost touch, though I heard she'd gone to teach English in Japan, and stayed out there,' she said, stubbing her cigarette out on a wall and dropping it into a bin. 'Then, about five years ago, I got a letter from her.'

'A letter?' I said, and Y laughed, which was when I realised he'd heard the story before. Of course he had. But I felt angry nonetheless, as though I was the butt of a private joke (later I would understand that his silence, his patience as X told this long story, was an act of grace).

'Yeah,' X said. 'Weird, right? I don't know how she got my address. It was just after Y and I got married. When we were living in the Brixton flat.'

I nodded. I remembered that flat. X and I had slept together there; just once, towards the end. Afterwards, we'd argued over something stupid, and I'd left, angrily slamming the door behind me.

Suddenly, Y put his hand to his face and stopped, so sharply that a man close behind us had to step into the road. 'Fuck's sake,' the man growled. He was wearing a black anorak, zipped to the neck, the tip of a small, dark tattoo peeking out from beneath the collar. It seemed like he might stop and say something, but then he turned and walked on, looking over his shoulder and muttering.

'The boy!' Y cried. 'What will we do about the boy?'

X put her hand to his cheek. 'My sister,' she said, looking into his eyes. 'Laura. Remember?'

'Laura,' Y said, with a relieved smile. 'Oh yes. Laura.'

We carried on. The sun had been losing its warmth since we'd started, and now the wind had a bitter edge. For the first time we could hear the sounds up on the hill; snatches of music from the speakers, the thrum of crowds. There were more people around us, all moving in the same direction: couples, families licking ice-cream cones, teenagers in matching red baseball caps and T-shirts, filming everything with their phones. And men in black anoraks and jeans, walking briskly, their eyes wild and excited, small, dark tattoos on their necks or hands. When we reached the end of the street we turned right, and began to climb the hill.

'She wasn't in Japan, my friend said, in her letter,' X said. 'She was in Birmingham. Though she *had* gone out there, a few years after university. Nagasaki. Then one day she was in the computer room at the English school where she worked, checking Facebook. She'd made a lot of new friends out there, so her page was a stream of photos of people she barely knew, doing stuff with people she'd never met.'

It was then the park began to unfurl on our right, as the road lifted above the trees along its western edge. From here, we could see how big

the crowds were—the whole upper meadow, and, looking back, the road behind us, was a thick mass of people, all moving towards the top of the hill and the stage. A series of loud, jittery crackles startled us, until we looked up and saw the pale smudges of smoke, the faint, fleeting flickers, of fireworks against the blue sky.

'That day,' X said, as we passed a rough-looking pub, and some shops—there was a Lidl, then an Iceland —and the muffled yawps of the first speech reached us, 'one particular photo caught her eye. It was posted by a Glaswegian girl called Susan, who she'd been to a karaoke bar with the night before, where Susan had sung …'

'"Born to Run",' I said, quick as a flash.

'"The First Cut Is The Deepest", actually,' X said, but with a quick smile, as though she was grateful.' She'd been really good, my friend said, in her letter.'

I remembered how X kept saying 'in her letter' later, because there was something magical about how she enunciated the words, the rhyme of the two -ers, the metre of the four syllables, the comma before them that seemed to float in the air; and also because the last time she said them was when Y stumbled. I caught his arm, but his cane clattered to the ground, and I sensed people looking. To X's credit, though, she just carried on as though nothing had happened, picking up the cane and rubbing Y's arm until he'd gathered himself, and leading us into the dense crowd.

'Anyway,' X said, raising her voice (the noise, by now, was much louder). 'She was looking at the photo this girl—Susan—had posted. A family snap—people gathered round a birthday cake, grinning into the camera. *Happy Birthday To The World's Greatest Dad*, the caption read. And that's when she saw the man standing behind the cake, with his hand resting on the shoulder of a woman in a wheelchair, was her father.'

'Her *father*!' Y said. 'Imagine!' He started laughing—a too-loud laugh that, again, drew people's attention, until X shushed him. That was when I remembered the strain he must have been under.

'Shit,' I said. 'What? No way.'

'Yeah,' X said, and gave me a strange look, one that would only make sense much later.

'She was sure?' I asked.

'She was sure,' X said. 'She said she stared at it for a long time, thinking she must be going crazy, that it was probably just someone who *looked* like

her father. But it wasn't—her father had a small birthmark on his neck, shaped a little like France, and when she zoomed in on the photo, there it was. So then she thought, okay, Dad's a spy, maybe he's undercover. But why would a spy go undercover as a middle-aged guy from Glasgow, with a wife in a wheelchair and a daughter teaching English in Japan?'

'He wouldn't,' I said.

'He wouldn't,' X said. We'd reached the petrol station by then, and she told us to wait while she went in. Across the street a young couple in red T-shirts were arguing—the girl had her arms folded across her chest, and was staring at the ground, while the boy waved his hands around and tried to catch her eye. Eventually he took a step forward, and wrapped his arms around her, though she remained where she was, her body stiff.

'It's funny,' Y said, watching them. 'In every relationship there'll be a moment when it's over, but neither of the people will know. They'll go on thinking that whatever's wrong can be fixed, for weeks, or months, maybe even years. But really what they had ended in that moment, and it won't be coming back.'

I looked at him, then at the couple, who were walking away, holding hands, their swinging arms forming the two flanks of a pale heart.

'I'm not talking about X and I,' Y said, with a laugh. 'In case you were wondering.'

'No,' I said. 'Of course not.'

'Tell me more about *The Sopranos*,' he said. So I did. I picked an episode, and I started telling him about it, as we watched X through the window, looking at the shelves, and picking something up, and going up to the till and paying.

I've been writing poetry recently. Writing poetry, and thinking about that day. I don't write about what happened, though I suppose an image creeps in here and there—the low percussion of the crowd, the shape the young couple's arms made as they walked away. I was still talking about *The Sopranos* when X came out, carrying a bag—she rolled her eyes, but let me continue, because she could see Y was enjoying it (I'd chosen the 'Pine Barrens' episode, where Christopher and Paulie have to bury a Russian gangster out in the snowy wilds of New Jersey, and it all turns into a big mess).

When I'd finished, we walked on, and X continued *her* story (the stage loomed above us, less than a hundred yards in front). Her friend had called home immediately, she said, and told her mother what she'd seen; her father, of course, was 'away' at the time. At first her mother said she must be imagining things, but she soon caved, and told her the truth, which was that her father wasn't a spy at all, but a pensions advisor, who happened to have another wife—or *lady friend*, as her mother put it—and daughter in Glasgow. And that for the last twenty-five years, he'd been living a double life, splitting his time between his two families.

'What? No,' I said again, once I'd digested this. 'That's insane.'

'Yeah,' X said, 'Insane.' She gave me another of those looks, and seemed about to continue with the story, but then we were getting close to the stage, and the rows of black-uniformed security guards, their helmets and visors glinting. There were more men with dark tattoos in the crowd now, standing in groups with their arms folded, that same hungry, expectant look in their eyes. But there were other people as well—families, and teenagers, and even groups of women, laughing and joking, some of them drinking beer. Occasionally someone would start a song, though none really took hold—maybe there was too much nervous energy in the air. To get any closer we had to split up, each of us picking our own way through the clumps of people. When we reached the front, and there was nothing between us and the stage, except for the crush barrier and the guards, we found each other again.

'Ever since then,' X said, looking around, 'my friend and her mother have been carrying on as normal, telling her father to *be safe* and to *go kill a bad guy for us* whenever he goes off, and acting relieved when he comes home.'

I realised she must have carried on talking while I was out of earshot, perhaps not noticing I was gone, because she hadn't said how her friend had reacted to her mother's words, or why neither of them confronted her father. I was about to mention this, but then she and Y exchanged a nod, and started elbowing each other, and laughing, and generally horsing around, so they looked like they were in the same exalted spirits as everyone around us. And I knew then that her story was over, and that this was it.

'Well,' X said, laughing and looking at her watch, 'I guess it's time.'

'No,' I said, because it couldn't be, not yet.

'The moment of truth,' Y said. He was grinning, his eyes shining, and I had a sudden urge to strike him. I felt guilty straight away—I knew his grin meant nothing, that he and X had shed their tears in private, in the weeks and months since she had made her decision.

'No,' I said, louder this time. 'Wait.' I realised then that although I'd known what was coming, I'd never truly believed it would happen. I reached out and grabbed X's arm, digging my nails into its soft flesh, as though both to hold her and to hurt her.

'Get,' she hissed, still smiling, 'the fuck off me.'

I did. I got the fuck off her.

When it was over I went home. What else was there to do? I sat in the living room with the TV on. I didn't want to see the news, so I watched *The Sopranos* instead. I must have watched four, five episodes straight through, and drunk most of a bottle of vodka, mixing it with Coke and limes until the limes and the Coke ran out. Coincidentally or not, the last episode I remember, before I fell into a drunken sleep, was 'Long Term Parking'.

Everything had gone according to plan. As soon as I let go of X's arm, she nodded at Y again, and he looked at me, then at her—how long that moment seemed to last, now. Then Y winked, mouthed 'I love you' at X, and fell backwards. He hit the ground hard, then started shaking, so violently I became scared, and for a second forgot it wasn't real. People rushed towards him, which made the security guards rush towards *us*, which is when X jumped over the railing, through the gap they'd left, and onto the stage. She stood for a second, her long hair blowing in the breeze, then took the can of petrol from her bag and emptied it over herself. Everyone, including the security guards, who'd just been about to grab her, froze. When I saw the silver lighter with *Paul* engraved on it gleaming in the sun, I turned and slipped away. I didn't need to see the rest. The noise of the crowd—or rather the stillness, just before the screams—told me she'd gone through with it. The rest of the speeches, including the one X and Y were there to stop, were called off.

Y was arrested for his part in it—the security guards, and later the police, weren't stupid—and I heard he went to prison for a short time. They didn't let him go to X's funeral, though I knew he wouldn't care—he'd say he didn't need a funeral to say goodbye. I went, and sat on my

own at the back of the church, and later stood apart from the small group huddled around the grave, lost in my own thoughts.

I didn't hear from Y for a long time after that. Until last week, in fact, when I got a letter in his almost-illegible handwriting (I'd seen that writing, years before, on scraps of paper and post-it notes scattered around the Brixton flat). He said he hoped I was well, and that he often thought of me, and the times the three of us had spent together. He didn't say where he was living, though he did say his health was okay, and his daughter was doing better, and that his grandson was growing into 'a fine boy'. The postmark on the envelope was smudged and indistinct.

He also wrote—at the bottom of the first page, continuing over to the next—that he'd known all about X and I. About how I'd been in love with her, even at the end. I was sitting in the same armchair I'd sat in the night of X's death as I read those words. The back of my head went cold, and the questions chased each other through my mind—how had he known? How *long* had he known? Had he and X talked about it? Talked about me?

He said he didn't care. That he and X had had six wonderful—'mostly wonderful, ha!'—years together, and nothing could change that. He told me I should always treasure my memories of her, and not become bitter. Only by filling the world with love could we fix its problems—those were almost the last words he wrote. I realised how much I missed him when I read them.

Almost the last, because there was also a PS, which I can still recall pretty much by heart. *Remember that story X told us*, it said, *about the friend whose father led a double life? Well, it was all true, in case you were wondering* (I hadn't been). *Only there was no friend. Or rather, the friend was X. She lived in Japan after she graduated. It was her own father she was talking about.*

My head went cold again as I read Y's words—not least because X had never told me about either Japan or her father, though I suppose there were lots of things we hadn't told each other. I thought, too, about what had made her tell me about her father in that way, at that moment, and how I'd never know the answer, not now. I thought about those words for so long, in fact, that I went into a kind of trance, one in which the events of that day swept over me—X saying 'well, that's five, no six, minutes of our lives we're never getting back', the empty boat on the lake. The young couple across the road from the petrol station; X's silver lighter, the one with *Paul* written on it, gleaming as she stood on the stage. The moment

when, as I pushed my way through the crowd, my chest and throat so tight I could hardly breathe, I'd remembered the night X told me she was ending things between us.

And then I went outside. It was a warm evening, still light, the air soft, the sound of a woman's laughter drifting over the fences. I got an old metal bucket from the shed, and put Y's letter in it, and then I went back into the kitchen and got a box of matches. They were old, and crumbled when I struck them, but eventually one took. I put it to the letter, and then I stood, watching the smoke ebb over the rim of the bucket and disappear, thinking about X and her father, and the lies people tell each other. Thinking about X and I, and about Y. And most of all, thinking about time, and how, like fire, it goes about its work deliberately, relentlessly.

Isometric Games

Darragh McCausland

My hometown, Kells, was once famous for its handballing men. Our school had a monumental structure at the rear of the playground, a double-sided handball alley of the old variety, a looming hollow trapezoid with walls of reinforced concrete slanting to a height of thirty feet. Viewed side on from classroom windows, it had a severe triangular facade, so that my young mind associated its dank presence, stained as if wet even when it was dry, with the Great Pyramid of Giza. The alley had frightening auditory qualities. It seemed to forever echo back the sweary voices of tough boys and the footballs they leathered against it, multitracked, chaotic and magnified, a forcefield of rebarbative noise that kept me and other meek pupils at bay. One sunny Friday morning in the early 1990s, my twin brother and I arrived at school to find nobody lining up outside to enter their classrooms. Instead, everyone, children and teachers alike, thronged around the alley. Mark, the domineering boy who was ostensibly our best friend, but more truthfully our master and owner, sloped towards us, strings hanging from the wrecked wool jumper he wore over his school uniform. His round face was bright with vicious glee.

'Well, worriers. They did a séance in the ball alley. They did weeja boards,' he said, with the smell of old biscuits on his breath.

'No way. In the school? It's come into the school?'

'It' was the rumoured black magic that was happening in secret around Kells. Speculation on the phenomenon had developed to the point of an obsession among the three of us. The entire town had grown increasingly uncanny in our minds, as we coded inhabitants and locations according to how involved they might be. The very first rumours of teenagers doing séances chained me to a sense of dreadful excitement. It was addictive but

increasingly overwhelming. That morning, with the school's sanctuary breached, excitement fell fully away, unveiling the grinning skull of its twinned emotion. Fear.

Wanting and not wanting to see, we followed Mark towards the handball alley, trailing him like baby animals imprinted upon a parent from another species. It was cold there, the warm sun having no place between those towering walls, two foot thick. I shivered as my eyes adjusted to its shadows. The lower walls were covered with lettering and symbols, some chalked, others sprayed in black car paint that dripped and ran. I recognised plenty of them from heavy metal album covers and drawings on older lads' bleach-spattered canvas school bags. The inverted pentagram. The upside down cross. But there were others that I did not recognise, strange sigils, charged with a meaning that was not for me. As my imagination retreated from their occluded power and my ears anticipated the rescuing sound of the bell for class, I could see in Mark's face the opposite happening. He read the walls eagerly, almost like he could understand them. He moved towards the world that generated this mysterious script. The world of his troubled older brother, where boys who knew stuff made loitering smoke-shrouded ghosts against evening walls.

'Who d'ye think did it?' asked my brother.

His eyes flicked briefly to mine. They settled for that barest fraction of a second it took for us to ascertain all sorts of things about each other, then leapt into a labyrinth of thoughts as kinked and tormented as my own. Though our minds were not quite the carbon copies of early childhood, the great individuating separation of teenage twinship was yet to occur. In other words, we still had that vibe that non twins find freakish. That psychic shit. It was how I knew exactly what he was thinking without ever having to ask.

'There's a cult. Loads of people are in it. Look at youse both,' Mark said, before adding one of the strange adult-sounding turns of phrase that were part of his peculiarity. 'Youse are gone waxen.'

He had gotten it from his older siblings that further satanic activity was to occur around Kells during the weekend. He forcefully told us that on Saturday afternoon we were going to investigate what he called 'a weeja-board hot spot,' where a group of daring secondary school girls had regularly entered to conduct séances, before becoming terrorised by

the manifestation of a wayward ghost called Wet Michael. It was in one of the dilapidated houses on Back Street, a depressing thoroughfare with one solitary business on it, a tiny video shop with a sticky carpet and limited trade of horror schlock and pirated copies of banned films that Mark's bohemian parents had invariably let him see, such as *A Clockwork Orange*. A few weeks prior, we'd have been able to evade his command with our stock excuse of 'not allowed', but Mark knew that our parents had recently extended the delineation of where we could go from the Gaelic football grounds at the bounds of the estate to the library at the far side of town. As a result, Kells mysteriously shrank and grew at once. Places that had been a sliding picture reel beyond the condensation of the school bus window were now available for detailed exploration, unlocked like the overworld on a computer game map.

'Yeah cool, we'll go,' I said.

On that promise, the air was sucked out of the world and replaced with an atmosphere of anticipatory dread that flooded from inside of me. My brother and I were creatures so prone to anxiety that one of the many nicknames we had acquired was 'the worriers'. The prospect of investigating potential supernatural phenomena at a local wellspring was enough to darken all of reality. I spent the rest of that day in school steeped in shadows and shapes. It was like I had dimmed the power of the June sun with my own small mind and the cross currents of its fears.

Back then, before I discovered mind-altering substances, I had a single means of escaping the manacles of obsessive anxieties: the PC our parents had recently bought from an electrical goods shop just over the Armagh border. It was a shopping trip like no other. The journey home was pure elation. Road signs flashed in the twisting potholed dark of county Cavan, and the propitious smell of cardboard, Styrofoam, and factory plastic filled our matching snouts. We contorted over the back seat to drum on the box in the boot. If we could, we'd have hugged it. The PC came with a free games pack containing a shoot 'em up, a flight simulator and a game that was instantly special to us, a *Dungeons & Dragons* style role-player called *Legend: The Four Crystals of Trazere*. That evening at home, the prospect of the game was the only thing that got me through a dinner of Campbell's meatballs and mash rendered almost inedible by nervousness.

'Yeez are very quiet today,' said our mother.

Tension flew through me as a cold wind. It separated me from comfort, from things the way they used to be with Mark, even from my brother. In a square of evening sunlight that made him squint, he appeared to fold himself around his anxieties in a way that was private to me and new.

'Finished,' he eventually said.

We hopped up together to go to the front room, where the PC was set up on its unlikely makeshift station beneath glass display cabinets filled with the Aynsley china the woman next door gifted my mother each Christmas.

The game booted up and the sound of its map music suffused the intolerably quiet air, a repeating score that pivoted once every couple of minutes on a tiny twinkling sound. Every time the twinkle happened it was as if the house grew darker and the game world brighter, not with the smoothness of an evening's progress, but in jumps or levels. Soon we were in a trance, enveloped in *Trazere*'s small universe. Anxiety melted away. The freedom was total and immense.

I can't shake a notion about that computer game. I have always thought that the hold it had over me was connected to the séance stuff, and how it overwhelmed me, and that if I were to interrogate it I might turn a key in a locked door to self-understanding. I might discover something important about my imagination and what happened to it at that ripe time, when certain forces from within and without changed it pretty much permanently.

We entered *Trazere* through the overhead map. A single screen depicted a rugged topography, rudimentarily drawn according to the graphics of the day, yet managing to emanate a sheer and extraordinary sense of being somewhere total and otherly. It described an entire world, inviting but not without uncanny menace. Below, bright blue rivers wound through snow-peaked mountains studded with castles and towers. Above, in the black void of the sky, a sun and moon with antic-animated pagan faces chased each other on a loop, their red eyes switching left and right. They described *Trazere*'s calendar, which flowed at speed, days and nights piling up by the dozen, faster than our own, slower timeline, housing estate evenings that crawled to night. Perched on a coffee table, our primitive gaming seat, we craned towards a screen so crooked that our mother once remarked 'Yis'd jump into it given the chance.' Our party of

four adventurers, the standard crew—warrior, mage, assassin and bard—was indicated by a simple blue flag. It was one of many units that jittered across the landscape, giving the impression of the troubled kingdom's busy flux and the chaos unleashed by an evil wizard's curse. That wafer-thin plot was last among the qualities of the game that fascinated us. No, it was not story that held us rapt. It was a purely visual matter. It had everything to do with graphics. With a type of perspective.

It became apparent after the transition from the macro to the micro, from the overhead map into a dungeon or tower. A sudden shadowy room. At its edge, in a perfect square, the four adventurers stood occupying the tiled floor like chess men. The room was tilted and viewed from an elevated point where, God-like, the player's eye peered through a veil that hung between the sitting room and *Trazere*. We knew the name for that point of view. It was called isometric projection, and we'd come to crave it, asking each other 'yeah but is it isometric?' when reading previews of new games in the PC magazines we thumbed to death. It had a practical purpose, to show facets of the game world that could not be presented if merely viewed from above. It did that by viewing everything from a fixed diagonal somewhere in the 'sky,' forcing a pseudo 3D perspective of pleasing regularity, like a snapshot of a city from the window of a plane on its final approach, when it's so easy to imagine what the eye sees is miniature. A fully realised little world unfolded through room after room, each containing not only monsters and challenges, but also decorations that added ambience and flavour. Small items were drawn with the beautiful economy demanded by computer art; furniture, rugs, chest, cracked stone columns, stocks with linked chains, flagstones inscribed with inscrutable symbols and grandfather clocks, their pendulums forever swinging. We pushed our adventurers past them all, and they in turn pulled us far beyond ourselves, beyond the fraught travails that marked the end of primary school.

In a room above, my younger sister played obsessively with a Sylvanian Families dollhouse, overseeing the lives of tiny rabbits and voles from on high. *Trazere* was our dollhouse. It exuded the same charm. But charm is too weak a word. The word I'm looking for is magic. Was it not magic to exist on two levels at once? To be both the god above, manipulating the adventurers ever further into peril with blithe abandon, and to somehow be those adventurers too? To be tangibly down there, stepping

past fireplaces and clocks, through doors and passages, sword and wand always at hand? Magic, but a safe kind of magic. A homely magic. And yet it had something secret to say about another magic, about a movement of spirit brought on by auguries in a school handball alley and whatever awaited us on Back Street.

Sometimes, when we switched the game off and I caught sight of the window and a privet hedge reflected dimly in the black curve of the cathode ray screen, I'd experience a vertiginous disparity between my place in the computer game world and the place I found myself. On the verge of discovering a fearful truth, gripped like a ball between fingering thoughts, I'd deliberately release it, so that it rolled away unexamined. It was like a little death.

After the terrible dilation of time that comes with dread, where a night and morning at home were as long as a week, Saturday afternoon found us on Back Street. Our bikes leaned against the wall of a derelict townhouse crowned with buddleia flowers. The day was torpid. Kells felt unreal the way it did on such days, like a painting of the actual town. The three of us, Mark, my brother and I, enacted our standard pattern of activity with Mark initiating a bold action while we hoped to experience what he did vicariously, with as little involvement as possible. He climbed onto a windowsill and pushed aside decomposing plywood, causing a dry rain of detritus to fall onto the footpath. Though he was heavy he slid through the opening like a cat. Half aghast, I watched all that was left of him, the sole of his LA Gear pump runner, disappear into mouldering dark so different from the painfully sharp day outside. It was like watching Indiana Jones enter the Well of Souls. Once there, in the beyond, he became just a voice. The effect was eerie and separating. It added to the cumulative pile of small ways he was becoming less a friend, more a strange and even hostile prospect.

'Are yiz coming in or what?' said the voice.

I thought of him as being already in the presence of an assimilating and powerful supernatural force. I remembered my father animatedly describing a film he had rented called *Poltergeist*, and how the voice of 'a little wan who got pulled away by ghouls came screaming out of all the tellies and the light switches and the plugs'.

'Nah. It's okay. We'll keep watch,' one of us said.

I looked at my shoes, because I could never look at my twin when the two of us experienced shame in the presence of a peer. To look at him was to see me, but more than that, to see us, as Mark no doubt saw us. Unusual side characters who look the same. Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

'Keep watch. Ha ha ha. Pure chickenshits… woah what's this?'

He rattled something wooden inside.

'What is it?' I called.

Mark didn't answer. I heard more wood rattle. His presence moved further, as if into another room. He was progressing like a bold adventurer in *Trazere*. Meanwhile us pair, the would-be gods, could not bear to even peep, let alone enter.

'Something's manifesting. Go up to the window. Look in,' said my brother.

'No. You do it,' I said.

The rattling stopped.

Deep inside Mark said something small and strangled, maybe the words 'oh shite'.

'Just look in. Risk it for the biscuit,' I said to my brother.

'Shut it. You go,' he said.

A commotion at the window shook us from our paralysis. Mark emerged through the opening with such speed that large chunks of dirt fell onto the ground ahead of him. I can remember few faces with perfect clarity from my childhood, but his at that exact moment has never left me. His mouth was an O and his big features had a funny unalive colour, so much that his own weird word from the morning before came into my mind. 'Waxen.' As soon as he caught sight of us gawping at him, his expression hardened.

'State of yas. Get away from me.'

We didn't. Silent as dolls, we got onto our bikes and followed him across the town to the estate where the three of us lived. Nobody spoke until we reached the gate of Mark's house.

'What did you see?' I asked him.

He dismounted his bike between the two gate pillars of his house, which were grander than any other house on his road. They were tall and topped with a pair of spheres from which large irregular pieces of white paint flaked, making them like globes of the world with the continents gone wrong. Mark was looking apprehensively, as he always did, towards

his bedroom on the top floor, a place which was a powerful mystery to me during the five years I considered him my best friend. He was forbidden to allow us upstairs. I still sometimes dream about what the inside of the bedroom looked like, my subconscious decorating it with an old-fashioned *Lord of the Rings* poster on a brownish wall and a hairy carpet imbued with the powerful blurry scent of old things that came off his school uniform.

'You'd just love to know, wouldn't ya?'

A contempt that had been bubbling in him for months spilled over in his tone of voice. He told us all the same.

'There was a star drawn on the ground, yeah? And there was an arrow drawn on the floor as well. And the arrow pointed to a small little door in the wall. Too small for a person or even a kid to go in. Or even come out of.'

The door appeared suddenly and indelibly in my mind's eye. It is still there, as clear, or clearer than things witnessed. I tried to articulate the perplexed and tumbling feelings it generated in me.

'Was it… a real door?'

I could see Mark knew what I struggled to articulate, which did not mean real, as in functionally a door, but 'real' in some metaphysical and awful way.

'Of course it was fucken real. Wet Michael is real. All the black magic is real. Me and my brother knew before anyone else.'

They were the last words he said to me in the capacity of friend. The following shocked Monday morning he punched me in the lip during small break, as some kind of dare, or initiation for a jeering group who watched. It finalised my conversion into a pale hermit, surrendered fully to *Trazere* and the isometric worlds that followed. *Diablo*, *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate*. As those worlds grew increasingly more graphically sophisticated and complex, their enchantment diminished accordingly. If I play them today, I am no longer able to fully inhabit them. I am no longer that double mystery of god and subject. I am just me, interacting with a game on a screen.

Decades later, at the cottage my partner and I moved into on Dublin's Ballybough Road, my twin brother came to visit me for a Hallowe'en housewarming. We had gone full steam ahead on the season that night.

The house was ornately decorated with black crêpe, fake cobwebs and orange fairy lights and scented by pungent exhalations from a UFO-shaped fragrance diffuser filled with an essential oil mixture called 'Green Man'. At the tail end of the night, when all but a handful had gone home, my brother sat with us in the front room, where we luxuriated in communal post-party hypnosis. The party was fancy dress and he had initially come dressed as Black Philip from Robert Eggers' 2015 horror film *The Witch*, but he had taken off his rubber goat head and black jacket. The only remnant of the diabolical costume were his leather gloves, creepy in the phosphor of the phone he used to cast music videos and songs through the TV and sound system. The clips he chose reflected the flow of his thoughts that leapt and grew through enthusiasms and associations. And though I'd often resented him for his habit of hogging entertainment systems at house parties, I was happy enough to listen to him, even taking joy in his sentimental expansiveness.

'Are you watching this?' he asked, all but looking at me.

'Yup.'

To give it my full attention I removed my own headpiece, a rubber horse's mask with eyes painted white to evoke Henry Fuselli's painting *The Nightmare*, and placed it on the couch beside the rubber goat head. Techno music gave way to a clip with the sound turned way up. It was the introduction to *Fraggle Rock*. An irresistible funk beat played. A camera panned from a view of the larger human world, down a hole, to track Gobo the pink-haired Fraggle into the Fraggles' smaller world, before taking us further and smaller again, towards the Doozers, the tiny helmeted creatures who build complicated sugary constructions among the Fraggles.

'This is the exact shit I'm talking about,' said my brother, '*Fraggle Rock*. I was obsessed with it when I was little. I used to feel this weird energy when I watched it but I wouldn't have been able to tell you why. Now I know. It's all about bigger worlds and smaller worlds. They sit inside each other, but it's not just that. No. There's more to it than just that.'

He skipped the clip back to the beginning again. He gave himself over to it entirely, eyes wide, head bobbing to the music's sugary funk.

He said, 'It's the idea of *Fraggle Rock*. The whole idea of it. That is magic. Like real magic.'

I became conscious that an old wind that had stopped had begun to blow once again in the grate of the fireplace. A cosy feeling was gone.

'That idea,' continued my brother with his characteristic tendency to overstate, 'makes *Fraggle Rock* one of the most mystical fucking things ever made.'

Overwhelmed with a threatening and superstitious feeling unlike anything I had felt since childhood, I picked up my rubber horse head, which seemed suddenly cursed, and stood up. I wanted to bin the mask but, not only that, tear down every Hallowe'en decoration in the house. I choked back the impulse to say something ridiculous or mad, to give voice to the spooked and incomprehensible movements of emotion that felt decades old. The little door. I left the room and went outside, into the back garden. It was 4 a.m. I stood in cold air and became aware of the giant shadowy presence that squatted above our cottage and all the surrounding cottages. Croke Park Stadium. It patiently watches the houses, I thought, and they huddle from it below, desperately protecting their secrets. I walked just a little into the garden's wet, then retreated, unable to shake the sense that my thoughts and body did not belong to me, that I was a small piece inside a simulation. A game.

To think of that moment now, and whatever secret from thirty years prior it contained, gives me a chill even as I type. An ancient and much-considered adage comes to mind. I never really understood it, but always intuited its uncanny power and that what it implied might well be dreadful. It goes like this. As above so below.

Don't Want to Die

Don't want to die in front of the television.
Don't want to die on the toilet like both Elvis and my grandfather did.
Don't want to die drowning in a great biblical flood.
Don't want to die in a megastorm when the climate collapses.
Don't want to die from bad genes.
Don't want to die of whatever new virus jumps from a lab or from animal.
Don't want to die like asthmatic Proust in bed.
Don't want to die drooling down shirt in old folks' home.
Don't want to die from bad pork or salmonella chicken.
Don't want to die in cancer hospice wailing.
Don't want to die with regret for not having saved the last white rhino.
Don't want to die not knowing my own name or who my mother was.
Don't want to die coughing blood from belly hemorrhage like Kerouac.
Don't want to die in mass shooting or bomb set off by madman.
Don't want to die from car crash, or run down by bus, or plane falling from sky.
Don't want to die from starvation for spending my life writing poems and stories, instead of working as a plumber, electrician, carpenter, or whatever.
Don't want to die in fist fight, stabbing, war, or devoured by wild dogs roaming in apocalypse night.
Don't want to die in fire, by electric shock, hung, or head cut off by new guillotine.
Oh let me not die but attain the deathless state, enter the stream, cross the shore.

Karl Parkinson

Boyfriend Reacts

Sean Cavanaugh

Chris knocked on the door to ask Julie if she was ready, and she told him to come in. There was a ring light behind her monitor that she touched briefly to mount her phone and which shaded her face when she turned around, so he couldn't see what she'd look like in the video. She smiled expressly and rubbed his knee, then asked if he was ready, which he was. They were going to make an entry in the 'My Boyfriend Reacts to Anime' series, Julie's most successful project to date. She looked at him with a serious expression and asked what he was thinking, but he said he wasn't thinking words, that he was just aware of things. Julie told him they didn't have to do a video, but Chris said he wanted to. She thanked him while she pulled up the material. The costumes and the lights were nice, but he made the process spontaneous. 'The things I could say, they know already. You can *surprise* them.'

She played a scene from a series she loved, or one she'd grown to love since she started making content. In the video, two young girls took shelter from the rain, huddling under a gazebo and rubbing their hands together. The rain, which was either painstakingly illustrated or rendered on a computer, lent the scene an impression of self-conscious beauty. The taller girl, this one with pink hair, pulled a bun from her bag and broke it in half. The other, blonde, grabbed the bigger piece and stuffed it into her mouth, spreading her cheeks with an exaggerated puff, then swallowed and sighed with delight. She said the other's name, and Chris realised he'd seen these two in a previous 'Boyfriend Reacts' video. The pink-haired girl giggled and wiped a spot of cream off her friend's cheek. The sound of the rain intensified, both girls made surprised sounds, and they kissed. The last time Chris saw these characters, they were tearing into each

other with massive swords, the world on fire, energy blasts expressing in motion what would otherwise go unsaid. He remembered the music and the violence of the scene, the overwhelming sense of betrayal, and he shuddered.

Chris asked if these were the same girls from the last video, and they were, so he figured the kiss must take place before the showdown. 'Okay,' she said. 'This is interesting.' The series was based on a video game, a narrative epic with branching storylines, so each season adapted a different timeline from the one that came before. These two scenes, the final confrontation and the spark of love, couldn't be put in sequence; they represented alternative presents, not a past and a future, so there was no reconciliation and no betrayal, just two character designs that meant different things to different people. The nature of choice, at least in video games, meant the player could make them do things 'they wouldn't do'. Chris thought her broadcasting voice was soothing, that he preferred it when she delineated her on-screen persona from his real-life girlfriend. If they could keep things superficial, they could approach something new without messing with their relationship as such.

Chris compared the show's timelines to a role-playing game he'd played in high school, and Julie told him the observation was apt, then smiled and made eye-contact. 'So,' she said, 'Cute or not?' He made a bewildered expression and asked how old the characters were, then gestured to the phone and said that was a shitty question to ask. She laughed, then agreed with him: 'Anime will do that to you.' He said he wasn't talking about himself, that he didn't want to make videos about which anime girls he found attractive. Julie took this ironically, but after she stopped recording, she said she didn't mean to cross a line, that she would send him the final edit before putting it up. She rolled her chair closer to his, bumping his knee and spinning him around a little bit, then told him, 'The point is doing it together.'

Costumes and lighting were great as crafts, but when she worked alone, she felt a tugging, extractive feeling. Her fear of irrelevance was tempered by her strong SEO practices, but she knew she could do more, that everyone else was. The accounts she loved invented micro-personalities they could swap between at-will, identities that evoked novelty and familiarity at once. They produced instances of contact between their personas and an idealised viewer, an imagined friction that gave off real heat. In the

past, social media users took pictures of themselves, but short-form video pushed them to elevate and augment their personalities, inflating inner tensions into viral ways of being. Julie thought that kind of work was beyond her, but her content had changed the way she spoke and the shows she watched. She liked making videos together because she didn't have to produce herself around him.

Chris thanked her and agreed that it was fun to do things together. Julie gave him an apprehensive grin, then dismounted her phone and began to organise the footage. After a moment, though, she placed the phone face-down on the desk and said his reaction to the fight scene was the best thing she'd ever made: it was authentic, and its authenticity was transmissible online. She cut it up and sent it out, but he made people care. She told him it did better numbers than the rest of her output, that the comments made her proud: people wanted a boyfriend like him, someone who could give himself over to their interests. She thought they were right, that they only had partial access, but they'd latched on to something worthy and true. She smiled and rubbed his knee again. 'Today was okay, but I know I can get you back there.'

After they finished, Chris went to the aquarium to meet his buddy Tim. He watched a livestream on the train and folded his foot over his knee. In the video, a teen stacked quarters and begged his audience not to donate to his account. Like many creators, he positioned donations against his stated goals: if a viewer gave over a certain limit, he would topple the stack and start over. 'Chat, do not donate. I am begging you. I am one token away from knocking it over. Do not make me knock it over. I am almost at one hundred quarters stacked.' The delivery was obvious and stagey, pleading in reverse for cheap gifts. He counted down from ten as he hovered a quarter over the tower and interrupted himself to beg his audience (Do not donate, chat). Finally, a viewer betrayed his wishes and donated a Galaxy Token, causing an extended performance where he cleared the coins from the surface and smashed his face on the table. When he was finished, he read the chat and repeated himself a lot, which Chris thought was a tactic for filling air. He liked this part, before the kid started over, where he didn't have to work as hard, and he seemed very tired.

He got to the aquarium early, so he bought a ticket and a cup of coffee. The metal detector messed with his earbuds, causing a quiet, dizzying whine,

and he thought in retrospect that it might have altered his mood. On the other side, he found an outdoor complex with brick buildings connected to deep blue pools and some kiosks selling lemonade. It was misty that day, so walking between the displays felt introspective and surprising. Chris thought the mist was reflective, that it brought his perceptions to the foreground, or made him aware that he perceived things at all. A black lump could be a seal, but it usually wasn't; it might be a rock with a penguin on it. He would approach a building and discover that it was a wall. He sipped his coffee and thought about Julie. She wanted him to be excellent, and she wanted to help him do it.

The day they recorded her favourite video, the one where he reacted to the fight scene, he'd woken up thinking about killing her and committing suicide. That happened to him sometimes, and it usually went away if things were going well. He'd spent that morning reassuring himself: he didn't want to kill anyone. It still bothered him though, and it'd bothered him that whole afternoon, while he checked his email and reviewed his samples. Chris was a pavement systems analyst: he looked at photos of sidewalks and put reports into his computer. He double-majored in anthropology and geography because he loved people and the world, then he chose his job as a protest against either himself or everyone else. He wondered how long someone could live negatively. Suicide didn't interest him, and the thought of killing Julie made him antsy and miserable.

The rest of that day, he'd considered his options for the evening. He could get drunk, buy a pack of cigarettes, order a hundred dollars of McDonalds on a delivery app and eat it all in one sitting. Maybe he'd take too many edibles and see a movie in the city. He'd known, even in the moment, he was searching for a way down. It wasn't pleasure-seeking because that wasn't a serious option, not since he'd woken with these thoughts. The murder repeated relentlessly, so evocative and ripe for interrogation that he couldn't be distracted from it; he couldn't forget something that couldn't become boring. It was perfectly fascinating, swapping out locations, weapons, varying the tone in which she begged him to stop. Every way he might expend this feeling was *bad*, but he didn't want to feel like this, and there was only so much to do. On the way home that night, he sweat all over his khakis passing gas stations and liquor stores, drive-thrus and buffets. Impulses shot down his elbows telling

him to get out and make a purchase. When he'd made it home without stopping, he'd felt manic and proud.

Julie had made dinner already, and he ate with her. It was Mexican night, so they'd built little tacos with their hands and ate them right away. He scooped meat out of serving spoons and stuffed lettuce on top with cheese and sauce, pinching his hand into satisfying angles and licking his fingers when he was done. She asked him to make the video after he cleaned up; he'd agreed. They went upstairs, and he'd sat in a comfortable chair while she arranged the lights. When she started playing the content, he wanted to like it because he wanted to like what she did. Exciting music started playing, then two girls with coloured hair came on screen and started hitting each other with massive, devastating swords. The blonde one stared at the other and let out an astonished gasp. He'd wondered, silently, if they knew each other, and why the blonde one couldn't believe this was happening. The pink-haired girl raised her sword so it looked like a skyscraper then thrust it down with catastrophic power, repeatedly and from multiple angles, severing her friend's arm from her body and causing a massive blast that scourged the surrounding land. Both of them screamed, the explosion was overwhelming, then it was over. There was a mile-wide crater around the impact site where nothing would grow for a very long time, and Chris knew that something meaningful was finally dead. 'Oh my God,' he'd cried, 'what the fuck?'

When Tim made it to the aquarium, they got chicken tenders and talked about TV shows. Tim said his girlfriend had been watching ahead on certain series, that he knew he should be angry, but he honestly felt relieved. Even if it was a show he liked, the pressure to enjoy himself was too much to bear, or at least to perform. Television had become radioactive in their relationship: it couldn't be their *favourite* thing, that would be sad, but it was what they did the most together, so he couldn't tell her he didn't like it anymore. Tim said once more that he'd stopped liking TV, and Chris pretended to gasp. 'I'm serious,' he said. 'I wish this was frivolous.' Chris said they could take a glass-blowing class or start rock-climbing, but Tim didn't think that could make up for TV. There would always be time between getting home and going to bed, and only one of them was a gamer.

They walked over to the beluga exhibit, which offered two ways of viewing the creatures: from above, where a friendly handler explained

their diet to a throng of families, and from below, where a panoramic window showed the whales as they saw each other. They started up top, where Tim asked the employee how they knew the things were happy; the employee laughed and said a good sign was that they'd just been fed. Tim laughed and nodded, bobbing his head in a gentle hyucking motion that belied his intelligence and made him seem kinder than he was. Really, he was fat and stolid, with a head on his body like an egg on a beanbag and a general itch to assert his own dignity. He asked the worker about careers in marine biology, then gave a knowing smile and said it beat software marketing. The handler agreed: it probably did.

Below, they stood in front of the plexiglass screen and watched the whales go by. Framed by the mist, the display looked like a gallery wall or a large TV in an undecorated apartment. Tim smiled and waved when a whale passed the window, claiming this one was a show-off or the other was being coy. Chris noticed that they were articulated at the knees, making an unwanted sensual impression, like they were people in disguise or a failed attempt at an underwater biped. Sometimes, when they swam by, Tim would say, 'Hello,' in an affected voice, drawing out the 'O' sound and tilting his chin in the air. They smiled and laughed at the whales for some time then took pictures of each other in front of the window, which was a little difficult to time, but which made for an excellent check-in with their girlfriends.

Afterwards, they wandered the grounds looking at penguins and jellyfish. Tim said he hated his job, and Chris reminded him that he himself looked at pavement for a living. As if to deflect, Tim mentioned his girlfriend and said her younger sister just got engaged. Chris said congratulations, but was rebuffed: her younger sister was getting married, guess how that made her feel. When her mom made a comment, her own desires became irrelevant. She had official positions, and she officially wanted a husband. Her aunt, who was Armenian, texted him the name of a diamond dealer in the city, a family friend. He was going to visit, but he wasn't happy about it. His future was beginning to calcify as his past thawed behind him. By the time he was stuck, he would see what he might have done differently.

'You guys seem to get along,' said Chris.

'We really do.'

On the way home, Chris got the final edit from Julie. It was glossy and satisfying, with graphics framing the stakes of his question and the implications of her response. Nowhere did it mention the possibility of simulated attraction, the sex politics of female fandom. He told her it was good, and she responded to his whale photo: Cuties. The train passed a baseball stadium, then a series of plazas that sprung up around transit stops. He thought about buildings and people then pictured a world without a planet, a hollow sphere made of roads and sewers, data and families, an interlocking playset with institutions in the missing centre. He pictured all of these things floating in space, giving off light and heat but anchored to nothing, then cohering into a shimmering plastic and wrapping around his head. He pictured it squeezing and shuddered with anticipation: he wondered what came next. There was a drink waiting for him on the counter at Starbucks, and when he made it home, he said, 'Sweetie, hi.'

It was date night, so they got in the car and she drove to the restaurant. She played female rappers and discussed the video, which she thought was a success. 'Everyone talks about the gushy stuff,' she said. 'There's room in the market for formalism.' If people had feelings for him, that was a tool for showing them why they felt that way. They could build a new literacy, a way of deciding what things meant. She smiled at the road and said they needed new premises to find new conclusions, that they'd reached the end of something, but that might be a good thing. They slowed in front of a car on the shoulder, totalled and completely on fire, which smelled somehow final, and whose heat they could feel with the windows closed. Julie said, 'Wow.' Chris stiffened and sweat onto his slacks. After a second, she noticed what he was doing and rubbed his knee. She said she loved him, and that he'd be okay, whatever that would end up meaning.

The Visions of Agnes Martin

There were a few clues
for paradise: the screen door with the sky
squared behind its grid,
the memory of looking at gulls
moving through the diamond eyes
of a fisherman's net.

The work was always the same:
mix nouns and powder them
into vectors—until a pattern
opened onto a plain:
the harvest, the sea, its blue hours,
and the desert of fires.

Jake Kennedy

Composition No. 49

Alicia McAuley

Well, I suppose you'll want me to lay the whole thing out. And in fact I don't mind doing that, I really don't, because after all it came off so well. Don't you think? So *appreciably*.

Where will I begin? First thing in the morning? Good. I'll spare you the washing and dressing and eating of toast. Suffice it to say I was ready to begin.

So, the idea was to use a suitcase to transport the—what shall I call it?—the *object*. But when it finally arrived it was a good deal larger than anticipated and it so happens that the only piece of luggage I own is the extra-small type, the kind you carry onto aeroplanes. A glorified briefcase, really. And the object was shaped like a cube, more or less, each face being a good couple of feet long. So you see there was no prospect of getting it inside.

It is true that I am not given to excessive planning, but that is because my wits have always served me well, and indeed this instance was no different. I had brown paper in my desk, lots of stout brown paper, and brown tape, and so I wrapped the thing up a couple of times, applied the tape to the joins of the paper and reinforced the corners with more tape. Then—and I think you'll like this—I folded a piece of A4, carefully wrote a particular name and address on it in slick black ink and stuck it onto one of the sides.

What was the name and address? Ho! Well, I'm glad you've asked. I'll admit to indulging in some fun there, yes, a baby lark. I don't expect the paper has survived, but if you ever do find a scrap of it, it might just give your friends the experts a way to earn their money. I'll be watching to see what they make of it.

Now, I knew that my neighbour kept a small, wheeled push-cart in the lean-to abutting the boundary of my garden, for the purposes of moving pieces of furniture and so on. At that time it was still pretty dark, so hopping the wall and purloining it was a trivial matter. I brought the cart inside and set it on its end and thus was able to slide the parcel onto it. Having righted it again and wheeled it to the door, I sat by the window and waited for my taxi.

When the driver saw me coming out, pushing the cart towards him, he said, 'Want a hand with that, mate?'

'Nice one,' I said, and let him take hold of one edge. The two of us heaved the cart, with the parcel still in place, straight into the boot of his Prius. I trust, unless you are dawdlers indeed, that the driver is here too, somewhere, in another one of these sticky little rooms. He'll be giddy, I expect. Giddy and bewildered. I'm afraid he won't be able to help you.

'Jesus,' he said, 'that'll cost you at the post office.'

'Yeah, mate,' I said. 'That's why I'm delivering it myself, isn't it?'

And so I hopped into the back seat and off we went. My new friend kept up a merry and constant prattle which entertained me considerably. In fact I barely thought of the contents of the boot until we pulled up in front of the building.

I paid the man using my telephone—I expect you know that already—and the gratuity I added had just the effect I intended, in that it caused him to hop out like a spring hare in order to help me. I positioned the little cart on the pavement to avoid having to lever it onto the kerb, and with his help was able to lug the parcel towards it.

The building, as you are aware, overlooks a large pedestrianised plaza, more or less triangular in shape. The plaza was just about empty, although it was due to start filling up very soon. By now the brown paper was sporting flowery rust-coloured stains here and there and when he noticed them the taxi driver became visibly nervous. He began trying to avoid touching the blotches with his hands and those parts of his belly and chest that were in contact with the parcel as we carried it towards the pavement. I must admit I was enjoying his unease. My own white shirt happened to be pressing against one excellently oily smirch and I took the opportunity of rubbing my torso against it in a manner not entirely wholesome, with a correspondingly voluptuous expression on my face. At that point the driver, who had been chattering like a macaque the whole

time, turned white and silent, scuttled back to his car and disappeared as fast as the mounting traffic allowed.

The push-cart was manageable on flat ground and without much trouble I got it across the plaza and through the revolving door of the building. I waved my ID at the security guard on the desk and headed for the express elevator. The express elevator goes as far as the forty-second floor and actually only makes two stops on its way, at what they call sky lobbies on floors fourteen and twenty-eight. After that, one is expected either to take the stairs or to transfer to the lifts that stop at each individual level.

Thankfully the express elevator was empty, so I wheeled the cart in and settled it in one corner. The rusty stains had got bigger by this stage and would certainly be noticed by anyone who came in, so I took off my suit jacket and settled it over the parcel. There was no hiding the smears on the front of my shirt, jacket or no jacket. This was vexatious, of course, and caused me to regret a little the fun I'd had with the taxi-driver.

I knew the building would not be entirely empty, even at that time of the morning. There was security, of course; there would be cleaners, but they would be indifferent, like ghosts. The people I had to worry about were my own colleagues, several of whom are in the habit of going in early of a morning to steal a march on their emails. (There is also a woman who locks herself in the boardroom and makes presentations to the chairs.)

Happily, though, no one else entered the elevator before it closed its doors. As it proceeded upwards, I became aware of a faint smell. There was a sickly, floral aspect about it, to be sure, but in the main it was a mixture of leather and lead. It was not exactly unpleasant but it was certainly unusual.

When we slid to a halt at floor fourteen, in came one of the very many ambitious twentysomethings who work in the building. Mikey is the man's name. Floor twenty-six. He bobbed his head towards me in the virile, combative kind of hello one encounters there a lot and expressed surprise at seeing me at such an hour.

Mikey appeared to notice the smell at once. Judging by his expressions, it did not take him long to identify the other questionable circumstances either—that is to say, the stains on my shirt and the peculiar object in the push-cart beneath my jacket.

Mikey was gearing up to ask questions and I would have to neutralise his curiosity. I decided to do so by deploying some of the very techniques that had seen me advance to my present high position in the organisation. First, I embarked on an extravagant display of nonchalance; then I disarmed him with flattery. In the parlance of the territory, I styled it out.

'So I hear you're getting into sustainability mandates,' I said. 'Totally get that. Playing the long game, yeah? Totally get it.'

'Exactly, man,' said Mikey. 'I'm all about the ten-year returns, you know?'

'Yeah, man. No more of that asset-class-specific bullshit. What are we talking, Hong Kong? Singapore?'

'Yeah, yeah, deffo, yeah. Was out in the 'Pore there in August. Bleeding edge of all that shit out there. Absolute bleeding edge.'

You may reasonably assume that a fellow practitioner of these tactics, as Mikey undoubtedly is, would be immune to them, but you'd be wrong, quite wrong! In fact it was easily done. As soon as Mikey began to brag about the trail he was blazing through the 'Pore he quite forgot the mysterious shape in the corner, on which I was by then oh-so-casually resting my shoe. Soon the elevator glided into position at floor twenty-eight. When Mikey took his leave he was as satisfied with the exchange as I was myself. I believe he even chucked me on the bicep on his way out.

When the elevator got to floor forty-two I rolled the push-cart out into the lobby. I squared myself behind its handle and launched into a purposeful walk, a walk that would give any milling workers to understand that I was an important person, not available for idle morning chatter and very likely badly disposed to questions about my little push-cart. In this attitude I made it, without being disturbed, as far as the doors to the Stopper.

The Stopper is what we call the structure that sits atop the main body of the skyscraper. The nickname comes from its design, which as you know is narrow at the bottom, with each of the five storeys extending slightly further out on all sides than the one beneath it, so that the topmost is as wide as the building's main façade. The overall shape therefore resembles a lidded bottle of fancy bubble bath.

It was beyond those doors that I encountered my first real obstacle. There was a piece of paper on the Stopper lift reading 'OUT OF ORDER'. I thumbed the call button but nothing happened, so I had no choice but

to make for the stairwell. My little cart was no use in there, of course, so I tipped it forwards, releasing the parcel onto the bottom step, and left it behind the door. I began to shove the parcel up the stairs.

I was wary. The Stopper is mostly engine rooms for the heating, ventilation and electrics of the building. It has no offices at all, and therefore a person like me had no business there with or without a suspicious-looking parcel. I say parcel, but after just one flight it could no longer be called that because the concrete stairs had worried the brown paper almost entirely away, leaving a trail of scattered shreds. Underneath, the surface was like rough granite, except that it was dark brown.

I moved regularly, rhythmically, one step at a time, but the object was heavy and my progress with it was slow. Despite this, I met nobody until I got to the sixth of the ten flights of stairs leading to the roof. At that point a door swung open above me and a footstep struck up. After a moment a man in a petrol-blue boiler suit and matching cap appeared, carrying a toolbox. The stairwell was narrow and well lit but without windows or air conditioning. The smell, just about perceptible in the elevator, was now quite pungent and, of course, at its most conspicuous where I was standing. There was nowhere for me to conceal myself, so I stopped pushing and offered the man a nod as he pattered past. He did not so much as raise his head, although it was impossible that he had failed to notice me.

As soon as I heard the report of the door at the bottom of the stairwell I continued on my journey. I had to stop often to wipe my hands on my trousers because of the iridescent ooze that was now escaping from small fissures in the surface. The surface was crumbling slightly; morsels of crust, now, were littering my wake. My palms were raw and I was tired, so it was with some relief that I made it to the last set of stairs.

I was halfway up these when I heard the bottom door open again.

'Hello! Somebody up there?'

It was security—it had to be. The man in the boiler suit! I cursed him.

But I was close to the top now. I would have to be quick, that was all. I pulled the cuffs of my shirt down over my skinned palms and began to push the object up the last few stairs. The guard's footsteps were slow and intermittent—I guessed he was stopping to inspect the debris I had left behind me. Then a chunk of crust the size of a golf ball dislodged itself from a corner of the cube, escaped between the banisters and clattered all

the way to the bottom. He called out again—'Hey! Who's there?'—and his tentative step became a trot.

By now, though, I had reached the door that gave onto the roof. It was a big, heavy door, the sort you open by pressing downward on a horizontal bar. I was ready for the alarm—after all, there had been jumpers—but even so it was louder than I imagined. Something about its urgency unbalanced me and—well!—didn't I quite panic? My methodical manoeuvring techniques went, so to speak, out the window. I clawed at the object with my fingertips; I dragged it across the flat surface of the roof. I lost my grip more than once and scudded onto my backside. At last I got to the edge of the building—the edge overlooking the plaza.

The wall forming the lip of the roof was less than two feet tall, but that was high enough to stop me rolling or sliding the object onto it. So I planted a foot on either side and eased my fingers underneath its greasy, corroded corners. The door clanged open. The security guard saw me and gave a roar of embargo… but he was too late. With a supreme effort I had heaved the thing up, over the lip and cleanly away.

How long it took to fall! How strange that moment was, when the thing was done—quite irrevocably done—and still not yet done at all! The guard peered fearfully over the edge—compulsively, I thought, and against his better judgement. Then at last came the mighty percussion of the landing, the crashes of cars when the dust cloud enveloped the street. Then more alarms. And sirens. And screams.

The security guard quickly recovered himself, took hold of me in a well-trained manner and began yelling in my ear. Of course I did not struggle against him. I let him tug and twist my arms behind my back. I let him pinion me altogether, in fact, which caused a spasm of agony that quite heightened the thrill. After a moment I heard the door burst open again and a great many heavy footsteps bearing down from behind. The guard pushed me further forward, right out over the edge of the rooftop so that it felt like the solid little pair of us were about to plummet to our deaths.

The dust cleared faster than you might think and before your friends dragged me away I had a very good view of the chaos. Oh! I could hardly have dreamed the extent of it! The object was more than the sum of its parts—I knew that—but the holy mess it made reached to the very edge of the plaza and up as far as the third storey of some of the buildings.

And the colours! There were reds, of course—scarlet and ketchup and fire engine—a flood of them, or rather several small, specific floods. (You told me exactly how many, didn't you?) But there were many other colours, too—lime, periwinkle, deep Champagne, jazzberry jam, rose dust, big dip o'ruby and bleu de France, to name a few.

You know, there was never the smallest intention of creating a work of art, as it has (with some justification) been called. Not at all! And yet, I believe that the view from the rooftop is what I will remember about the whole enterprise. Even now, you know—just now, here, when I was waiting for you to come in—it was that very moment I was thinking about. Oh, that moment! The moment of aftermath—in which a man had me trammelled, with my head over the precipice and his knee compressing my chest, and there I was, looking down—staring down—at the deedscape beneath me, picking out vestiges of acid green, gunmetal, steel teal, tumbleweed, maximum red, jelly bean, peridot and tickle-me-pink.

Votives at Sacré-Cœur

And what stays
is the image;
light flowering
off the wick

like gorse
from the cliffside,
blooming
with each turn

of shuffled
cupola air
as the wax, wetly,
folds in.

Daniel Shannon

The Woods

Paula Dias Garcia

Niamh is quiet most of the way out, focused on the road ahead. We're both grossed out by the act of driving, and I'm glad she's offered, glad my licence is only good for the other side of the road.

Used to be the boys would drive us.

She drives onto the bridge and I perk up at the window like some labrador. I catch the view across the fog as we go over the hump, lifting us up enough to reveal the green on green on green I always loved so much.

It looks delicious from out here, the shades of grass; makes me desperately, hopelessly wish I was a sheep. I want to be munching on it, to have the distinction of palate to find the right shade and go yes, this is the good shit, this is my type of grass. I want the distance between myself and the earth to be only the inch I'm ripping from the ground.

I want to taste the rich dark of it so badly, it's almost enough to set me off.

'It's nice we're doing this, haven't seen you in a while.'

She's cautious. Everyone is cautious talking about my *while*.

'You know you can always call me, right?' she goes. 'Whenever you feel like it.'

She gives me a sideways look and we grin at each other.

Niamh pulls into Cratloe, goes for a spot, parks like absolute shit. Pulls back, does it again. One more time, so the tyres are no longer on the lines. Every other spot is empty.

We get out of the car, her all decked out with her hat and tote, me with the big fisherman coat on me. I pull a lighter from my pocket, try to use its tiny flame to get a look at the sign.

'Don't be smoking in front of the kids,' she says, as we walk past the playground. It's a joke; it's two in the morning.

'Quit,' I say, regardless. 'Had to, no smoking for the dead.'

'Ah, that's fucked.'

We head into the trail, the woods around us lost to the darkness. I can see Niamh's breath puffing up in front of her face, but it's a nice, clean cold, no mugginess to it.

We soon veer off the trail and into the grass. I hear rustling and keep turning around, hoping I'll see a fox, but it's just the trees, every time. I point the lighter at every shadow, expecting the yellow shine of a creature's eyes.

Eventually the pad of my thumb starts to feel sore, so I give up and put the lighter back in my pocket. Niamh catches the movement.

'What's up with your hands?' she asks. 'Is it just from being dead?'

They look twice as old as me, fingers gnarly. When I was alive you could see splotchy red so it looked right; you could understand inflammation, sores. Now that they're this pale, they just look cursed. Old.

'No, it's just from before. The thing I had.'

'They just looked a bit grim.'

'I mean, yeah. It's just not a new development.'

'Ah,' she nods. 'Just old grimness, so.'

'The best kind.'

'Speaking of,' Niamh says, and looks pointedly at some creature's burrowing hole, a lair dug into a tree stump by tooth and claw. Trunk's dead, branches half-rotten, but maybe something is alive in there. Something bad.

She doesn't make the joke, of course, because it's not her joke to make.

And part of me does want to do it, just stick my hand all the way into the hole, even though no one's betting me a fiver to do it. I want something to be there: a spider, a hare, a badger. Something that will take off a finger, something that'll really bite. Sure what is it gonna do? Kill me?

I walk past it and don't do it, because I'm still afraid of what it'd feel like.

The trail goes a little ways up, turns steep, then slowly flattens out. We step off the dirt path on the flat bit. To our right, there's a slope through the weeds, where I can see the yellow sheen of gorse all the way down on the moon glow. It's nice that it's gorse, because I couldn't name any other flower. Niamh doesn't even pause, as I do, to take it all in; she's a path to take and it doesn't go through any flowers. I stare at it briefly, mainly yearning for the ease of descending instead of climbing.

It's not a *cliff* cliff; it's just enough that if you got pushed off it, it'd fuck you up a bit. Be taking bits of gorse from between your teeth for a while.

Niamh makes her way over to a big rock and settles herself on it. Then, without looking, she drops her bag to the side, and it nestles itself in a perfect little divot.

'This is it,' she tells me. 'This is where I come to scream.'

'It's nice,' I say, wondering if there would be an echo off the hill or if that's not how it works.

'I'm telling ya,' Niamh says. She's distracted, rooting though her purse. I want to ask her for things, just to scope out how well-prepared she truly is. Does she have some Panadol in there? Change for the bus? A book?

And fuck me, out she pulls a little tub of raspberries. Not even the tray from the shop, a little container she had in her house, lovingly lined with a paper towel, because you can bet she's washed them.

She opens the lid, picks one, eats it. Picks another and offers it to me.

'I don't need to eat anymore,' I say.

Niamh rolls her eyes and keeps holding out her hand.

'Nobody *needs* a raspberry, they're just nice.'

There's no arguing with that, so I take it and pop it in my mouth.

And it's a really good one, too, so when I press it between my tongue and the roof of my mouth, it doesn't go soggy on me. I can feel each terse drupelet, all full to bursting, and when the pressure is just right the whole thing splits apart. Just a bunch of cells that had decided to be a raspberry for a bit, until I'd gone and said, *that's enough of that, now.*

A perfect raspberry is such a religious experience that when Niamh offers me another, I can't take it for fear it'll be bad, and that'd probably make me cry.

She flings it towards the cliff instead, a tiny pink offering, and I get to imagine it bursting in the dark. Niamh keeps eating her raspberries while I pick at my skin, thinking about how much I'd like another perfect raspberry, how heartbroken I'd be at a horrible one.

I don't come to any conclusion before they're gone.

'Whenever you're ready,' Niamh says. She clocks the damage I've done to my hand, frowns at it, doesn't comment.

'You go, if it's such a good screaming spot.' I've come all the way out here but at the back of my head I'm thinking: surely she doesn't mean it.

Niamh gets up from her rock, turns towards the slope, and lets out the most gut-wrenching wail. Just a horrifying, throat-ripping banshee cry, and keeps going and going until I think she's gonna topple over; she doesn't really stop as much as just empties out all the air from her lungs.

And then she sits back down, puts the lid on her raspberry tub and packs it away in her bag.

'Now you go,' she says.

I look at her, then at the slope, then I step over and go,

'AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!'

While screaming, I'm thinking about how I'm thinking about screaming, and I'm picking at my hands hard enough that a flap of skin comes loose. I rip it and toss it the way of Niamh's raspberry, a second course for the birds.

I turn around. Niamh looks very unimpressed.

'Now that was some indoor bullshit.'

'Do you think everyone just has one of those ready to go?'

She looks at me like that was the stupidest thing I've ever said, and Niamh has heard me go off on some seriously stupid rants.

'Not everyone, no, but you definitely do.'

I try looking away again, picking at the mess I've made of my hand, but Niamh is not letting me off.

'What are you actually doing right now? Are you for real gonna stand and pretend you've nothing to scream about?'

'It's… it's not that big a deal, Niamh. It happens every day, and people just deal.'

'Mo, you *died* about it,' she says, in absolute disbelief. 'You are fucking *dead*! What needs to happen for you to call it? How bad does it need to get?'

'It's not—'

'And would you *stop* with the hand?'

I look down and she's right. It's bad. Half of my palm is hanging in shreds, and you can see the writhing flesh beneath it, the white shine of tendon. There's no pulse for the blood to run, so it stains my skin, congeals under my fingernails.

'It doesn't matter, Niamh!' I dig my fingers in and grab what's left of the skin and pull, and maybe now she'll finally get what 'dead' means. Maybe *I* will. 'It's over! He's gone, and I'm dead, and I can't *believe it*.'

'He was always leaving, Mo. You knew that.'

'That's not… that's…'

It's like a good pull of yarn when the skin finally rips off. There's just the bare flesh of my hand now, no more pain and itch and the endless drudgery of sick, there's only glistening mess. Here, here. This is how bad it is.

'I can't *believe* that's what killed me,' I say, my fingers curling into fists, my nails burrowing. Maybe if I keep going, if I dig deep enough, I can

devour my own tail and just keep going until I… amn't. 'After everything I've done, everything. We can blame sickness and sadness or whatever else, but you know it and I have to know it too. He left and it killed me.'

'Ah, Mo,' Niamh says. 'Sure, if they didn't dip Achilles by the heel it would've been the wrist.'

The strangeness of this makes me look up, as though for the last gulp of air before I drown.

'It doesn't matter where the soft spot was,' she says, 'it only matters that something managed to dig its teeth into you, Mo. I'm just so sorry. I'm sorry it killed you.'

Her words hook deep into me and tug, and suddenly it's like a rotten tooth has finally been pulled, and so I open my mouth to let the infection out. It comes as a wail, this breaking wave of grief, and I don't think I'll ever stop. I hear movement in the brush and if there was a fox, I've scared it off, I'll scare every living thing away from me, but still I'm wailing.

Niamh joins me, and we howl together, two discordant notes of pain in the quiet of Cratloe woods. We're the last wild things left in the dark, set on haunting everything that's running and alive, and we scream until there's no more sound, just vocal cords rasping uselessly in our throats, the wail turning into a curse.

I feel the iciness of air hitting wet hands.

I look down and there's blood dripping on the ground.

And in the quiet that follows our howls, I hear the impossible thumping of a heart.

'Niamh,' I say, raising my hand and watching the dark flow down my wrist. 'Niamh.'

Her eyes glint, and her mouth shapes a much more mundane sort of scream as she understands the weight of something I'm only beginning to glimpse. The wheels are already turning for Niamh, and I can see the machinations in her head of all that will follow, the needs for the keeping of living things, as I say,

'I don't think I'm dead anymore.'

And behind the uncertainty of my words, my heartbeat demands to be heard.

As we run back down the trail, the only trace we leave is my dripping blood, seeping into the dirt to herald our way out of the woods.

Nightfall

Kirsty Logan

The first time she came to me, I woke in blood. My bed was crimson velvet—at least I called it velvet, though of course it was velour, scratchily artificial and bought from some high street discount place in the post-Hallowe'en sale. The man-made whatever-it-was soaked up the blood beautifully so I didn't notice at first that I'd got my period: gushingly so, bright red, flooding out like the elevator in *The Shining*. What I did notice was the suck on my cunt. More specifically, the tongue slipping between my inner labia, the languid drag on my clit. I thought it was a dream—wanted it to be a dream—was afraid it was a dream. I kept my eyes closed. The room was too hot and smelled like rotting flowers. I felt teeth. A blissful, burning pull. The jab of a forked tongue. I came, hard, in a hot gush of blood, and I felt my whole body convulse and pulse and pulse and she climbed on top of me and lay her body on mine, the sweet weight of her, her cool clean skin on every part of my skin, and by the time I could open my eyes it was all gone: the blood, the throb, the night, the oxytocin, her.

The morning sun felt sour. I could smell my mother burning the toast.

The menagerie of crystal animals by my bed had fallen over. The lilac crystal deer, the size of my clit, lay nestled in a light fuzz of dust on the plush carpet. I picked it up and swallowed it.

In the library, I doodled cobwebs on the corner of my notebook. Clouds and a crescent moon. A heart pierced with an arrow. I glanced over at Thessaly's homework and it was just Keir Keir Keir, Thessaly Byrne-Burke, Mrs Byrne-Burke, T+K. Milagro's homework I couldn't see because she'd fallen asleep leaning over it with her head on her arms.

Boys think they know what girls want: an inverse of their own needs. Where they desire, girls want to be desired. Where they want to penetrate something, girls want to be penetrated. Where they hunger, girls want to provide for them. You have to laugh. Poor things. They have no idea of the ferocity in a girl, the ravening wolves racing in opposite directions.

No idea that a girl can want to be the passive fuck-toy, hypnotised and hogtied, body pulsing as she's penetrated. And at the same time want to be the one penetrating, the one powerful, the rockstar, the fuckboy, a lanky 7-foot devil up on a stage humping a mic stand while girls scream until their throats bleed. And at the same time want to be soft, pulpy, clothed in pale velvets, adorned with flowers and worshipped with a dozen gently lapping tongues. And that she can feel all those experiences at the same time during one ordinary morning wank. The thought that one man with one penis could possibly provide that. What a joke.

That was the inside of my mind, the hidden part of me; when on the surface I was pure and clean and doing my Advanced Higher Physics homework. Rotational motion. A little bit of electromagnetism.

It was late closing on a winter evening and the library was saving on lights. The darkness at the end of the corridor said no one else had been here in a while, or if they had then they weren't moving. Holding their breath and their tongue. Waiting.

'What's the best thing a guy ever did to you?' said Milagro from the nest of her arms, her voice muffled from her school jumper.

'Left me alone,' I muttered, and I didn't think Milagro heard but she snorted a laugh.

'With me? Or for me?' said Thessaly. Her jaw worked rhythmically, a fast heartbeat, and she blew a big red bubble and let it pop against her glossed lips.

Milagro's head jerked up. She looked confused. 'No, *to* you. You know.'

'Keir always says he'll kill me if I leave him.'

'Oh my god,' Milagro breathed, eyes wide. 'You're so lucky.'

All girls want to be a little bit killed. But only a little.

Milagro stared enviously at Thessaly, and Thessaly was toying with the tiny gold pendant she wore—we all had them, it was a theme, she had a guillotine, Milagro had the thumbscrews, and I had the pear of anguish. We'd started with the standard instrument-of-torture accessory, the crucifix, but we liked to branch out, because we were not like other girls, just like all girls say.

I went to say something, I don't know what now, maybe even that thing about being killed but only a little, and something caught in my throat and I sneezed and a fine red mist of blood landed like dandelion fluff on the desk between us.

Thessaly shrieked and yanked her books off the desk. The movement triggered the lights and they all flickered on.

'Not again,' I said, tipping my head back. I felt the blood drip metallic down the back of my throat.

It happened fairly regularly—still happens, sometimes. Thin skin somewhere inside me, not enough to keep my insides inside.

'Did I get blood on you?' I sounded like I was speaking through a gag.

'No, it's just…' Thessaly sounded awkward. 'It was just a surprise. It's not like I think you're gross or anything. It's not that. It's just, the blood and stuff, that's how you get diseases.'

Milagro gasped. I still had my head tipped back, so I could feel rather than see that she was glaring at Thessaly.

'Faith, oh my god, oh my god,' said Thessaly, awkwardly patting my shoulder. 'So stupid, I'm sooooo sorry. I didn't even think about your brother. Did I make you sad? Do you think you'll cry?'

Christian was five years older than me and I hadn't seen him in almost that same amount of time. My mother was too angry that he left to ask herself why he did.

'I don't think he caught it from a sneeze,' I said. Probably a cock, possibly a needle.

At a sleepover once I woke to a sex-like stickiness on my lip and cheeks, and found blood gushing from my nose. I don't know why my first thought was to turn to Kerensa Byrne-Burke—whose house we were staying at, and who had heard me shifting in my sleeping bag and had also sat up—and grin, knowing that my teeth would be bloodied. I liked the thought that I was a still from a horror movie poster. I don't know if I thought Kerensa was going to kiss me, or laugh, or run away screaming, and I don't know which I wanted. In any case, she just stared at me, and I went wordlessly to the bathroom and spat a gloppy red clot into the toilet bowl, right on the shit smears her older brother had left. Unless it wasn't him, and it was Kerensa; everyone shits, after all, even posh girls. Maybe especially posh girls.

After I woke up bleeding a few times, my mother decided it was time I stopped, and she took me to the hospital, to a strange below-ground

department with extremely bright lights and fake birdsong piped in and a smell of bleach and pollen. There a nurse put hot needles up my nose to cauterise… something, I don't know exactly what. It didn't hurt. I still tasted the blood some mornings, but now it only went back into me, and never out, like the nurse put up a little construction barrier. The building of my body was still crumbling, but I couldn't see it, so I figured who cared?

She was like that, my mother. Always a barrier. It sounded dramatic to say but I didn't think she'd touched me since I was a baby. Even then, she told me that when she fed me and Christian, she had to use plastic nipple shields, because we wouldn't latch on properly. But I thought it was so that no part of her had to touch us. It was safer that way. A placenta so our bloods didn't have to touch. Rubber gloves. Hairnets. Facemasks. Condoms.

'Wash your pad,' my mother said when she found the packet in the bathroom cabinet. I hadn't even told her I'd got my period; I just went to the pharmacy. 'Wash it off in the sink and then wash the sink.'

'And then what do I do with it?'

My mother wrinkled her nose like I had just thrust my bloody pad under it.

'Then throw it away.'

'Then why wash it, if I'm going to throw it away?'

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, like I was getting on her last nerve, and breathing techniques were all that was standing between her and murder. The brand of pad I bought had the tagline '…Because.' Because what? Because I was shedding womb lining? Because blood was gushing from my vagina? Even the period pad people couldn't bring themselves to say 'period'.

That's all my mother ever told me about periods: wash it away, throw it away. She didn't tell me that at first it would look like I had shit myself. She didn't tell me it could be ropey or mucusy or come out of me in clots. She didn't tell me that my cramps would feel like there was an enormous pepper grinder, slow with rust, twisting inside me. She didn't tell me it would smell like raw steak or like pennies or like rotten eggs. Just: get rid of it, and don't let anyone know.

She didn't need to tell me why, because I already knew. I knew who—what—wanted young girls' blood. I'd read plenty of books where the girls wanted to give it to them, too. And there's only one way to give someone

a lot of your blood without hurting yourself. The books didn't say the vampires liked periods in particular, because no one ever says that word. But I knew. 'Because…'

I didn't have a tissue to wipe my blood off the desk, and I didn't want to get it on the library books or my school uniform. I thought about licking it up, or using my hair, but Thessaly and Milagro were watching me. I remembered the morning and wondered if I'd shit out that little crystal deer whole, or if it would shatter inside me, or my body would absorb it entirely.

'Come on,' I said, and picked up my books without touching the blood. 'We'll miss the bus.'

That night my period was in full flow and she sucked the blood from me over and over and over and over and over and over and over. She whispered things to me, about how I was her slut, her toy, her doll, how she owned me, how I was just a thing to her, how I made her want to hurt me; she whispered it all in my ear, voice thick as cream and dense with love. Afterwards she crawled up my body and held me until I stopped shaking.

In English we were reading *Dracula*, because of course we were. Girl gangs dress to theme, so Thessaly was in a red veil stitched with tiny black seed pearls, Milagro had walked down the corridor holding a lit candle so the wax spilled and hardened on her hand, and under my uniform I was wearing a belt of rose thorns (plastic, sadly, but it still pricked). Obviously Miss St Cyr made Thessaly and Milagro put the veil and candle in their bags, and Milagro had to go and run her hands under the cold tap and take a detention for having an open flame in school, and that's why I was smarter than Thessaly and Milagro, because no one knew I had my thorns on.

Keir Byrne-Burke, with the same pale eyes and underbite as his twin Kerensa, was reading. His seat was beside mine and I could smell him: feet, washing powder, cum. It was the bit with the vampire brides and he'd already read 'wicked burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips' and he'd even managed 'deliberate voluptuousness', but 'languorous ecstasy' was obviously too much for him, and he stumbled over the words, and I didn't notice because I'd read on ahead and was thinking about my own languorous ecstasy, tilting my hips so my labia pressed my clit against the hard plastic chair, and I brought my thumb

to my mouth and pressed my teeth down on it, ripping off a loose edge of skin, and the tiniest salt of blood burst on my tongue and I must have made a sound then because Keir Byrne-Burke was on his feet, his back to the rest of the class so only I could see the hard-on carbuncle in his trousers.

'Fuck you laughing at, fucking cunt,' he said, big man, big tough man, leaning over my desk and getting his spit on my book.

'Keir,' said Miss St Cyr, and I wish I could say it was in a warning tone, but she just sounded tired. 'Sit back down. The word is pronounced *langorous*.'

'Your brother,' said Keir, bringing his face close to mine, his voice low, almost a growl, like a motor trying to start, 'your fucking brother fucked filth and now he's fucking dead. That's what you get. Because…'

And he didn't get any further, because I girlishly tilted my head up towards him, or I suppose not so much a tilt as a very hard nod, a headbutt, some might say, and his nose burst into blood and so did mine, and the surprise of it made me laugh and the blood on my lips sprayed right into Keir's face.

'Fuck!' he was shouting, backing away from me, bumping into desks, frantically swiping my blood off his face, 'fuck! Help! Fuck!'

I turned to Milagro, who had been toying with her gold thumbscrews necklace, and I expected her to laugh too but she scraped back her desk and moved away from me, still holding the tiny thumbscrews like she was warding back a demon.

In the bathroom I ran my hands under the cold tap. There wasn't actually that much blood. It had dried in a row of drips from my nose, round the curve of my mouth and down my throat. A row of rubies. What a waste that we only put jewels on our ears and throat; the colour looked so pretty there.

I heard the door open and Milagro came in. I didn't turn to look at her; just at her reflection in the spit-smeared mirror. She looked ugly, reflected. Her hands were scalded red from the candle wax.

'Keir is such a dick,' she said. 'He deserved that. I wasn't on his side or anything, I just got a shock. You'd think I'd be used to the sight of blood by now, you'd think all girls would be, isn't it weird that we're meant to be like these delicate—'

'I don't have anything,' I said to her reflection. 'In my blood.'

'I know, god, I know, it's just, the other day, what Thessaly said. About that's how you get diseases. It was on my mind, and I—Faith, I'm trying to apologise, are you even listening?'

I handed her the wet paper towel, blood still smeared down my throat. She stood there, mouth open, until it dawned on her. For a second I thought she was going to clean me up, but she mumbled something about being late for French, and dropped the paper towel in the bin on her way out.

She came to me again that night and she said to me: 'Shall I tell you that I love you?' She leaned in and pressed her nose to my throat, a slow inhale, and I felt a part of me go inside her. 'No. That's not it. You want me to say: I hate you.' She pulled the blood from me then, a little from my nose and a little from my thumb and then it was my cunt, my cunt, my cunt, and though her mouth was full I still heard her words in my head, her voice deep inside me, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, and I came so hard I scraped my throat raw. That morning I had put my tiny crystal rabbit in my mouth and rolled it around. It fit perfectly between my upper teeth. I had a deer, a rabbit, a turtle, a mouse, a sparrow. I had only just noticed that all my crystal animals were prey.

I lay there under her and I wondered what would happen if you could gather all your dark things. If you could bring all the shadows in you together, crush them all in your hands. What would you get? A blank space, a compressed nothingness? Or would it be better and richer, the best and most delicious parts of you, the boiled-down essence?

A few days later my period finished. I told myself I could wait. My period would come again—that's what they did, they were known for it. Every single month, the pepper-grinder wretchedness, the judder of the dry tampon, watching the blood pool and pink around your feet in the shower. Worrying that you smell like past-its-sell-by mince. Worrying that you actually quite like that smell.

In the library with all the lights gone to dark except mine, I read about night terrors. I read about a man who tried to be rid of his night terrors by bleeding himself regularly. It didn't say what he did with the blood, whether he ate it or threw it away. It did say that the bleeding had the opposite effect, the creature being 'aggravated rather than abated', so he doubled the amount of the blood-draw. I wondered if two creatures came to him then, and if he was tempted to triple it to call three, or if he was scared of losing too much blood, and dying.

I lingered on the description of being ridden by the night hag, the sinister figure made of shadows, the sensation of being suffocated, the feeling of being pinned down, the impossibility of escape, and I felt my stomach twist like a period cramp and my clit throbbed and I pressed against the seam of my jeans and with tiny movements I made myself come in silence at my desk.

The next morning I got up and rinsed the crusts from my eyes with icy water. Pulled my hair into a ponytail. Clenched my teeth until I felt a back one squeal and almost crack. Applied my acne gel and concealer and eyeliner. Punched myself in the mouth. Tasted blood.

I never asked her to come to me. I never consented. Boys made us say yes but we didn't know what we were saying yes to, and once we'd said it, it was too late. Or we said nothing at all, which was as good as a yes. Yes to their grubby hand on you, their hangnails scratching your vaginal walls. Yes to a cheesy pissy cock in your mouth. Yes to it going inside you, squishy and solid at the same time, like a hard-boiled egg.

With her, I never said yes, and got exactly what I wanted.

My period came back early, two weeks later, as if it couldn't wait. The soft clock of my body, losing time. So I rolled out the red carpet for her. I thought about making a joke about that but that would involve speaking and I didn't think she wanted me to speak. I made a noise once, a feral grunt that could have been *more* or *no* or *why*, I don't even know, I wasn't thinking in words at that point, and she slipped her cold dry fingers into my mouth to silence me.

'When you die,' she said to me that night, 'I will fuck you one more time then feed you to wolves,' and I thought, Where the hell is she going to find wolves? and then about how I'd read about wolves being reintroduced in the north of Scotland, and then about a wolf snout parting my labia, fur against my fur, a wolf tooth sliding against my clit, the smell of blood and meat, the death of something weaker than me, and I came again.

I thought about how when I would die—about how when I will die—she will take her sharp pinkie nail and slice me open from my throat to my cunt and spread me wide, and she will take out all my glistening purple innards, and she will put them in their own individual dishes. Perhaps the dishes will be crystal. Perhaps they will gleam.

*

My period came and went and came and went and it wasn't enough, it was never enough.

I peeled off scabs and she came to me.

I ripped off hangnails and she came to me.

I violently waxed my pubic hair and she came to me.

I cut lines into my thighs with a razor and she came to me.

I jabbed a compass into the soft flesh behind my ear and she came to me.

I called her, and she came, and so did I, over and over and over, and she kissed me with her tongue hot and bloody and I tasted myself, and I was held and I was cleansed and I was still.

One day after school I went to Mädchen's house, because Mädchen always did something weird, and that's what I think I needed. Weird, but in a safe way. She was Milagro's mum and so Milagro was there too and that was fine, even though things had been weird between us. She never said anything about that day in the school bathroom and neither did I, but we could still sprawl on the mauve inflatable chairs in her room and tip sugar into our mouths and use her magenta lips phone to call boys, because what else was there to do?

Mädchen's kitchen was like a witch's kitchen, steaming warm, herbs and copper pots everywhere. I was very pale by then, and I felt hungry and sick all the time, and the heat in the kitchen made my head spin. Black curtains seemed to swoop in at the edge of my vision like I was on a theatre stage and the show was over, it was time to go, but then the blackness receded like the audience had changed their minds and I had to do an encore.

In the kitchen Mädchen was stirring batter in a bowl with a wooden spoon, with ornate glasses set out, full of something dark. Milagro dumped her bag and coat on the floor, then picked up a glass and sniffed it.

'I wouldn't drink that,' said Mädchen, lightly. 'It's blood.'

'Gross, Mum, ugh! Why?'

'For the brownies.'

'Blood brownies? Grossness. Where did you even get it?'

'You've eaten these many times and never complained. The blood gives it the perfect texture. Crumbly and fudgy.'

'I wish I didn't know what was in them. I can't eat them now.'

'Can I?' I asked. The glasses were so beautiful, tiny and all different colours, etched with stars. They were probably vintage. They were probably from some really weird little shop that only Mädchen knew about.

She smiled. 'Of course you can. The iron will be good for you. Are you menstruating? Milagro just finished.'

'Mum, god, can you not?'

'You girls need to pay attention to your iron. I know all about it. I had fibroids and I bled through everything! Pads as thick as steaks—two of them—and still I bled through.'

Milagro shuddered and flounced out of the room, her steps thudding up the stairs, and with a grin Mädchen offered me the spoon to lick. I pressed the batter to the roof of my mouth with my tongue, feeling the crystals of sugar dissolve.

Mädchen winked at me and then licked the spoon herself. If she'd taken care not to lick the same part I had, she didn't make it obvious. But I noticed she put it in the sink after, and took a fresh spoon to her batter.

'Do you miss it?' My voice was quiet, muffled by the gooey batter. 'Your period.'

'Oh, it's not over for me! Not, at least—' and here she came close to me and whispered theatrically in my ear, even though no one except the cat and the blood could hear us, '—at least as far as my husband is concerned. I put a tiny bit of raw liver in my panties every month. Can't have him thinking I'm old!'

'I thought men didn't like periods. The boys at school say it's disgusting. They say they can smell our pads.'

'That is just boys. A real man appreciates that a woman is most sacred when she is bleeding.'

Mädchen was a midwife; she spent every day looking at vaginas. She told me once that when pregnant women called to say something had come out of them, she got them to bring it in, even if was messy or smelled. The midwives put on white gloves and examined the stuff with their fingers, discussed the colour and texture, the give and collapse of it. They stretched it out and rubbed it between finger and thumb. She said they even smelled it. I wanted to ask if they'd ever tasted it, but I thought even for Mädchen that was too far.

Mädchen stopped and looked at me. She tucked my hair behind my ear and gently, so gently, stroked the scabbed-over cuts. She cupped my face

in her hands, her wrist bones on my collarbones, her fingertips over my ears, and she kissed me on the forehead.

'Faith,' she said. 'You shouldn't let anyone hurt you.'

'You don't understand,' I said.

'I know,' said Mädchen. 'I know.' It hurt me to look at her. Sad old woman, all dried up, trying to trick her husband into finding her desirable. I was never going to be old. I was never going to be anything but this.

I helped her bake the brownies and, later, despite what she'd said, Milagro did eat them. They were delicious.

In the library all the lights were off except the one on me. I was wearing my pear of anguish and my belt of rose thorns and reading about the signs someone has been visited by a vampire: fatigue, lethargy, loss of appetite or extreme hunger, insomnia or hypersomnia, excessive passion or listlessness, unexpected bloodstains. Common symptoms of menstruation: fatigue, lethargy, loss of appetite or extreme hunger…

We used to play a game, Thessaly and Milagro and me. One girl would put her hands around another girl's throat and find the biggest vein, then press on it. The blood would start to pound, you could hear it throb in your ears, like being underwater in a storm, and you'd have to look her in the eye until you passed out. We thought some kind of truth would be caught there in our eyes, like crystal balls. I can't remember when we stopped playing that game.

I feel bad about this story. About all of it. Shouldn't it be a girl-power narrative? Weren't we all about girl power? Shouldn't I have been empowered and strong and good and sort of relatable too, with a minor adorable flaw like a bad singing voice or always being late?

But it was my choice. It was my power. If it was my choice, then how could it be damage? If it got me what I wanted, then wasn't that power?

Mädchen was only trying to be kind. But she should have known that a bit of liver in her knickers could solve her problems, but it wouldn't do shit for mine.

I spread myself on my crimson velvet bed and I opened my best vein as wide as I could. I knew she would come to me, lie on me and take from me—but it wasn't like before.

She was inside me. All the way.

Wrapping around my bones, ribboning through my muscles and sinew. It was agony.

I gasped out and came harder than I ever had—than I ever have, to this day, despite the attempts of many lovers and professionals—and I felt her come with me.

And I think I died. I really think I died.

That was the last time.

I woke in the hospital. The lights were very bright. I was freezing cold and very white, and there was no blood anywhere. The cut on my wrist looked puffy and puckered, like I'd been underwater for a long time.

My mother held my hand tight. When I opened my eyes and looked at her, she raised my hand and kissed it so hard I felt the hard enamel of her teeth through her lips.

'Faith,' she said, and pulled me close to her. 'Oh, Faith.'

She held me like that for maybe thirty seconds, her heart beating against mine, her nose pressed to my hair, and then the nurse had me sit up so she could check my blood pressure and my mother never touched me again.

I turned 18 and I wasn't dead, and neither was Christian, so I went to live with him. Plenty of people hurt me, including me, but no one ever did it as carefully as she did.

It's been many years since she came to me. I'm not a girl now and I have made another body inside mine and birthed it in a wave of agony and bliss and blood and then a few years later I did it all again and I pushed so hard that it felt like all my glistening innards fell right out and every drop of blood in me was gone and even then, even then, she never came back.

There were nights I held myself rigid and sleepless until dawn, my children in my arms so small that I could have unhinged my jaw and swallowed them whole, brought them back inside me where I could always have them with me, kept them always safe and warm, the temperature of my blood. I would have destroyed myself in making them. I would have destroyed them to keep them safe. But I didn't have to. They grew up and they grew away, and the house fell quiet.

And still she never came back to me.

I still have the scars she gave me, soft and silver, touchable and tender, the most beautiful part of me; a reminder that once, once, I was loved.

Skinner

Pass me my skin, Papa says—this is my cue to open
his wardrobe drawer and unfold the fur hide
with butterfly motifs he calls his *tigre mariposa*.

He used to lay it on the bed and ask me to lie on it,
my arms pinned out along the front paws, my legs
along the spreadeagled back paws.

Once upon a time, he begins, speaking in French—
il était une fois—jaguars could fly.
Then he shows me the bullet hole where

the heart once beat, and the thrumming starts.
Fetch me that cigar box he asks then, struggling
to breathe, and I obey. By the time

I reach him with the box I'm a child again.
I bring out the morpho butterfly inside, with eyespots
under its wings like jaguar eyes in the night

and I glide through a sky so blue-black Earth itself
is an eye. I don't know what happens while
I'm airborne, or where my father's trophy cat

takes me, but when I return there's always blood
under my nails and around my mouth,
my skin peeled off and folded in his drawer.

Pascale Petit

blood sugar

if I may / while I feed my son / if you will / while I attend the frantic / berry / of his mouth / I have been learning / you see I have been / learning how so many men / convicted / of a violent crime / speak overwhelmingly of / shame / and it is this shame / so often supped and pumped / early as babyhood / deep as milk / this shame / this awful / nectar / will bulb and fret across the body / and I learn there is / among these men / an uncanny prevalence of / belief / that their bodies are made not of flesh and blood / but stuffed with straw / or steel / that their veins and nerves are ropes or cords or / fibres / see how shame will guzzle up a person's meat / see how it feeds upon the thing / it made / and I am learning of my body's shame / how it is the syrup that attends my gut / how it rises from my person like a reeky mist then slumps / anew / hither thither / so dogged / how I have been sacked / muscle worsted / in the blood-heave of / delivery / sweet and / sharp / and I watch my son and / wonder at the shame I might be steeping in his fats / which o which of his sticky organs might it covet / this shame / pitched and candied / where might it squat / what have I / I have / and then the other / thing / that I am learning / well / it is of the old / sugar / and its shame / it is that white / man / now hewn of stone / who attends this / city / from his marbled ledge / he who crewed the thousands over / seas / because / did you know how sugar is / made / the fibres of the cane cut at the root / then / stripped / packed / pressed / hauled and / cooked / until the juices / leak / does my son sleep now or wake / he is flushed / and always scenting / it is the old sugar / the unholy / fuel / that birthed this shore / it is the indecorous stench of / sugar / that crowns this / what is the word / my son is waking / polity / it is the very fibre / it is the fumes / of this everything / and we are not disgorged / here / we are not / it seems / yet so ashamed / of this / we are not / ashamed / he is waking / is he waking / I will feed him this my very / sweetest

Kate Wakeling

How to Get Rid of a Ghost, Part One

Nicole Morris

The first thing is to put salt around his bed. Table salt will do; there is no need nor reason to track down artisanal flakes of *fleur de sel*, Maldon, or Himalayan pink. Demons do not differentiate. You want a decently thick line of the white stuff; think a smidge skinnier than the broadest part of your pinkie finger. The important part is that the salt connects back to itself, making a complete ring around the bed. That way, you know he's protected. Amethyst (his birthstone, yours too), carnelian, and smoky quartz. Pretty rocks to ward off evil. It won't hurt to place those under his pillow. A bowl of water at the foot of his bed, changed daily to feed the good ghosts. Using the full range of your free arm, wave, and work white sage, myrrh, sweet grass, or cedar into the room's four corners. Remember the windowsill, that often-overlooked point of entry, and the stuffed guts of wardrobes, deep or narrow. In extreme cases, get you a red and black candle to burn around the clock for Papa Legba, that father of crossroads, the old man at the gate, that Voodoo king. The one who knows how to throw darkness into the light and will carry your prayers from this realm into the next. Note: if a Botánica is not in your neighbourhood, or if the name of that shop is foreign to you, you may swap in a peppery green wax pillar to represent Saint Patrick, who has harboured Legba since we first hid Africa inside of the church during those early days of crossing the Atlantic against our will. As you proceed with this smudging, left hand gripping the plant or tree material, right hand, palm open, sweeping towards your heart, then away, towards your heart once more, and then out, say aloud (this may feel awkward at first) 'all good things, all good beings; only good things, only good beings welcome here; only love here, all love here'. Or something to that effect. There's no script. Freestyle it

but say it like you motherfucking mean it because this is real. You are saving your son from Satan, fam.

When my eldest boy did his thirteenth turn around the sun, two things shifted his orbit away from his father and me forever. First, he and his seventh-grade cohort of young learners at a very progressive, child-centred charter middle school were given brand-new, unlocked iPads. Unlocked meaning free of a firewall that might have slowed down thirsty adolescent fingertips from tapping their way into the wild frontier of the internet's most carnal corners. This public school operated under lottery-based admissions, which meant it took pure luck to get in, and thus attracted loads of luck-strong teenagers who got even luckier once they unboxed those tablets and swiped up to unlock entrance into the mainlining, speedballing, rolling, candy-raving, all-you-can-eat buffet of free and open access to whatever their adolescent imaginations could conjure.

It took the school's administrators fourteen days to understand the gravity of this oversight, and they clumsily required all iPads be returned, recalibrated, and reissued, born again clean, with no trace of tracks or scars on them. But, of course, it was too late. Those two weeks surfing the open waters of the web broke the levee and flooded those young people with an abundance of exposure to material that, most child psychologists agree, should be carefully monitored, or banned entirely by parents or caregivers to ensure healthy perceptions of fact versus fiction in the child's mind. Our child, inconceivably, before this moment, had exposure to technology limited to one password-protected, age-restricted Netflix account alongside a very innocent and timeless video game: Super Mario Bros on the Wii platform, no less. This little lamb, coddled in the wool of intentionally-mindful-gentle-attachment parenting, charged into the deep end of the pool fully clothed, with his shoes on, given a VIP backstage press pass to a virtual Sodom and Gomorrah. He never looked back. In short, he left us.

After the obligatory and most cringeworthy chat with Mom and Dad about the perils of pornography and the damage to one's sense of humanity when stumbling across snuff films, we considered our job done. Ish. I'll never know what he saw; I didn't want to. I feared it might change something between us, more than the continental drift that was already

pushing us apart. Like how once you uncover something private about a person, something that freaks you out, you can't unsee it. I needed him to remain the boy before all of this.

But I do know what he listened to. The music that spilled out from under his door gave voice to the quiet. The second level of his departure took place between his ears.

It is the rare adolescent that doesn't relish alienating himself from his parents, and music makes for an exceedingly easy and accessible portal to proclaim one is so fucking far removed from anything their parents planned. 'You don't know me, and you never did' is the message parents are to infer as teens kill off bedtime routines spent reading a book together or being tucked in for locked doors and speakers screaming declarations of war.

Ours was a home shaped and run by song. Mary J. Blige or Kanye upon rising to get us all hyped, jazzy Coltrane or Monk vibes after school during homework hour, and maybe A Tribe Called Quest or Black Sheep at the post-dinner reading hour. Earth Wind and Fire on Saturdays, Billie Holiday or Sade on Sundays. We lived in and with music. Now, though, we were assaulted, in a way that only a teen can do, with music that defied categorisation and was… do I say it? Can I bring myself to sound this old? Offensive. Music that made me blush—and that is not easy to do. Song lyrics that had me looking at my son from the corner of my eye, asking, 'Who is this person who looks like my sweet child but clearly is not?'

The despair, angst, and rage rooted in the music he ate, slept, and dreamt in disappeared the son I once read *Harry Potter* aloud to while curled up in a couch cuddle with his baby brother and the family dog. That kid was gone for good. What took his place was a silence that swallowed up our lives. Anyone living with a teenager can attest to the screaming quiet that can replace the vocal narration of a younger child. My younger son, at eleven, ran a running commentary of everything he encountered. That bird on the window. The mean lunch lady. The toilet paper commercial with a bear wiping its ass. There was no question, observation, or confession inside him. It all spilled out with openhearted innocence. In contrast, teenagers can disappear into their interiority. They go mute, and

all you get are their eyes. And my son, my firstborn, withheld his from mine; they stopped meeting me. His head seemed to be set permanently to the left or right of me, now aloof, now hostile, now knowing-it-all, lids half-closed, too heavy to lift with what they'd left in.

In attachment theory, it is understood that the adolescent must separate from their primary caregivers. That is healthy. That is good. Neural pathways are being grooved into pink matter, impulses forged into behaviour patterns, and the parent who insists on maintaining the symbiosis of early childhood threatens to initiate a codependency trait that could haunt and harm their child well into adulthood. My son's detachment took shape slowly but with sharp lines. He kept secrets for the first time. He began withdrawing to his bedroom and locking the door. He distanced himself from family rituals like late-night TV time, all together on the couch, laughing at *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Bernie Mac Show* reruns. He retreated into himself, spending his time in murky corners of the World Wide Web instead.

I imagined him leaning into the blue light glow of the tablet, pupils dilated at the narcotic hit of discovery. Was his heart racing? Did his breath catch at the shock of body parts bent in erotic angles or twisted in agony, in the grip of death? I am from the generation where porn was on paper; slick magazine pages made sticky by how the handlers consumed their contents. Around age eight or nine, I was in a park with friends when one squealed in horror at something she found in the waste bin. We swarmed and stood in a tight circle, sharing two torn-out sheets, the centrefold. I still remember the slowing down of my thoughts as my eyes tried to make sense of what I saw. It was a close-up of a penis penetrating a vagina, and I nearly puked at the improbability of this thing going into that thing. It looked painful. Violent even. I am certain this early exposure to imagery without context is one of the reasons my own sexuality wasn't explored until well into adulthood. I was too young to have seen that. Something broke inside me or was made wobbly, decentred, fractured. This was in the mid-1980s. What would my son bear witness to in the untethered internet of 2017? What would make him wobble?

His new guideposts in the universe were fringe rappers on Soundcloud—that bastion of post-punk, post-rap, post-everything, post-*we don't want*

your money or your follows. Soundcloud is to Gen Z what Sub Pop and Death Row Records were for my Generation X, but on a scale we could never have imagined in our analogue pre-internet universe. Launched in Berlin in 2007, Soundcloud is an artist-driven platform, meaning anyone can upload and distribute their music without the usual barriers of record deals, agents, or industry connections. Many Soundcloud rappers went from nobodies to underground heroes, clocking up millions of plays. They spoke to the anti-fan, the outsider, the kids who sit alone at school lunch and appear dead behind the eyes to those of us thriving in the matrix, the ones who get off on you asking, 'What are you listening to?' so they can remove their AirPods and snarl, 'You've never heard of them.' In other words, Soundcloud befriends the musical subset of the woke-before-woke die-hards. Anti-woke may be a better-fitting description, considering the controversy these artists attract. My boy was drinking this Kool-Aid by the gallon; he was doggy paddling through subgenres like horrorcore, emo rap, sad boy rap, alternative rap, and ultimately demon fandom, which is exactly as head-scratching as it sounds. He centred his interests on what I, a forty-year-old 'boomer' in his eyes, called Satanic rap and its offshoots into the occult. And that terrified me, which I am sure was entirely the point.

In the Soundcloud rap universe of this period, between 2016 and 2018, I saw echoes of the hardcore punk and riot grrrl scenes of my youth, the same alchemy of anarchy, misanthropy and rage. Fans and artists rocked screaming neon hair, oversized fluffy pink hoodies and tattoos. In this sub-scene, if you are a real one, if you're down as fuck, you will tat your face. I'd scroll through Google images of these artists with eyelids tattooed, foreheads, cheeks, full necks filled in with black and blue ink; words and phrases like Lost, Alone, Sad, Pain, Already Dead and Broken One. Kids as young as twelve and thirteen mimicked these artists, declaring their devotion to depression. In high school, I knew a girl with Morrisey's 'Hated For Loving' in gangster script across the length of her lower back, a sad secret, invisible unless she chose to expose it. At age sixteen, she confirmed her loneliness. Thirty years later, these young people feel no need to hide their confessions underneath sleeves or trousers. Their pain is on full display to shock you into either fucking off or, maybe, intervening. The heartbreaking irony of anti-anxiety meds like Xanax replacing the party drugs of my youth is hard to ignore, with

overdoses claiming the lives of Soundcloud rap superstars like Lil Peep, Juice WRLD, and the more mainstream Mac Miller.

Major rap artists such as Lil Uzi Vert, Gravediggaz, Odd Future, Playboi Carti, and XXXtentacion have faced backlash from media outlets and fans alike for merging their on-stage personas with off-stage Satanic declarations and imagery. Fans foam at the mouth when they cite obscure occult texts in their album art and lyrics, or brag about hooking up with witches, or tweet confessions and professions to Satan himself and his brothers Beelzebub and Baal. Their tattoos are upside-down crosses in the middle of their foreheads, triple number sixes and chest-spanning pentagrams, and their concerts open with feverish chanting and screaming to work up crowds. Astroworld, the infamous 2021 festival hosted by chart-topping rap artist Travis Scott, during which ten people were trampled to death and hundreds were injured, opened with incantations and demonic imagery transmitted on mega screens. Festival organisers underestimated the number of attendees and were tragically unprepared to intervene. Despite Travis Scott's viral Instagram apology after the concert, he was criticised for not stopping the show amidst the chaos.

Are these so-called Satanic rappers exploiting the naivety and lust for conflict in teen fans? Are they making a larger point about the evils of the industry? Or do these artists use Satanic imagery as a symbolic statement on the horrors of anti-Black racism and state violence experienced by Black Americans? These questions fuelled my late-night armchair Google searches as I struggled to find a way to understand my son's pivot down a road I could not follow.

The last question sparked something in me; it was one I could grab hold of and feel safe sitting with, that of Black resistance by reclaiming anti-Black racist associations of Satanic and anti-Christian themes as a new expression of Black pride. The fact that these artists are all Black American men, within the age range of 'most likely to die' from violence at the hand of someone in their community or the police, who are making millions from their image, gave me pause. Accusations of the devil being in Black music originated in banning drums on plantations in the Antebellum South and on into the invention of the blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and finally, hip-hop. What sweet revenge that might be to lean into those tropes to seduce white fans into Satan's heathen den of rap music, as white kids

make up a massive portion of Soundcloud rap's fanbase. Add to that the legacy of cultural exploitation and extraction of Blackness in the United States. The origin story of exploiting the Black body for commercial gain began with the transatlantic slave trade. Still, a case could be made that an inequitable extraction remains in the currency of fashion, the arts, and the music business. While it's true that some of the performers are getting rich, it is the predominantly white infrastructure of the music industry—the corporate executives, label owners, and shareholders—that profits from this theatre. But maybe there's not anything historical or political on the underside of this. Maybe these performers really have sold their souls to the devil, and part of the deal is that now they must proselytise in Satan's name. It's also entirely possible they are savvy entrepreneurs following in the lucrative footsteps of white artists like Slipknot, Ozzy Osbourne, and Marilyn Manson, capitalising on the dismay and distrust of anti-establishment teens towards the world they've inherited. Shock value can make you rich, even more so when you mix sex, drugs, and demons in a cocktail of angst and good old-fashioned teen rebellion.

When our son began waking with night terrors, screaming through the house in the dead of night, swatting at his face, and grabbing at his collar while still out cold in sleep, we knew things had escalated. He'd come to after half a minute of this possession, open his eyes in fright, in my arms, me soothing him with sounds I haven't used since he was a toddler. Shhhhhh. It's okay, Mama's here. Mama's here. This affectionate moment would last half a precious second before he recoiled from my arms, eyes blazing with a white-hot rage at being comforted by his mother—tagged 'birth person' in his iPhone—at his age, the scandal. Before being escorted back to his room, though, his fear allowed some vulnerability to remain in the air. He tried to describe what he saw, what he felt, and it spooked me for sure; scared the dog even, who refused to follow us back to the kid's bed. My son described a large presence in the corner of his room that had, well, presence: a force, a cold heat coming off it. He described this entity as very much real and wanting something from him. He went on to say he experienced sleep paralysis; that is, he knew himself to be awake, lucid even, but frozen. Only his eyes could dart about his inky bedroom, twelve feet by twelve feet in dimensions. The nightlight he was humiliated to rely on for sleep illuminated this silent phantom. He could

not describe it physically, and his throat could barely open wide enough to squeak out what he knew: this thing was evil, and it wanted him. It wanted my son.

I first encountered a ghost at the age of seven, and again at nineteen. Although both experiences were benevolent, my mouth still goes dry with panic when I return to these memories. The first time, I was woken from sleep by a sense of being watched. In the right corner of my bedroom door, hovering in the corner, just below the ceiling, was a child younger than me. I remember thinking, 'You can fly?' and then it blinked at me. It was human, androgynous, amber and glowy, and its presence was soft and observant. It didn't want anything from me. I shut my eyes and hid under the blankets until sleep took hold. The second time was hours after my grandfather died. I was living in New York City and was five hours ahead of my family in Los Angeles. My mother's early morning phone call delivered the news, and it gutted me. I became a grief zombie wandering the city, lost in my emotions. In my daze I nearly missed a subway train, and as the doors were about to close. As I raced and twisted my toes sideways to slide between the steel doors, my grandpa appeared and held the door open for me to pass. When I got inside I looked at him, he waved, and the train tore off down the track.

Whatever the thing was that haunted my son, it appeared predictably at least twice a week and only at my home. The three nights at his father's house were uneventful; it was the four at mine that brought doom—a detail that was not lost on me, as our family was just two or three years post-divorce. When someone tells you a ghost is in their room, your first impulse may be to scoff. When your hostile, barely-speaking-to-you, nearly six-foot-tall wire of a fifteen-year-old kid cries out that there is a ghost in their room, and they wake you up screaming for their lives, night after night, well, you either believe them or you don't. But act, you must.

I was raised with no set religion, but I absorbed pieces of scripts and rituals that surrounded me. Morsels of faith from friends and family who were devout in their practice as Lutherans, Baptists, and Catholics snuck into my subconscious, and showed up mainly as superstitions. I make the sign of the cross when I pass a Catholic church; I murmur a meek 'Thank you' before eating a meal, and after spending some time in Wiccan and

Santería circles, I occasionally will talk to the dead if I feel I'm intruding on their privacy in graveyards or homes with floors that creak where no one is standing. We are not a religious family, but we are a spiritual one, and we have an inkling of how to access ancestral wisdom and customs. After consulting several friends who are more deeply entrenched in African and Indigenous traditions, I took away some rituals I could share with the kid to give him a sense of control over an out-of-control, out-of-body experience. Enter salt, sage, cedar, and speaking to rooms that appeared to be empty but maybe were spilling over with ancestors or spirits who'd been patiently waiting for their opportunity to shine.

There is no parenting book in print that can help soften your kid dropping away from your orbit. The day may arise when they charge full speed into the oncoming traffic of adolescence without holding your hand or looking both ways before stepping off the curb, frontal lobe still all mush and goo, utterly incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions. When the state declares that at eighteen years they are legally an adult and no longer beholden to your rules—that they are free agents, citizens, and expats of the country of Mom and Dad—you have to let go. Sigh. Deep fucking sigh. In some respects, I look back on those haunted days with gratitude, bumps in the night and all. My kid did not fall into the grips of street drugs, street gangs, or any street at all. He sutured himself into the walls of his bedroom with a locked door, drapes drawn, studio-quality earphones channelling music straight into the meat of his brain.

The night terrors eventually gave way to him learning how to meditate as a tool to find his footing, beginning each morning with a ten-minute practice. By eighteen, he announced he had successfully astral projected and was deeply entrenched in studying metaphysics. In his twenties now, and in the thick of reckoning with living the life one is called towards while surviving capitalism, echoes of ghosts remain, and flickers of something outside the third dimension follow him. He meditates for forty minutes daily now. Astral projection, quantum healing, past lives, interdimensional beings; these are the waters he swims in. On holidays home, though, I can see a vacancy on his face, in the hollows of his eyes, and the slant of his shoulders. Sometimes I see a shifting of the light, and it halts my heart for a beat. What if something got stuck in between the

here and the there? What if a bit of unrest, a wraith, a fissure, implanted itself in the webs of my son's fingers or in the crook of his neck, now brushed with the start of a beard? Is there a residue of the spirit world on my hands, too? It's always on my mind, and I take precautions to protect myself. I speak to shadows; I track the moon; I visit the sea daily and pay my respect to the dead there, my kin and not mine; the bones held at the bottom of the Atlantic, the ash carried on the breeze. I choose to find comfort in keeping that door ajar because if there is any chance my son might slide behind that veil, I want to be sure I know how to call him back.

A History of Iceland as Told by the Foxes

A single drop of water, frozen. More drops.

A sheet of ice. Over the sheet is a blanket of snow.

A blanket of snow with a tiny footprint. More footprints.

A blanket of snow with a hole in it, some blood around its mouth. A tunnel ends beneath it.

A rock reaches out of the snow towards the sky. The sky reaches back but they do not touch. Not yet.

A rock surrounded by more rocks surrounded by water. The water comes and goes like the moon like the sun like the night like the day.

A rock surrounded by more rocks and less snow, less ice. Later a rock surrounded by more rocks and less snow, no ice. This makes a beach.

A beach that reaches towards another beach and the other beach reaches back but they do not touch. Not yet.

A cliff with a bird perched on it. More birds.

A beach that touches a fjord that touches a cliff makes a coastline. The coastline touches another coastline. This makes an island.

An island must be discovered. A cliffside fills with birds like the night with stars. A valley begins to grow after the snow stops growing, goes away. A valley of black fills with green like the night with aurora.

A beach with a dead fish left among the rocks. Later a beach with a dead whale left among the rocks like a fish.

A field where a blade of grass grows over a rock. A flower grows over it. More flowers. This makes a field. The field no longer has lemmings.

A field with a tree in it. More trees. This makes a grove.

A slope with snowfall coming and going. Another slope with a grove growing and growing.

Another grove that touches a field that touches a beach that touches the ocean.

An ocean that brings a storm.

A beach with a large footprint. More footprints.

A beach with a man on it unlike a whale or a fish. He is alive.

A field with a dog in it like a man but faster.

A grove is where we forget how to chase and where we learn how to flee. Then the groves are gone.

A slope where a rock reaches away from another rock. Inside it is an opening. This makes a cave. This is where we learn to hide. This is where we fail to hide like birds in cliffs like stars in skies.

An opening that closes up. It fills with fire or we fill with hunger.

An opening in the rock, some blood around its mouth. A tunnel ends beneath it.

A tunnel with our bodies left among the rocks like whales like fish on the beach.

A valley where the bushes are worn down to grass by sheep hooves. Later the grass is worn down to dirt by horse hooves. This makes a road.

A road that must be crossed.

A slope fills with sheep like the sky with snowflakes. Its legs are weak, its throat just low enough to make a feast.

A yard fenced in. Dogs bark, fighting and feasting over one of our naked bodies. There is blood on every mouth.

A shed that is covered with turf and filled with fish hanging. The smell reaches towards us over houses over mountains over beaches like the sky fills with wind. Later a fish goes missing. More fish.

A den that is covered with flowers filled with our children squealing. The sound reaches towards them over villages over farms over fields like the sky fills rain. Later our child goes missing. More children.

A field filled with flowers and giant steel jaws, waiting to snap at the touch. Some reach our legs. Others bite our bellies, spilling our organs into the bushes before the berries turn red.

A valley that a gunshot echoes through like the sky fills with fire. Some of us run. One of us remains. More of us.

A shed with a pile of our skins in the corner. They take these off us but do not put them on themselves.

A patch of dirt that is fenced in. We fight and feast on fish that comes through the links, climbing to the top like the sky fills with barbed wire. This makes a prison.

A river that cuts through a mountain. It opens a new valley. A new child is born in the valley. More children.

A valley must be climbed out of.

A valley that fills with snow. There are large footprints. There are small footprints. A field that fills with trees again. This makes a new grove. More groves.

A beach with a dead bird left among the rocks, like a whale like a fish like a fox. It could be a feast. Its wing reaches towards the ocean and when the water comes in, it touches infinity.

Grayson Del Faro

The Bells

Clemens Meyer

Translated from the German by Katy Derbyshire

He was surprised that the snow wasn't black.

He stood on the platform, right by the edge, the tracks before and beneath him now empty; he could still make out the lights of the train in the darkness, red, like the rear lights of a very big car, and then he saw the yellow squares of the windows as the track curved away. It almost seemed as if he could make out passengers behind the glass, heads leaning against panes, last glances before the train took the long curve and disappeared into the night; the station, the tracks, the snow, a man alone on the platform.

But the train had been practically empty and it continued its journey empty, to Wolfen, to Dessau, to Berlin.

No, he hadn't really been surprised, it was just that instant of transition, when he wished and almost believed that the snow lay grey and black before him on the rails' sleepers and between the sleepers, heavy flakes melting slowly on his coat; he was wearing a pale coat, beige, the marks of the snow on the fabric as if a bird had walked across it… The snow hadn't been black in this small town for almost thirty years now. And when had it last even snowed in December?

He stepped back from the platform edge and turned towards the station building. And although a track lay like a trench between him and the strangely complex building with its ticket counters, newsagent, waiting room and its little restaurant, he wanted to reach out his hand and touch it, touch the grey-plastered walls revealing their dark-red bricks where the plaster had fallen off, eaten up by the breath of the big works, the factories that formed a single gigantic factory far beyond the platforms,

behind his back now, heads leaning on blackened panes, the station full of people, passengers, factory workers, shunters, even on holidays. The trenches of the tracks petered out towards the big works, trench beside trench, track beside track, forked off and branched out, loading docks, sidings, engine sheds, a few stunted, crippled black trees by the sides of the rails, the snow on them impossible to make out, coating the wood, melting and freezing again like a hard skin of bark, and he turned to face the station building and reached out his hand.

A wall of steel and wind and cold. And he lurched back, hand still at chest height, fingers spread wide, and in a brief moment of transition, the blink of an eye, he began to count the cars on the passing freight train, snow driving into his face, burning his eyes like the snow used to burn his eyes when it still fell black. When it melted on his hat and dripped onto his face.

And as the freight train vanished into the long curve he saw the Christmas tree in a window of the station building opposite, saw the finger-length blue, green and red clip lights sparsely illuminating the tree's dark green branches, and he ran his cold hand through his hair—where were his gloves? and why wasn't he wearing a hat? was this onset of winter an unexpected guest in mild December?—and he wondered, as he slowly descended the stairs into the subway, the tunnel, why he hadn't noticed the decorative lights before when the door of his train slammed behind him, the scudding snow stronger.

The tunnel leading underneath the tracks to the station building was very brightly lit, several strip lights on the ceiling; he remembered this subway being dark, the lamps broken, flickering, a stench of piss; as a child he'd imagined rows of men facing the walls and urinating. Now the very bright tunnel—the walls must have been recently painted—seemed like the tubular body of a plane, but then he did spot a few scribbles on the white. Football, of course, what else.

The names of some clubs or other, some he knew from the old days, small teams and clubs from the region; he wasn't much interested in football these days and hadn't known these names even still existed. So much had disappeared in this part of the world, but perhaps the old scrawls and slogans he'd read here as a child had pervaded the fresh paint, come through from beneath, just as he was now climbing the stairs, leaving the tunnel again for the station building, slowly, step by step, as

the front of the complex building on Platform 1 emerged before him and he saw the two wings of the door leading inside the building opening and closing, opening and closing over and over. It was the kind of door triggered by light barriers, where the barriers on the inside and outside weren't activated if no one approached, no one passed through.

Yet still the door's two wings moved incessantly, touching, pulling back again, approaching each other; it looked like the glass doors of a bank, at least he thought so for a moment, though he didn't want to think of banks and their doors; he'd passed through those doors too often in the past years, opening, closing, and he felt the folded papers in his coat's inside pocket, suddenly seeming as bulky and heavy as a briquette, and as he reached into his pocket the briquette crumbled, crumbled like a piece of brown lignite that had been mined for so many years around this town and their village and the other villages, and he looked in shock at his brown, black hand with the crumbs and pieces on it; the papers had turned into coal in the seams, carbonised, pressed into the layers …

No, he stopped on the stairs, felt the papers in his coat's inside pocket only briefly and watched the door, which must be playing up because no one was using it; but as he went on, stepped onto Platform 1, approaching it, it closed, the doors touched and stayed that way, the door no longer opening. He stopped a few metres away from the door, on the top step, felt the cold wind at his back, on the back of his head, saw the snow moving on the platform ground, moved by the wind, and hardly dared to reach out his hand for the door to open it, perhaps because he didn't know whether it would open, or perhaps because he was afraid it would open. And the white-framed glass of the door seemed strangely unfitting, looked like plastic between the brick walls, the old walls, and he wondered what kind of door used to open and close when his mother first set foot on the platform when she was a child, a young girl accompanied by her brother, seventy years ago.

But he knew that old black and heavy door himself, two oaken wings you had to lean against before you got into the small station in the small town that had always seemed so big to him.

He stood in the empty platform hall, the door behind him once again opening and closing incessantly, and the wind blew a tabloid across the floor, torn pages of the *Bild*. Twenty-fourth of December, he noticed as his eyes followed the drifting newspaper, which wandered across the floor

to the rhythm of the insane door, then poised with a rustle. He noticed that the naked woman had gone from the newspaper's front page for some time, apparently; the naked front-page woman probably didn't fit in with the times; EUROPE'S DIRTIEST TOWN, he read on the first page, WORKS CLOSING, EXCAVATORS SHUT DOWN; no, that was a long time ago now, too.

He picked up the paper and smoothed it out and skimmed a few stories; the world was off the rails but the gorgeous naked woman was gone for good. Up until a stroke put him in a kind of nursing home, his uncle, his mother's brother, had cut the women out. He'd stuck them inside his locker until the works closed down, picked the best ones and kept them in an old cigar box. Before 1989 his uncle had often travelled far and wide to get hold of the only magazine that had pictures of naked women in it. There were only a few newspapers and magazines in their village shop, and even here in the small town his uncle didn't always find the magazine, so he'd take the train on to Wittenberg or Dessau.

Once, his uncle had gone all the way to Berlin, just before Christmas some time in the early eighties, after a workmate had tipped him off that there were supposedly pubs in Friedrichshain where you could buy *Playboy* under the counter, behind the bar. For a hundred marks. His uncle had been *odd*, that was the word they used for him in the village, a loner, he lived alone in his half-derelict house on the edge of the village, in *their* village. When he died they found all sorts of women's underwear under his bed and more knickers in the kitchen cupboard, and some of the ladies in the village remembered washing going missing from the line now and then, but it was what it was and no one talked about it. As a child, after 1945, his uncle had suffered from malnutrition and hadn't grown much, but his head looked very big on his small body and his forehead was strangely high.

He's still holding the ripped newspaper when he hears footsteps. A boy, ten or eleven years old, crosses the station hall, heading for the station pub without looking at him.

Is it really open on Christmas Eve, with everyone at home with their families? He puts the newspaper down on one of the empty benches and takes a few steps after the boy, towards the station pub, which used to be a proper restaurant, a big Mitropa. He sees the boy behind the glass in the half-dark room, and now he makes out the little Christmas tree behind

the tables with nobody at them, in one of the windows to the platforms; the boy walks up to the bar where a man is standing, leaning on the bar, there is a man there, isn't there? He rests his head against the pane, places his hands on the glass for a better view, the coloured electric candles on the tree seem to be the only light source in there, he sees the boy talking to the man, touching him, tugging at his shirt, at his jacket, pushing away the two glasses on the bar in front of the man.

Other than the boy and the man, he sees no one in the Mitropa. And when he's in the taxi later—missed the last bus to take him to the village even though he'd had enough time—he remembers the boy again, talking to the man; how could he hear it through the glass? 'Uncle, come on, you've got to come with me, you can't sit here all night,' and on either side of the road they're taking through the night he sees the chasms of the slag heaps, the big open-cast lignite mines; the road they're taking through the night is like a long thin jetty jabbing out into that dark sea. He can't make out any lights in the pits, though the excavators used to work day and night and didn't stand still even on the twenty-fourth, but perhaps they've dug so deep that the lights can't be made out from up here.

'I'm going to see my mother,' he'd told the boy, 'I haven't been for a long time,' as the boy led the man, swaying slightly and not much taller than the boy, across the station hall, and they came so close to him, almost touched him, the boy and the man, that he could smell the almost stunted man's Mitropa breath, cheap brandy, stale beer, the boy pushing and shoving the man to the bus stop outside the station building, but they stopped at the door and the boy asked—and his voice echoed very high and very childish in the hall, which was actually just a rather small room —'What are you doing here? It's Christmas.'

'You off home, are you?' the taxi driver asked, after not saying anything for a good while, probably surprised by the detours he'd been instructed to take, and so they drove in a curve around the small town, through the villages, through the forest, past the flooded open-cast mines, boats in summer, bathers, skating in cold winters.

And over and over he looked around, the late-night passenger, and behind the town's silhouette he saw the tall thin chimneys of the old works, from which the flames shot out into the night sky, and in the mirror the driver sees a child, turning around to look at these big Christmas candles,

counting them like he counts the cars of a passing freight train, the candles gutter out and flare up again, and there are moments when four, five and more of these candles are burning on the horizon, the breath of the works, and the child sees himself in the Mitropa window, in the window of the station restaurant, black snow falling outside, 'Please, uncle, please come with me, I'm supposed to fetch you home.'

His uncle's house is long gone, torn down after his uncle went to the nursing home. He pays and gets out. The folded documents in his inside pocket. Big and heavy like a briquette, crumbling brown lignite? No, just papers. Like a parcel, a Christmas parcel, he comforts himself, but as he was on his way, looking first through the windows of the train, then out of the taxi, he was afraid of the moment he'd give it to his mother, and so he instructed the driver to take detours, the road like a never-ending jetty into what's past, what's disappeared. At the edge of the village, the hills slope gently.

He sees the taxi driving down the road, turning off, he watches the red tail-lights for a while longer, getting smaller and smaller, turning into red dots, disappearing. It's stopped snowing. It'll all melt soon, he thinks, and he sees the white clouds of his breath; it's supposed to turn mild between Christmas and New Year. No one to be seen on the road, between the houses, nothing to be heard, not even a dog barking. Why on earth does she stay in this backwater, he thinks. *His backwater, his village*. When there's hardly anyone left here, even though the excavators are long since submerged on the bottom of the flooded mines, dead lindworms, but then he sees two or three lots of Christmas lights along the village road, arches of candles in a few windows, red stars behind the glass of the front doors or the big ground-floor windows, and he wonders which of the old folks make such an effort. He doesn't spot a light in his mother's house; the top windows are dark, she must be in the kitchen and the kitchen window can't be seen from here. He got the driver to drop him off at the edge of the village, where his uncle's house used to be. At the edge of the village, the hills slope gently. 'We're going to disappear,' that's what they said back then in the village, that's how they talked. The pits coming closer, the excavators coming closer. The neighbouring villages disappeared. The inhabitants resettled, moved to the small town, closer to the big factory where many of them worked. Like his uncle. Others went to the mines,

they paid well there, moved to the slag growing and growing around their village, slag heaping, bad dreaming, space screaming—

And his uncle's house was on the boundary to that dark and yet light-flooded pit where they worked through the night, excavating, his uncle's house stood as if on the edge of a cliff, and the cliff sloped steeply down to that sea, but unlike ships' lights, the signs of the machines beamed and blazed incessantly, the signs of the excavation beamed and blazed, beamed and blazed droning and squealing into his uncle's windows.

'You're late.' His mother's sitting at the kitchen table. An Advent wreath with four candles in front of her.

'Did you get my letter?' he asks, and he sits down with her.

'I'm not leaving.' She looks at him, face grey beneath her white hair, and he thinks briefly that she's been sitting here waiting for him for days. It's chilly in here and he gets up and paces the kitchen, sits back down, looks at her limp shoulders, her old crooked back; she's not quite as small as her brother, his uncle. She once told him that her brother, his uncle, fed her wild berries when they were starving. Running from the Russians. Before they stood on the platform in the small town, Little Sister and Little Brother. Hadn't she always read him that fairy story?

'Shall we go in the front room?' he asks.

'I like sitting here. And I haven't got a tree this year.'

'But you made yourself a wreath.' He points at the Advent wreath. The branches look fresh; she must have cut them in the nearby forest, though she can hardly walk these days, and he sees silvery threads between the dark green needles where she's woven the branches together. Three of the four candles are burnt well down. She picks up a lighter and with a slow trembling hand she holds the flame to the small black wicks, which start to burn haltingly and with low flames, and then the flames around the wicks grow longer and more pointed, light up the kitchen table, shadows flitting across them. 'Imagine they're Christmas lights, big Christmas candles, there's no need to be scared.' He hugs her, holds tight to her, and she leans over to him and holds him by the shoulders; they're standing on the platform waiting for his uncle, come to pick him up so he won't stay at the Mitropa all night. It gets dark quickly in the small town, as if the evening sun no longer cuts through the haze, the works' breath, and first the flames press small and low out of the chimneys behind the tracks, then they grow long and pointed and blaze yellow into the black smoke,

and he's not afraid any more, he takes her hand and the two of them watch these December lights flaring up and then disappearing again; later that evening grey snow falls, black by the morning.

'But you've always had a tree, Mother.'

'No, not the past three years. What for? You hardly ever come, and if you do then not for long.'

'Mother, you know I—'

'I'm not leaving.' Those words again, the ones he'd been waiting for, the ones he's afraid of, and perhaps she's afraid of them too. A little girl outside the big heavy doors of the station building.

'I'm not leaving.' His uncle had said the same thing, over and over. Back when the neighbouring villages were cleared, sank into the slag, made way for the coal. On one horizon, the works glimmered behind the small town; on the other horizon the long excavator crawled through the gigantic pit like a lindworm.

The kitchen is chilly. No radiators, no heater, only the cooker providing warmth. A few saucepans on the rusty electric rings. He lifts a lid swiftly and drops it again. Grey-green meat between yellow potatoes.

'Uncle!' he calls. But the house is silent. He's supposed to come and fetch him, again. He wants to look for the cigar box with the naked women inside. 'Uncle!' he calls, 'come on now, it's Christmas.'

And then he hears the bells. They seem to be ringing very close by. He goes to the window and knows instantly that it's not the bells of their church, the village church; the service doesn't start until six and it's just gone four.

'And it's really true, it really happened, or did I just dream it?'

He puts his hand on his mother's shoulder. A church on a perfect circle of land in the middle of the slag, like an island, the village to go with it torn down, sunken in the slag, only the church left behind. Why?

Had the priest refused to leave? Were there things to be rescued? Art treasures? Was the church to be removed, brick by brick? His uncle had got there somehow, had seen the church tower from his kitchen window day after day, illuminated by the glow of the long excavator in the nights, snaking around the island like a lindworm; had hiked over there, through the pit, through the ravine, through the slag, that bleak afternoon which soon became an evening, December, yes, perhaps even Christmas.

'Yes, that's how he was. Long time ago.' His mother lays her hand on his hand, still resting on her shoulder, and he feels her trembling before she pulls it away.

'He rang the bells like a man insane, hung onto the old rope, yes, it was an old church. And he swung and swung there. Rang and rang. You were the only one who could get him away from there.'

'Me?'

'He was like your father sometimes, after your father… You were the only one he'd listen to.'

'You've got to leave, Mother. I've taken care of everything.'

'And you turn up on Christmas Eve and act like it's a present?'

'It's not easy for me, Mother.'

'I'm not leaving. Can't you wait until I'm dead?'

'Mother…'

'Your father died here and was born here, your uncle died here, and I'll… '

'No, he didn't die here… '

'Who?'

'My uncle. Your brother, Mother.'

'And do you think he was happy? Everything he had was here, we came here together, as children, after the war.'

'I know, Mother.'

'You don't know a thing, my boy.'

And she was right. She'd never talked about it and neither had her brother; only sometimes, when they sat together on the edge of the huge pit and watched the excavators working and lost themselves in all the movement down there, had his uncle remembered out loud in his hard-to-understand barking voice, *the old days*, Little Sister and Little Brother come hand-in-hand from far away, through flames and death and snow, and he'd opened up his big calloused hand as if it were still holding a few wild berries.

'It was snowing.'

'What?'

'When I went to fetch him from that church, at Christmas. It was snowing. And the snow wasn't black, not even grey.'

'It was always black in those days, my boy.'

'No, not that night.' He strokes the snow out of his uncle's hair once they've left the pit hours later; someone must have called the police but they wouldn't come too quickly on Christmas Eve; he strokes the white snow out of his uncle's hair.

It had been cold inside the church. Even colder than outside. He saw the clouds of his breath ahead of him as he called into the quietening bells. 'Uncle?' He found him in the tower, lying exhausted by the old-fashioned bell-ringing mechanism while the bells above them swung less and less and grew quieter. As they walk outside he sees a scrubby Christmas tree, probably a small pine, on one of the front pews; someone propped it there as if the tree were sitting in the pew and looking at the altar and the silver church organ.

'A tree, Mother.'

'What?'

'I'm going out again to get a tree, to chop one down.'

'A Christmas tree?'

'It is Christmas, isn't it?'

'You're going out to the forest? Now?'

'Why not, Mother? I know the clearings and the planting areas by the old pits. I know the forest here. I'm going to get us a tree.'

'Wait, my boy…'

And he goes to the shed, where he's sure he'll find a good axe. It's snowing again and he hears his footsteps crunching on the ground. And bulky and heavy as a briquette, he feels the papers from the bank and the nursing home in his inside pocket. Axe shouldered, he crosses the village road and walks to the edge of the forest.

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We'd like to give huge thanks you to all the people who have generously supported our work over the years by becoming patrons. In the very early days, their annual contributions helped to keep the magazine afloat while we sought to secure funding. They've played a crucial role in sustaining our development and growth as an organisation ever since.

Earlier this year, The Stinging Fly CLG became a registered charity. Our ambition is to remain at the heart of literary life in Ireland, nurturing new writers and continuing to share exceptional new writing with readers throughout the world. To help us acheive this ambition, we've established a new 'Friends of *The Fly*' initiative, which replaces the original patrons programme.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Dean Browne received the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize in 2021 and his pamphlet, *Kitchens at Night*, was a winner of the Poetry Business International Pamphlet Competition. His poems have recently appeared in magazines such as *London Magazine* and *The New York Review of Books*.

Dulce Maria Cardoso* is a Portuguese novelist, short story writer and columnist whose books have been translated into multiple languages and earned her many prizes, among them the European Union Prize for Literature, Portuguese PEN Prize and Portuguese Writers' Association Grand Crónica Prize.

Sean Cavanaugh* is a writer based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His work has appeared in *Heavy Traffic*, *X-Ray Magazine* and *Maudlin House*. He is pursuing his MFA at the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. @DoctorSlop on Twitter.

Rosa Churcher Clarke* was born and raised in Manchester, but has been based in Lisbon since 2012. She does freelance literary translation from Portuguese and Spanish into English, and works part-time as an editorial assistant at Portuguese children's publisher Planeta Tangerina.

Grayson Del Faro* is an American writer based in Iceland. His poetry has appeared in *The Baffler* and *Evergreen Review*, among others.

Katy Derbyshire lives in Berlin and translates contemporary German writers, including Judith Hermann, Sandra Hofmann (in *The Stinging Fly*, Issue 44) and Karl Bartos of Kraftwerk fame. Her translations of Clemens Meyer have twice been nominated for the International Booker Prize.

Paula Dias Garcia* is a queer writer from Brasília, currently based in Limerick, where they edit fresh and weird stories for Sans. PRESS. Their writing can be found in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Channel*, *Riverbed Review* and others.

Ian Duhig has published seven books of poetry, won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem once and the National Poetry Competition twice. His *New and Selected Poems* was awarded the 2022 Hawthornden Prize for Literature. His next collection, *An Arbitrary Light Bulb*, is due in November 2024 from Picador.

Martina Evans was born in Cork and lives in London. She is the author of thirteen books of poetry and prose. *The Coming Thing* (Carcanet 2023) is shortlisted for the Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry and its sequel, *Drunken Driving*, will be published by Carcanet in 2026.

Dan Hogan* is the author of *Secret Third Thing*, which won the Five Islands Prize and Mary Gilmore Award, and was named one of the 25 best Australian books of 2023 by *The Guardian*. More of their work can be found at: www.2dan2hogan.com

Paweł Huelle* was a novelist and poet. He was born in Gdańsk in 1957 and graduated in Polish Philology at the University of Gdańsk. He worked as a university lecturer, journalist and director of the Gdańsk branch of the Polish Television. Honoured with many prestigious literary awards, Huelle was one of the most successful contemporary Polish writers. He died in 2023.

Rowe Irvin* is a writer and artist. Her debut novel, *Life Cycle of a Moth*, publishes in June 2025. Her work is published with Prototype and Nēpenthé Press. She won second prize in the 2024 Sean O'Faolain Short Story Competition, and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Poetry Prize and the Bath Short Story Award.

Jake Kennedy* is the author of several volumes of poetry and is currently working on *Mr. Cho Stayed For Tea*, a collaborative project with Paul Hong, involving as a source text a series of mid-twentieth century Canadian farm journals.

Brendan Killeen won the 2022 RTÉ Short Story Competition 2024 in honour of Francis MacManus. He has been nominated for the PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize and was highly commended in The Stinging Fly/FBA Fiction Prize. He is working on a collection of short stories and a novel.

Antonia Lloyd-Jones* translates fiction, non-fiction, poetry and children's books from Polish, notably the work of Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk. She is a former co-chair of the UK Translators Association.

Kirsty Logan* is a professional daydreamer. Her published work spans novels, short stories, audio and radio work, memoir, poetry and collaborative work with musicians, artists and performers. 'Nightfall' is from her tenth book, *No & Other Love Stories*, which will be published in the spring of 2025.

Alicia McAuley* is a book editor based in Belfast. Her short stories, flash fiction, non-fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *Winter Papers*, *Banshee*, *The Irish Times* and elsewhere, often under the pen name Jane Lavelle.

Eimear McBride* is the author of four novels: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *The Lesser Bohemians*, *Strange Hotel* and *The City Changes Its Face* (publishing in 2025). She held the inaugural Creative Fellowship at the Beckett Research Centre, University of Reading, and is the recipient of the Women's Prize for Fiction, Goldsmiths Prize, Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award and James Tait Black Memorial Prize, among others. In 2022, she wrote and directed *A Very Short Film About Longing* (DMC Films/BBC), which was selected for screening in the 2023 London Film Festival.

Darragh McCausland* is a writer from Kells, County Meath. He has had short stories and non-fiction published in various journals and anthologies in Ireland and further afield. He is currently working on a volume of non-fiction.

Tim MacGabhann is the author of the novels *Call Him Mine* and *How to Be Nowhere*, the long poem, 'Rory Gallagher —Live!— at the Hotel of the Dead', and the memoir, *The Black Pool*. A book of poems and a book of short stories are also forthcoming.

Paula Meehan published *As If By Magic: Selected Poems* in 2020. *The Solace of Artemis*, 2023, received the Pigott Poetry Prize. Both volumes are available from Dedalus Press. Selected poems in Japanese and Dutch have been published recently and Spanish, Polish and Greek books are in the works.

Clemens Meyer* was born in Halle (Saale) and lives in Leipzig. His debut novel *While We Were Dreaming* was published in German in 2006 and in English in 2023. His epic, *The Projectionists,* was shortlisted for the 2024 *Deutsche Buchpreis*/German Book Prize.

Nicole Morris* is a working-class, mixed-race Black girl poet who writes essays. An Autumn 2024 Tin House Fellow, her writing is featured in *Banshee*, *Blood Orange Review* and *The Indiana Review.* Originally from Los Angeles, she lives in the West of Ireland.

*Rugadh **Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha**** *in 1994 agus tógadh í i gceantar an Lagáin in Oirthear Dhún na nGall. Tá cónaí uirthi i gConamara anois.*
Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha* was born in 1994 and raised in the Laggan in East Donegal. She now lives in Conamara.

Karl Parkinson is a poet and writer from Dublin. He has published five books, including *The Blocks, Butterflies of a Bad Summer* and *Sacred Symphony*. His writing has been published widely in journals and anthologies in Ireland, the UK and USA.

Pascale Petit's eighth collection, *Tiger Girl* (Bloodaxe, 2020), was shortlisted for the Forward Prizes for Poetry and for Wales Book of the Year. *Mama Amazonica* won the Laurel and Ondaatje prizes. Her novel, *My Hummingbird Father,* is published in 2024, and her ninth collection, *Beast*, in 2025.

Leeanne Quinn's *Before You* (2012) was highly commended in the Forward Prizes for Poetry 2013. Her second collection, *Some Lives* (2020), was noted as a Book of the Year by *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent*.

Lowen Reilly† is a writer from Falmouth, Cornwall. This is his first short story to be published.

Keith Ridgway is a Dubliner. His most recent novel was *A Shock* which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for The Goldsmiths Prize. Previous novels include *Hawthorn & Child, Animals* and *The Long Falling*. His short fiction has appeared in *The Stinging Fly, The New Yorker, Granta, Zoetrope, Inque, The Atlantic* and others. He has been awarded the Prix Femina Étranger and The Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. He lives in south London.

Daniel Shannon* is a writer from Templepatrick, Antrim. He currently lives in New York.

Peter Sirr's most recent books are *The Swerve* (2023) and I*ntimate City: Dublin Essays* (2021), both published by The Gallery Press. *The Gravity Wave* (2019) was a Poetry Society Recommendation and winner of the Farmgate Café National Poetry Award.

Rosamund Taylor's debut collection, *In Her Jaws* (Banshee Press 2022), was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Poetry Prize for a First Collection and the Yeats Society Poetry Prize, and longlisted for the Polari Prize.

Kate Wakeling* is a poet and musicologist. Her pamphlet, *The Rainbow Faults*, is published by The Rialto. Her poetry has appeared in *The Poetry Review, Magma, Stand Magazine, Oxford Poetry* and *Butcher's Dog*, among others. She writes for *BBC Music Magazine* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Milena Williamson* has a PhD in poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast. A recipient of the Eric Gregory Award, she has published a pamphlet, *Charm for Catching a Train* (Green Bottle Press), and a poetry collection titled *Into the Night that Flies So Fast* (Dedalus Press).

James Young* is from Belfast. His stories have been published by various literary journals and shortlisted for the Bath, Wasafiri and Fish prizes. He is the editor of *Short Fiction* journal and has translated the novels of the Brazilian author Victor Heringer into English.

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