

Quarryman

Vol. VIII

2025

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Foreword

For the past few years, I've kept a post-it on the computer monitor in the shed. It says in blue biro (fading now to green), in capital letters:

PERCEIVE WHAT IS PRESENT AND WHAT IS POSSIBLE

It's something from a book on ethics that I stumbled upon a few years ago, by an early twentieth century philosopher (Tetsuro Watsuji). The words felt vital to me at the time, as a kind of mantra for myself in my writing. But now, with everything going on, it feels like a totem, it feels almost like a prayer.

It really is a horrible time. It seems that the world is falling headlong into chaos and cruelty—the people tasked with leading some of the world's most powerful nations have this disgusting urge to hurt, dominate and erase others. They seem to be, at their very core, unloving, and this feeling has clearly trickled down into our communities as well. As a result, we seem to me to be on the brink of (or indeed in the process of) ethical collapse, political collapse, economic collapse, civilisational

collapse, environmental collapse... It is very hard to find hope, very hard to nurture it, and as the poet Claudia Rankine said on campus, only yesterday, perhaps 'collapse' is what we have to do, so that we can find a way to get back up... And yet, out of this struggle too, out of this horrible time, come beacons of hope, flares of love, acts of true solidarity.

For me, writing is an act of solidarity, of connection, of empathy, of resistance, of love. This is why the *Quarryman* and all other literary magazines are so important, here in campus and out there in the world. The work in this issue—by writers who perceive both what is present and what is possible—is the very opposite of the work of people who want to tear the world apart. It inhabits different forms and genres, and covers different subjects and landscapes, of course, but always there is presence, and always possibility. The work asks you to inhabit other consciousness, to feel other feelings and to see other places. It moves you in myriad ways, and it lingers with you, and that, for me, is the essence of solidarity, of connection.

And though the work is far-ranging and probes many disparate aspects of the human condition, there is, I think, something that ties it all together, and indeed the late, great Eibhear Walshe wrote about it in his own foreword to *Quarryman I*. The work of the journal, he wrote, enlarges 'our sense of what it is to live and to observe and to be observed.' It is almost a year since we lost Eibhear, far too suddenly. He was a great champion of creative writing at this university and beyond, and an early supporter of *Quarryman*. But amidst the sadness of his passing, and the surrounding chaos, the creative work in this issue and all around this country does give me hope, whether it's a beacon or a flare or a quiet, private moment of connection on a rainy or a balmy afternoon.

All that remains for me to do now is to thank and congratulate the brilliant people who contributed to this issue: the writers, the readers,

the editors, the designers and typesetter, the committee of the English Literature Society, the artists and project managers. You've all connected to put a beautiful, powerful thing out into the world, a thing that fuels hope. My gratitude and admiration to everyone who laid their eyes, hands, minds and hearts on this wonderful thing.

Danny Denton
Midsummer, 2025

Editorial

The works collected in the following volume represent three years of contributions to the *Quarryman* since our last issue was published in spring 2022—during which period many of our attempts to produce a new volume unfortunately came to premature ends. As such, it is quite proudly and gratefully that in this volume, in spite of the wait, we have again been privileged with featuring both new and returning writers from the continuing tradition of creative writing at UCC. It is wonderful to see such a continuity with the run of the journal begun a decade ago in 2015, including strong ties with UCC’s Creative Writing students and graduates. I am especially grateful, though, to everyone who submitted new work for the first time this year, and made the return of the journal possible.

Perhaps this same storied context also contributed to the particular depth and variety we received in the full range of submissions this year, and as a result, to a set of works that seem to really speak to and work with each other even in some subtle and unexpected ways.

As a last note, I would like to particularly thank Danny Denton, along with Seán Kelly of the Arts and Culture Office, the Cork University Press team, and others from UCC’s Library Staff, for all of their advice to us and for their continued support and eagerness to help throughout this year.

Liam McDonagh

FICTION

Horses

Freyja Hellebust

The horses, frothy with sweat. They can smell his thoughts off him—mind readers, horses. They look through you with those black eyes, bulging and wet like full balloons.

The thick smell of hay, shit, tacky grime. The give of wet sand under his own stinking boots, the way his feet feel, then, rubbed raw and slippery.

Seamus goes to see the horses every day, has become used to the way they roll their eyes and snort with violence. He likes that, the soft weight of their breath through velvet nostrils becoming such a snotty trumpeting noise. He often tries to get a hand on the plush flesh of their blunt noses but they won't let him, snapping back arched necks to escape his clammy touch.

Today is different because one of the horses has died. Shot, out of necessity.

He's never seen that before, has trouble picturing it without the whole thing getting cartoonish. World War One movie, maybe. He wonders if they can tell, before it happens, that they're in trouble. He's heard they bleed loads. It gushes out of them, someone told him, like water out of a bath tipped over. He imagines it steaming in the crisp air, warm around

people's boots. But there's no organic record of the animal left, not for him to see, anyway.

When he arrived today to see the horses—one less—he knew before being told that something had happened, because one of the girls had been pretending not to cry. Things like that—emotions running high—remind him he doesn't live in the same world as these people. He's not a natural part of this functioning, everyday place, having only been brought in so he'd be occupied and supervised. But this also means no one minds him too much.

"Why'd ye have him shot?" Seamus asks his cousin's husband now.

Cian is the main reason he's allowed come down here and do what he likes. Seamus joins him on his fag breaks.

"He managed to fucking shatter his leg bone, so we had to."

"Hm. Fair enough." And that's the other thing about the horses—sometimes they've just got to die. It's the only thing for them, when they're too ruined to ride, too ruined to stand around in a field all day, too ruined even just to lie in the stables and chomp hay, drooling. Probably why they're as skittish as they are. They know the score.

Silence, then. Seamus watches smoke rise into the fresh blue of an early September morning.

"How's Ciara, anyway? And himself."

Ciara is the best cousin, having a husband and a dog and a son and even a house they actually own.

The son is two, but Seamus has only met him a couple times. Ciara doesn't think he's appropriate for sons.

"I don't want him growing up thinking men like you are normal," she'd told him once.

He was offended she'd said it, out loud, to his face, but not really that she'd thought it.

"Ah, they're grand."

Seamus wouldn't be told if they weren't, which annoys him, but

there's nothing he can do about it. He understands Cian's babysitting him to help his wife out.

Seamus helps out here and there, is around too much not to, but he's not getting paid. He doesn't mind. The shit-shovelling's not so bad. He finds it easier than anything else down here. There's no managing of talk, facial expressions. No one's looking at him, wondering what he's at. He does it alone and it takes him out of himself. No chance to feel the want that still runs him. He's still thin, thinks this might pack a bit of muscle onto his stringy arms.

It's mid-afternoon and the day has become ordinary. The kids will all be in soon for the after-school lessons. He generally leaves around then. Even if he was being paid, he wouldn't want to be standing around sweating under the gaze of perfumed, blow-dried mothers. They make him feel like a child himself, squirming and red in the face. Aware of how he must smell.

"Right," Seamus says when he's finished smoking.

"Are you away?"

"I am. I'll probably be down to ye tomorrow again."

"Right so."

And he's off. He walks home. It's more than half an hour, but he walks a lot these days. The grime's on him like another skin. Cooling now, though he's walking fast, always does on his own. Thinks of the shot horse as he goes to distract himself from the feel of his feet in his boots.

He's reminded for the first time in years of his dog when he was younger, when it went totally nuts. The two of them in the yard, him and it, and Mam had rushed out with an ugly face on her like someone possessed. She'd grabbed a broom and just battered the shit out of it—both of them frothing at the mouth around bared teeth. Odd, to see his mother like that then. Odd, too, the crack of bone, the way it hadn't stopped snarling, like the rage took its pain.

The worst part was after. He kept remembering the whole thing, replaying moments. Mam's awful face. The thought that if Mam hadn't come out—but she had come out. She rang Uncle Patsy, then, because she didn't want to manage all the nasty bits of dog. She wanted to go inside and put the dinner on, like she'd been trying to do. They had pork chops, all pink and fatty, and he felt sick. The nausea's the feeling he best remembers, the glistening meat and the drop of his stomach. Watching her hands serve peas, thinking of her thick fingers clenched around the broom handle.

Before that, still out in the yard with Patsy, he watched the soft brown snout disappear into a bin bag and his throat had locked up, squeezed itself shut so he couldn't talk. His uncle had him hose down the concrete but then he gave him a drink, to settle him. It cut through the tight pain in his neck, his chest. Mam said he was too young for it but Patsy gave him another after dinner and that helped the queasiness, too.

"Did you feel bad killing it?" He'd asked his mother later, one of the only times they were able to speak properly to each other.

"No," she told him, "I was just afraid of it."

Seamus understands sometimes there is a need to kill. The killing of animals is often ritual. The dog, if not ceremonial, certainly subdued things between him and his mother. The pair of them remembered how its behaviour made it die and they treated each other well.

His eyes are unseeing where they land on the autumn hedgerows. He's not looking at the brambles or the blackberries, the tangles of thistles, the tall thick-stemmed nettles. The fuchsia, in the golden afternoon light. The branches of trees against the clear sky. Blackberries and huge unmoving spiders, both fat and shining. He should be looking at these things, paying attention so the changing world really sinks in. He knows he lives his life narrowly. Doesn't look at birds as much as he should. Doesn't know them apart, only the easy

ones. Sometimes he fools himself that he is changing—the cooing of a wood pigeon in the evening leaving him calm, extending outside of his own body.

Once he's home, he goes straight for the kitchen and boils the kettle for coffee. Spoons instant into a sticky mug.

He wraps his hands around the white ceramic, feels the boiled-water heat seep through, just on the right side of burning the palms off him.

When he'd tapped his card for the €3.50 he'd been so unhappy, but it's worth it now, this small energising warmth. He stands, for a minute, breathing into the smell of it. Movement gets his attention—a glowing white animal bounces onto the windowsill.

It's a stray cat that's taken to poking its head in if the window is ajar. It picks through the wet leaves collecting on the sill with round, careful paws, makes its way through the orange slime to peek in at him, hopeful and skinny—its feet are too big for the rest of it, like a lion cub. The size of them hints at another animal, hiding in the little bones of this one. It bobs its head up and down, sniffing and searching for a way into the house out of the damp afternoon. It did get in, once. He didn't know until he found it on a chair, shedding all over the scarf he'd left there, pretzelled into itself and purring ferociously. He threw it out the back door on instinct—lobbed it in a wide arc, and it landed weightlessly on its feet and skittered off—but it was still summer then, climate-change-hot, and he didn't feel bad. He'd been drinking, was in that place where he could move through the world unworried. Didn't find himself dwelling on things after, able to dismiss.

Now, with the autumn chill waiting in the air, he feels worse for it, thinks he'd let it in if it wasn't so muddy and untrained. It would piss on his floor. He takes another sip of his coffee instead—burnt, unpleasant. Mainly good for the way it goes down, bitter and hot but nothing like whiskey.

He sits down with it at the table, leaves a wet ring on the white

Formica. Afternoon ritual—he goes through jobs in the area on his phone, scrolls through the offers of minimum wage, sends emails claiming to be a quick learner and a team player. To avoid the particular stillness of a cold kitchen he plays a “Chill Playlist,” unable to face actually choosing something he likes.

The need for a job—he feels it less than he really should. He’s got savings from when his mother died two years ago. He’s pissing her money down the drain and if she was still living, she’d strangle him. He feels guilty, sometimes, not so much about his behaviour but about how she can’t get angry. It feels like he’s pulling one over her.

Darkness comes earlier than it did yesterday. He locks the front and back doors, watches video essays on his phone, makes a cheese toastie. Thinks the whole time about how he’s going to have to shower.

Sleep never comes easy to him—he’ll spend hours online, absorbing cartoons, self-growth podcasts, American reality shows from fifteen years ago. Let Us Redo Your House. Let Us Redo You. With no other way of knocking himself out, this is routine now. Otherwise it’s just him and the knowledge that no one is actually keeping him from going out. Just him and all the empty rooms of the house, waiting. But once asleep, he stays that way—he normally doesn’t remember his dreams.

This one sticks, though.

He is standing, cold in his hoodie, in a wet field. The world is shaded blue, as though through tinted glass. The grass and mud are one and the same, turf-like and sucking at his feet when he moves.

Then, the horse. Spindly-legged and shadowy, squelching up to him over the sodden ground.

Breathing, loud and snuffly. Bends its nose to him. He wants to run the backs of his fingers gently over its warm skin, then into the short hairs further up the face, pat its round cheek, curl a palm around its pointed, flicking ears, flatten a whole hand over the forehead. There’s a horse he gets on with, at the equestrian centre, that lets him do things

like that. Lets him fuck with its ears and plait the mane, too. It's called Champion and no one can believe it likes him.

But now, here, he watches himself do something else.

He reaches into his pocket and finds sharp metal. It had been digging into his thigh.

He starts at the lumpy breast of the animal—pushes in there and pulls upwards, along the wobbly jugular groove—follows that smoothly up to the latch of the throat. Like slitting an envelope. One gesture, unless it catches. But it doesn't catch. The horse just looks at him still. He looks back into its unspeaking face, not down at what he is doing. He can't see it properly in this almost-light, but he can imagine—the gentle nose, whiskery satin over huge yellow teeth. He can hear it breathing still, heavy, like a sigh pushed out.

He's not the one in charge of his hands. He can only feel them as they reach through the soft coat into the cut gorge, finding the sticky middle contained by the outer animal shape. His fingers are nearly burning, like they would under a tap, very hot or very cold. The feeling of numbness in the hands like when he'd wash them in the yellow-tiled school bathrooms in November.

He didn't mean this. Is there no way to take it back? It only wanted to be friends. Maybe it thought he might feed it, keep it company, out here in the dark. He wants so badly to go back in time, thinking of its friendliness. There's that particular panicked feeling right after the act, the moment right after knocking back a shot when he'd think, fuck. That's done now. It is already in me.

He can feel his face moving without his permission, stretching and winding itself into a wide-mouthed sob. Something rising inside him, vomit or an ugly noise. He wakes up before it has a chance to come out, tears rolling into his ears.

It's early-morning-cold but the dream's made him sick, so he gets out of bed anyway. The window's fogged up round the edges. He opens

it to let the air in, feels a little better now he can smell the rain-soaked earth.

The buzz of the fridge is loud in the kitchen until he puts the kettle on. On the sill, a waiting white shape, the cat again. He watches it while he wipes his face with his sleeve. Makes a go of breathing in and out. Just breathe, Ciara always tells him, like it's a good substitute for a drink at all. But he has no other choice. The little eejit notices him looking and starts to claw at the window, leaving wet smears. This sort of boldness is probably the reason it's survived all these weeks out here alone, roaming the wet fields. Cats are an invasive species. It's probably killed an ecologically significant number of shrews or something.

It's while he's spooning sugar into the tea—something he doesn't really like but he's gotten more used to it, all part of the effort to get bigger, like getting the weight on will make him a sturdier person—that it starts to yowl. A sort of pitiful weeping. He's holding his tea, pressing his hands around the mug. Watching it wail over the rim pressed up to his lips, through the steam.

He's not had a pet in years, not since childhood. And there's all that stuff too, get a houseplant, manage that. Manage yourself. Get a grip before you try holding anything else. But he's been the only thing haunting this house for a while.

The cat gives up and is silent in the damp back garden. It sits now, tail twitching, still staring implacably in. It'll eventually leave. Someone else will let it in. Someone much more suitable than him. But maybe they won't. A fox will kill it. Or it'll be run over, its small spine crushed, the whole animal turned into a cat-shaped mess, like the crows he passes sometimes on his daily walk, foxes as well, smeared across ground they should be safe on. He's frozen, barefoot on the unswept tile, reddened palms around his mug of tea, then he's moving before he's realised, opening the door without thinking at all. It shoots in, delighted with itself. Within a minute, it's kneading the couch, purr-

ing hard, circling and settling itself, making itself round and happy. Sits down, squints its eyes, burrows its nose between its still damp paws. It gets comfortable with a frantic urgency, maybe to stake its claim on the place, show him it belongs here and he can't throw it out again. It's so small and he is so much bigger.

He thinks of the dream, imagines himself treating this cat the same way, opening it up with his mother's fish knife. But he doesn't want to. He doesn't have to. He's in charge of what he does now. He sits down next to it instead, breathes the dream out and tentatively places one smarting palm in the cool fur layered just over its tiny, hummingbird heart.

Date Night

Jamie Keegan

“I just think it’s just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin.”

That must have been the third time he said that in the twenty minutes since she sat down. With that same wide smile as well. It was charming in his Tinder profile; confident, welcoming. Attractive. But here it felt strange and just the slightest bit uncanny. After a few seconds of awkward silence—

“I think people, men especially but I guess women too, just put way too much effort into trying to be something they’re not, y’know?”

Before she can answer he goes on again. She was getting the feeling that most of his questions were rhetorical.

“Like, I get it. I used to be like that too. But y’know, I realised one day, just said to myself, I said this: ‘Stop pretending to be something you’re not and *start* becoming the person you *want* to be!’”

He paused like he was waiting for a sitcom audience to start clapping. She gives it about five seconds before opening her mouth to reply.

“Wow, that’s great, yeah. I think more people really should follow that logic.”

What the fuck was that? She thought to herself. Her smile was probably so obviously bored and skin-deep, and she was worried his feelings

were going to be hurt. Considering the blinding white glow between his lips hadn't changed at all, she figured she was in the clear.

"I think so too, yeah. I mean, think about it. Imagine if everyone on earth just stopped focusing on their shortcomings and just y'know, grabbed life by the balls and just made their dreams happen!"

Jesus, this fella's a genius. That was mean. He didn't seem nasty really, in fact over text he was quite funny. Just in person, there was something off. She didn't feel threatened exactly, but ever since his tight and sharp handshake over the dinner table before she sat down, there was an aura of unease. And the smile. She remembered joking with Anna how he must have used filters in his pictures, but up close she knew he was certainly the real deal. Too perfect, she thought. She took another sip of the Prosecco in front of her. The one she didn't want. The one this fella just ordered the second the waiter came around. Funnily enough he only had a glass of water, one he'd barely touched.

"I mean, this body didn't just make itself!" he laughed. "I did!"

For God's sake, can the food get here already? She needed to say something, just a question to get him off his gym-bro talk. She manages to get something out after her hopefully convincing fake laugh.

"I just need to use the bathroom there. I'll be two minutes."

"I'll keep count!" he laughs again. The smile still there, same shape. She could have sworn she saw something move in his face. A twitch, maybe. Time to go.

She is careful to not walk too fast or slow towards the bathroom door. A small look behind her and his eyes are following her. *Okay, that's weird. Or is it? Am I the weird one?* She gets into the bathroom and stands in front of the mirror. *I look good*, she thinks to herself. She didn't overdo with the makeup, and considering this guy's view on "being true to yourself", thank God for that. She reaches into her bag and takes out her phone, opening up the Tinder profile again, desperate to find something else to talk about.

Occupation: Accountant

Fuck. That won't do.

She exits the app and dials Anna. After twenty painful seconds she answers.

"Hell-OH!"

That always makes her laugh.

"Hi Anna, calling from the bathroom."

"Oooh, exciting! How's My Shiny Teeth And Me?" she asks. *Definitely was waiting to use that one.*

"He's... okay..." she manages to get out.

"Jesus, that bad?" Anna's voice turned concerned.

"No, not bad, just weird."

"Weird, how? Holly, there's lots of ways a guy can be 'weird' and some are a lot worse than others."

She pauses for a moment. What is it exactly that's bothering her? Is it the dull conversation? The smile? Come to think of it unless she was imagining it, were his eyes not a bit funny? There was a small disconnect, his gaze was oddly piercing and intense, yet somehow still empty. It was probably that with his massive grin. The "uncanny valley" effect.

"He's just *weird*. He looks like one of those freaky wax figures that made a wish to become alive."

She can hear Anna laughing on the other end. "You're an asshole, you know that."

"Ha ha, it's not just that. He non-stop talks about himself. And not even properly about himself. It's all some shallow 'I put so much effort into my body and lifestyle' gym-bro bullshit. I've barely been able to get a word in and press him about anything. And he went and just ordered Prosecco for the table and he hasn't drank any of it. Just a glass of water that he's taken about two sips of."

Holly realised she was probably coming across a complete mug at

the moment.

"Anna, look, I don't really know how to put it into words, but this guy is freaking me out a bit. I don't know whether to feel bored or intimidated by him."

"Alright, look, do you want to just fake the shits or something and get out of it?"

Holly stopped. *Does she really want to go that far?*

"No... I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh. I finish work in about 20 minutes. Do you want me to come get you?"

"No, no, Anna it's not like that."

"What's it like then? Girl, if you think he's dodgy then don't take the risk."

"I don't think he's dangerous or dodgy really. I don't really want to hurt his feelings. He does seem nice like."

"Yeah but what's your gut telling you?"

Good question, she thought to herself.

"Look the food's ordered, I'll come back there and try and strike up a conversation until the food comes round. He offered to pay for it anyways so, might as well."

"Are you sure, Holly? Like seriously, if there's a problem, just go."

"I will, don't worry. I promise."

"You better."

*

She made her way back to the table, and found his eyes fixed on her from the moment she opened the bathroom door. She avoided eye contact until she was closer to the table and gave a customary smile and wave. *Time to break the ice.*

"Jesus, the food is taking longer than a Chris Nolan movie."

What the fuck was that? This is why you shouldn't make jokes for fuck sake.

She nearly jumped after the sharp, hearty laugh he let out.

“HA! Good one! God those movies, am I right?”

Okay, wasn't expecting that to land. At least we can make a conversation now.

“Yeah, they do go on a bit too long, don't they?”

“Yeah.” He laughs another bit, and the conversation goes dead. *Fuck.* Well, time for the nuclear option.

“So, you're an accountant, aren't you?” she asks, preparing for a bunch of economic jargon she'd never understand nor care about.

“I mean, it's my job, but I don't let it define me.”

That one got an honest laugh out of her and she would have relaxed if not for his eyes. For whatever reason they seemed to focus in on her response, like he was a computer storing information. *Why do they look so judgmental?* They were so at odds with the rest of his face. Then she saw it again. Not a twitch, a lump. She blinked, and it was gone again. *Okay, I'm losing it.* She looked down at her hand with the now halfway-finished glass of Prosecco. The glass she had left alone for ten minutes. *No.* She felt fine. She had never been spiked before, but she had seen it. She'd certainly have felt something. Which means she did just see a lump pop up on his cheek and disappear again. He started to talk again. Was it just her or did his voice sound more uneasy?

“Y'know, one time I was at the gym and, I was on the treadmill, y'know. And I was doing my running, making sure I was getting my hydration in, and I catch my face in the window reflection, and I'm just like 'wow!' that's an achievement right there. And you see, it made me think, because like that was the first time I really realised it, y'know I was like, 'Damn, I actually look good!' and it just felt amazing, y'know. I knew I was good then, as good as I always wanted to be.”

She didn't know whether to be relieved or more uneasy by this sudden opening up, but truth be told, she was still thinking of the lump. Her eyes were focused on his face, to give the impression she was paying attention to him, but really was trying to figure out if she

was crazy or not.

"It's just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin."

Jesus, a fourth time?! Was he having a go at her or something? Was she meant to say something? But before she can, a waiter puts a plate of chicken goujons in front of her. *Thank the Lord above*. She took the knife and fork and started cutting it up and just when she made eye contact again she saw he had no plate in front of him.

"Oh shit, sorry," she said, mid chew, before swallowing. "I didn't think you were still waiting."

"Oh, I didn't get anything," he replied, smiling.

She waits for him to start laughing, or say he's joking. *Please be joking*. Unfortunately, there was no reprieve. And she was left to eat while this weirdo was going to observe her like she was some dumb animal. She felt her face turning a slight red, both in embarrassment and anger. *Fine buddy, but that's all you're getting*. She pushes the Prosecco just a small bit away. His eyes follow her hand.

"Sorry, I didn't get the chance to say I'm not the biggest fan of Prosecco."

"Oh really?" he responded. His face seemed more inquisitive than condescending.

"Yeah, I just didn't want you to feel like you were wasting money. I mean, you can have it if you want."

"Oh no, you're fine. I actually respect it honestly. Alcohol I just think—" for the first time he makes a disgusted face, "no way. Poison if you ask me. I just ordered it because women like wine."

Okay pal. She's about to respond when he starts again.

"It just does awful things to you, and like look, I'm taking care of myself. It's why I'm not eating tonight, I don't want to get any nasty stuff in me, or any food on my nice clothes. I'm a bit particular, yeah, but it pays off. People might think it's weird, but it's just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin."

Fifth time. Bingo. She started to rub her hands a bit, as she tended to do when stressed. He started to do the same. *Pop.* Another lump on his hand. And then it moved. Instantly, his other hand bounced onto it. She locked eyes with him again, the smile seemed smaller, his eyes seemed angrier.

"So—sorry, I didn't mean—"

His face stretched back into the smile.

"Didn't mean what?"

"I just..." *Time to go, time to go.*

"I need to use the bathroom again... I'll just—"

"You're leaving, aren't you." His smile is still there, but his eyes shift again. No longer angry. Just sad. She tried to sputter something out.

"N-no, I just, I just— I haven't been feeling too good—"

"It's okay, Holly. I understand. I'm sorry." He took a sip of the water, and she noticed his hand shaking, as if he was terrified. A small drop of it spills on his white shirt.

"Oh for God's sake! I really thought it would work this time. FOR GOD'S SAKE!" The sudden shout makes her jump out of her seat and his hand snaps to her arm. *Oh no.*

"Please," she whispers out, "please just let me go."

"It's not your fault! I'm sorry, I did it all wrong, damnit! Ahhh...!"

He starts shaking again, and his body begins to rise, his hand still gripping her arm. *Let go, let go.* She reaches for the glass and throws at him.

"Let go of me!"

His grip releases, her arm is free. He covers his face and begins wailing and falls to his knees, the lump in his hand opens. Small droppings pop out falling on the floor. She covers her mouth in horror, the creatures on the floor begin moving. *Worms.* Worms begin spilling out from the opening in his hand, and before long the lump in his cheek begins to open too. Soon his body begins to crumple under

his white shirt and chinos as he sinks onto the restaurant floor. She stares, partly in shock, partly in pity. He echoed one more sentence out before bursting.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like this.”

He was no more now. Just a crumpled set of clothes with worms moving in and out. The only skin remaining is that face, now resembling a crude mask. Still smiling, still that wide gleaming smile.

Meditations on the Second Deck

Stephen O'Brien

"Tori, like Amos? That brings me back! I loved that one song about Cornflake Girls!"

I smile. It's something most millennials I've met bring up when they hear my name. Either Tori Amos or Spelling: the actress from *Beverly Hills 90210*, and someone I know for being the butt of a joke in *Scream*. That's my real namesake apparently; my mom was a big fan of 90210.

The psychiatrist Dr Foster, first-name Jodie (who, despite the resemblance, was not named after Jodie Foster—I asked), must be new, as I've never seen her before. Perhaps she's the psychiatrist they throw at teens they don't know what to do with. Seeing how they brought me here just to up my dosage of quetiapine and nothing else, I think that that's probably the case.

"So, Tori, your file says that you struggle with intrusive thoughts and emotional dysregulation. Has it been better or worse recently?"

"It's better," I lie. There's no point in speaking about my issues. Last time I did, I had to spend a month in St. Pat's. It was Mom's decision to have me locked up, it's always her decision on what I should

or shouldn't do, as if she's the one living in my head, going through this.

"That's good to hear. Your mother was in contact with me about you, and she was hoping..."

I block out whatever she's beginning to say; I nod and mumble a few 'uh-huhs,' but inside I've decided I don't like her. She's probably been influenced by my mom. She's such a *girl*, a 'Cornflake Girl,' if you will.

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"Well, Tori, I think we're finished here... Unless there's something else you wanted to say?"

I can't tell if this is a compulsory question, or if Dr Jodie Foster's *magical* intuition could tell that something is up with her 16-year-old mental patient sitting in front of her, fidgeting and trying to avoid her gaze.

"No, there's nothing, thanks Dr Foster."

"Ok, well, get home safe! Is your mom waiting for you?"

"Uhm, yeah. She's just parked outside."

### **Stop 145303, St Vincent's Hospital**

Getting the bus isn't my original plan, my mom dropped me off at St. Vincent's. It was the shouting match on the drive here that made her not bother to wait around. Whatever, I'd rather not have to drive home with her. She'd probably start crying, and I'd have to hug her and say I'm sorry for her making me angry. Or she'd finally tell me how she *really* feels, which I'm sure she had to hold herself back from saying aloud.

I'm getting angrier, not just from the fight; my shoes keep squeaking. I can't seem to figure out what's causing the squeaks. It's just a constant irritant, one that *she* told me to get, and not the Doc Martens I wanted...

I'm on the bus now. It's a sensory overload. There's a reek of weed from the girls at the back of the bus, who are shouting over the TikToks blaring from their phones, a cacophony of obnoxious popular songs on loop, and high-pitched screeching. There's an empty can of Orchard Thieves too, rattling from the vibrations of the bus, and every so often hitting my foot when the bus turns to the right. I can't stop wondering who has drunk from it, and if they were 13 or 30. I start scratching my arm, it's the only thing that quells the rattling in my head when I'm uncomfortable.

Honestly though, I'd rather be here, with the unknown stains and the rattling cans and the nauseating loudness, than in the car with Miss Control Freak. If my life was a movie, it would be *The Virgin Suicides*, and my mother Mrs Lisbon. She probably doesn't even know that movie. Or who Sofia Coppola is. Maybe Dad would. Actually, I don't know; we haven't had a conversation deeper than small talk in months. I think he regrets me. I'm a drain on the family, what with all these appointments and meetings and groups. I'd probably regret having me too.

### **Stop 145313, Longley Road**

I'm cramped and sweaty. I can't open the window next to me, and I'm trying to make myself as small as I possibly can, just so I don't brush up against the old man sitting next to me. He looks weird and smells of mildew, although I feel bad thinking that because what if he's the sweetest old man in the world?

Mildew Man is looking at me, I can see it from my periphery. I think he's staring at my thighs, and I feel his foot on my foot. This is Mom's fault, forcing me to take this stupid bus with predatory men like him. Time to give him a piece of my—He's blind; that's the ball of his cane on my foot, and he has cataracts.

I feel like such an ass. Why did she have to put me in this

position? I hate her, I really do hate her. I wish I didn't, I know it's wrong. But I do. She would never say it, but I know she hates me too. I see it in her eyes when she looks at me. I'm just a lesser version of her. It's her fault though. I didn't ask to be born; I didn't want to be *her* daughter. I told her that much before the appointment, that she would have been better off sterile. How that would have fixed both our problems.

She was playing her stupid CDs too. I felt embarrassed to be sitting in her shitty sedan while the Carpenters sang about 'Yesterday Once More.' I do like that song though. She used to play it all the time when I was younger, but she'd ruin it by singing half a second faster than Karen Carpenter. Eight-year-old me would complain incessantly, but she'd just laugh. She didn't even realize she was doing it. Sometimes, it was funny. Not nowadays though, nothing she does is funny. Just annoying.

### **Stop 145413, Belvedere Way**

Blind Mildew Man has gotten off, taking with him the cane and his mildew smell, though the weed stench from the back of the bus continues to be wafted around. The rattling is still there too, and the TikToks seem to have gotten louder—Or maybe I'm just going crazy. These bratty kids don't have any respect, don't even realize that we don't want to hear them. Do they not think about anybody else but themselves?

Ok, it was wrong of me to say what I said to my mom, I know, but what I said wasn't *wrong*. The truth hurts, but at least I was honest! Maybe I shouldn't have shouted, though. That was a bit overkill. And as much as I needed to say it, and as much as I hate her, it was painful to see her face. She froze and she seemed like she was struggling to speak. Then she just opened my door and told me to get out. I had barely slammed the door shut before she sped off down O'Rahilly Road. With the way she was driving, I wouldn't be surprised if she crashed. And

I'd feel horrible because I'd be to blame. She's the adult though. If she can't handle me, she shouldn't have had me, which was what I was trying to tell her...

She hasn't texted me. No notifications, just my background of *Carrie* covered in blood staring back at me. I feel like her, a bit. Overbearing mother? Check. Misunderstood and mocked? Check. Psychic abilities? The jury is still out on that. I think I should just listen to some Hole to distract me. I know Courtney Love is a bit of a horrible person, but I can't not listen to *Live Through This*! It's one of the best albums ever! Now I can't stop thinking about how the media tried to make it out that Kurt Cobain wrote the songs. Which I think was a load of misogynistic bull... Shit, I think that's my aunt at the bus stop. I hope to God she doesn't get on —

She's gotten on. I hope to God she doesn't come upstairs —

"Hi Tori! Fancy seeing you here! Where's your mother?"

I take out my earbuds. She's always this perky and obnoxious it seems, even on a Tuesday evening commute. "Hi Ellen. She's not here, it's just me."

"Oh! Whereabouts are you coming from? This bus route is a ways out from Grange, sure it is!"

Does she have to be a nosey old bag? Gotta create some excuse for her... "I was just visiting a friend. Gave her a CD to borrow."

"Aw that's sweet! Your mother always talks about your CDs, how your room is just a library of music. So 'retro' for your age!"

"Oh, she does?"

"Sure, she never stops, Tori! Every time I see her, she tells me about the newest musician you love, what's the newest one again? That band with your one! Kurt Cobain's wife!"

"Hole... yeah I like them."

"I remember your mam was not a fan of them back in the day."

Yeah, she's too preppy for them, Ellen.

"She was more into Oasis and the likes. You know who she loved though? Sinead O'Connor."

"I don't believe that at all, Aunt Ellen. Mom likes pop, the fluffy stuff."

"It's true! She loved all those singer-songwriter girls! She was a bit of an activist type. She wanted to go to this woman festival in the States, that one Fiona Apple was there—Tracy Chapman too."

"I never knew Mom liked that music."

"Tori, you barely know the half of your mother! The stories I wish I could tell you, but she'd kill me if I did! She always said that she wanted to name her daughter Tori, after that one Tori Amos—she loved her!"

"She told me she named me after Tori Spelling..."

"Wait, you're right... She did love 90210... But she definitely liked Tori Amos, I remember one of the Tori songs being your parent's first dance."

This is news to me, the idea of my mom being... cool? Not possible.

"She was only telling the girls how she brought you out to a record fair in Mallow a few months back, she seemed to have loved it."

God, I forgot about that day. I'd been so low for months, and after another appointment that did nothing to help, she surprised me by driving us out there. And she let me stay an hour to search the whole fair, it was kind of nice of her.

"I didn't know that..."

"Your mother thinks the world of you, Tori. We sometimes tell her to shut up because if she could have her way, she'd never stop talking about you!"

### **Stop 145473, Carthy Street**

Aunt Ellen has moved on from talking about Mom and is talking instead about traffic; how there "must be some situation going on" that's caused a diversion from O'Rahilly Road. She blames all the young, distracted drivers on their phones, all while scrolling through

Twitter, oblivious that her bag has fallen over. I can't stop thinking about how my mother once was—how she is nothing like that today. I can't help but bring the conversation about driving etiquette and car crashes back to Mom.

"Does Mom complain about me?"

"Tori, we all complain about our kids. Don't tell Michael, but the amount of times I've talked shite about his BO to your mam... it's like the boy doesn't know what a shower is!"

I laugh at that. Sometimes I forget that Aunt Ellen is a real person, and not just my aunt. I guess I do the same with Mom.

"But, Tori, she's told me that she's worried about you. She thinks that you hate her, or that she's not a good enough mother. I tell her that's not the case, all parents feel like that when their kids become teenagers, but she seems fixed in that mindset."

Hearing someone else say that—that I hate my mother—it's strange. Like, yeah, I hate my mother, but I don't *hate* her. 'Hate' is such a strong word, it feels almost violent.

"I don't hate her, she's my mom... I just think that..." I let myself trail off. I don't want to say out loud that I feel like my mom doesn't like me, no less to her sister. Anyway, even if I did, she'd just tell me how much my mom loves me. But I don't mean 'love', like family love. Mom just doesn't like me, and I feel it every day.

"Well, I think that you should probably let her know that, Tori."

### **Stop 145527, Rosebank**

"I'll be getting off now, Tori! Got to get ready for yoga! Tell your mam I said hi!"

"Will do, Auntie Ellen. See ya..."

She must have been trying to flatter me. I am her niece after all. My mom doesn't care the way that Aunt Ellen said she does, unless she's mixed me up with another niece named Tori who lives in Grange. But

that story about the record fair in Mallow, that did happen...

Mom must have been complaining. How she had to take her pathetic child to another of her expensive therapy sessions, and how she had to take me to that fair to keep me preoccupied, or buy my love, or give her an hour of rest away from me...

But she did spend the whole time standing with me, asking about the albums I picked up. Questions like why the girl on the CD I was holding was called St Vincent (and if was connected to the hospital or charity). Or if she knew any of the songs off *Disintegration* (she assured me she knew who The Cure was). She would beam with excitement when she'd see a Duran Duran CD and tell me about how she was their biggest fan when she was my age. She seemed happy to be with me, to be honest.

### **Stop 145623, Coppervalley View**

I can overhear some old women talking:

"I heard it was a pileup, out past St Vincent's."

"Oh bless them, I've never seen so many ambulances"

I can't stop thinking about Mom. I regret it, I feel awful. I'm such a brat, why can't I just be normal like her or Dad.

"...O'Rahilly Road is a disaster; they said someone was speeding."

What did she say? Mom was driving towards O'Rahilly Road, speeding too. Obviously not, I won't even try and think about it... but what if that was Mom? What if she caused it? I know she sped off— No, I won't allow myself to think like that. That wouldn't happen, it can't. I close my eyes and all I can see is her car driving fast, too fast for safety. Fast enough to be fatal if...

Our last conversation can't stop replaying in my head. What if the last thing I ever said to her was *that*. I know I said I hated her, and maybe I did feel that way, but I don't *hate* her. At all. I love her so much. What if

I caused her to crash? I'm sweating again. Everything is getting louder. Will those girls turn off those damn TikToks? I feel myself starting to—

“Oh dear, little girl, why are you crying?”

One of the old women has gotten up, and I'm looking at her through my wobbly, tear-stricken vision. She sits down next to me, hugging me and rubbing my back. It's all too maternal.

“I— My mom— I shouted at her— I think—” I stop to control my breathing, so I don't choke on my erratic breath. “I heard what you were saying about the crash on O'Rahilly Road. I'm scared it was my mom.”

“No, girly, don't think like that.”

“She drove off fast. What if she's dead?”

“Oh honey... I'm sure your mam is at home, worried sick about you too.”

### **Stop 145836, Grange Rd**

I'm off the bus, and I don't think I've ever walked this fast. It's a sprint now. I'm rushing down the road, squeaking with every step. With each squeak the crash flashes in my mind. Squeak: I see her hair messy on the steering wheel. Squeak: I see the sedan, crumbled into the side of a lorry. I have tears running down my face, and I don't care. I don't care about how sweaty I am, or how the girls with the weed at the back are probably laughing at me. All I care about is if I see her car in her spot, or if it's replaced by the police car coming to say that they're 'so sorry.' I'm almost there though, just need to turn the corner...

And her car isn't there...

She's dead. I knew it. It's my fault, I caused this. My knees are shaking and my eyes watering. I can't stop the outburst. I'm on the ground, crying. All I can think about is how much I messed up.

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A passing car rolls down its window, and I can distinctly hear ‘Corn-flake Girl’ playing from the radio.

“Tori?”

The voice startles me, like I’ve heard a ghost.

It’s my mother, in her shitty little sedan. I’ve never been so happy to see that heap of junk.

“Mom? I thought— I’m so sorry, I—”

“Oh, Tori, I’m sorry I drove off. I just was so upset— I was worried sick when you weren’t in the hospital carpark, I thought something awf—”

“I’m so horrible, you don’t deserve a mess like me. You deserve a daughter like you.”

“No, Tori, don’t say that. You’re my daughter, I love you more than you could imagine, and I wish I could be a bett—.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She’s taken aback by that, struggling to find a response. For the second time today, my mother is shocked by what I’ve said to her. This time though, she’s smiling.

hazy

Louis Egan McCutcheon

when the door opens, we hear a voice. we don't know yet who it belongs to. this is good; we are setting up tension and the promise of release. I read this dream like a story, where every word is a question and every object a symbol. I think about me and him. what are we after all this time together? where do I end and where does he begin?

I have loved one man forever.

I have been one man forever.

our story is a dream.

when he turns to me I look away. our eyes clash like mirrors, the brightest objects in the room. his gaze feels like being caught, or being held. there is a draft against our backs. sometimes the soft touch is the scariest. I think he might have said something so I suck in a sharp breath in agreement. we often communicate in this way. I wonder if he heard the voice too. we take a few soft steps forward.

he turns to me again, curved like a question. he narrows his eyes so they look empty. he says what and I say yeah. the voice speaks again

and I can't make out the words. he asks what language was that and I say how should I know. he says I would know these kinds of things. I say not all speech is language and not all language is spoken. as it happens the two of us do most of our speaking without words.

some nights he holds me for hours without a word, and I feel his eyes burrow into the back of me. that one round promontory bone that sticks out at the base of my neck. he wants to touch it but doesn't. i feel him scope me out, stroke me with his gaze. neither of us falls asleep and neither of us gets hard. he wraps his arms around me in the dark, awkwardly, comfortably, for what feels like forever. sometimes I get up for a glass of water without saying where I am going and he says get me one too. being with him is as uncanny and essential as being myself.

we are in a derelict hospital on the outskirts of bandon town, by the way. at least that's what it looks like in the hazy, in-between space where dreams happen. it's close to home but foreign; I've never been inside. some of my family members might have died there. the light is cold with history and implication.

the next time the voice speaks, it's less of a sound and more of a picture. it sounds like the japanese character for cut. I always liked that one because it feels so spatial and final. I whisper its sound, *setsu*, under my breath. is that what it said? he pries, desperate and accusatory. what does that mean, he says. I say I don't know.

I like to pretend I know nothing. denial is a good place to be when you don't want to be anywhere. but wherever you are is always second best. I am picturing all the characters that make the sound *setsu* and the words they create. *connection, bittersweet, season, joint, closeness, theory*. there is no relation between these words, only association. my language

is made up of synonyms that can never meet each other. this is where I exist, floating aimlessly among the fruitless and intangible things I know. I don't know who I'd be if I'd never met him.

I am walking behind him up the stairs. maybe five seconds have passed, but I don't know how time works in dreams. I don't question where we are going or whether he knows. our story is developing satisfyingly. the relationship between us, the protagonists, is intimate enough to allow for some playful suspicion. he is solid and upright and I surround him like water. I call his integrity into question. he is my rock, my object.

I have known him since we were boys, a lifetime ago, in a dream, in a story. we met on what was probably a spring day, maybe on the gaa pitch behind our primary school. I picture myself making a daisy chain. he comes up and talks to me as if we're already friends. we are kids and no one is a stranger. we have never made a decision for ourselves. he asks for one flower and eats it promptly, giggling. I like him. this is the meeting of two fated souls; the archetypal boy lovers, never apart, never together. the daisy chain was a nice touch of symbolism.

there is a day some years or weeks later when we go swimming in the river together. when we are both stripping, I dare to glance over at him. I don't know what I'm looking for but I see it. he notices, turns around, and for an eternal instant, we are face to face, naked, taking each other in. our narrative is illuminated. it all makes sense now. when he slides into the water, before he resurfaces seconds later, blinking rolling river droplets from his eyelashes, and drifting in the idle current—is he picturing me? I hear the river's chime on his tongue still today. he gives my being breath, my inspiration. he is a dream, a story.

at the top of the stairs he looks back at me. a door stands ajar. who

knows what will happen now. we sense the climax is fast approaching. I am about to say something. something definitive and meaningful. not just sounds, but language. not just speech, but an event. the turning of the final page in our story. something that summarises and defines all the things which I have said and not said in my feeble life devoted to this person. to speak is to be and I open my mouth and I am about to say it but there is nothing. a hollow sound hangs in mid-air. we continue down a corridor.

we enter the room, where a figure sits hunched over on a bed in a far corner. we now understand that this is where the voice was coming from. we feel uneasy at this development. the figure is making helpless and unintelligible wails, somehow more potent in their meaninglessness. we look at each other, lost but in fearful understanding. the voice and its owner are too fragile to be recognised as male or female. but it's him. as we approach I am sure of it. when I see his face it's like seeing my own death. he looks right through me as if I'm not there. it melts my core. I am no longer substance. he turns to him, the other him, the real one. mine, or rather his. their eyes connect and take root. their words spill over across their gaze.

in the morning, the coffee is ready just before I get up. he is wearing my dressing gown. he knew I wanted scrambled eggs, slightly underdone, with plenty of butter and black pepper. he knows everything there is to know about me. we stopped saying meaningful things years ago. we speak like rivers becoming the sea; aged, contemplative, barely there. he's reading the novel I gave him the other day. I'm reading the air. our narrative explodes, then collapses in on itself. I am part of him until I am not.

what do you like about me? I ask him. I don't know what I'm saying

but I go ahead anyway. this is why horses need blinkers. he turns to me, the two cups of coffee quivering in his hand. he does not look startled. I see his left testicle and tip of his penis between the folds of the black silk dressing gown and it does not shock me. he considers my question earnestly for a few seconds. his sincerity is charmingly loveable. you're kind and caring and loyal, he says. you're genuine and real. you're beautiful like in a classical sense. whatever it is that makes humans did a good job on you. I chuckle and roll my eyes, which he calmly ignores. he continues, not just beautiful outside but inside too. here we go again. he's never been afraid of cliché. his story had been written a million times while I'm still searching for the words to write mine.

my silence folds over into his. he hears my hesitation like electricity or a fly in the next room. I don't know what I want to say anymore but I need to get it out. if it doesn't leave my body now it will live there forever, in the microscopic ridges of my skin, an itch I can never scratch. the wave welling up inside me is too enormous to translate into tears. my eyes are as still as lakes at midnight. the poignant and aching conclusion is here. it leaves the reader with the saddest grain of salt on their tongue. they will puzzle over this feeling in its aftermath. I'll miss you, I say. I'll miss you too, he says back. I don't think he knows what I mean but I leave it that way.

we will always be together.

we will always be alone.

there is so much left unsaid.

The Butcher's Funeral

Catherine Madigan

A garish yellow church with a finish like curdled cream sat at the top of Shanid hill, scrutinising everything below. The village consisted of one sloping road occupied by terraced houses adorned with tumbling window boxes and smoky chimneys. The O'Briens ran the poky corner shop at the top of Main Street. Otherwise, all the enterprises on the road, including an austere funeral home, a lively butcher's selling local meat, and a two-chair salon, were run and owned by the Molloyes.

In Shanid, the old men in the parish had encyclopaedic knowledge of who belonged to whom, and who had land and what they'd done with it. The older ladies kept track of who gained a few pounds or only went to mass at Christmas. Tom Molloy, the eldest brother, ran the butcher's shop and was also the principal funeral director on account of his tact and superior literacy. His wife, Mary, attended to long-standing clients at the salon and also regularly coiffed and powdered the remains of parishioners for burial. She was kept abreast of local news at the salon and would often give her husband tips on who to pay a special visit to at the nursing home that week. It was a symbiotic pairing.

Gerard Molloy usually helped out at the butcher's shop before school. His older brothers used to be around a lot, but they were all in college or Canada by now. That morning, he woke to a sharp rap on the door and gave a grunt to show he was up. A square of buttery light shone through his window and cattle bawled out the back to be milked. He gathered a crumpled pile of school uniform and hurried to the bathroom to splash water on his face.

He'd been run off his feet the previous evening escorting old ladies into the funeral parlour and hadn't finished his homework yet. He gave his jumper a sniff to check how spicy the lingering incense was. The usual smell and crackling sound of frying sausages wafted out of the kitchen as he threw his schoolbag together. His Mam gave him three sausages and two slices of brown toast, and he slapped together a breakfast sandwich.

'I've a few appointments in the salon this morning, Ger,' his Mam said. 'So you'd better not miss the bus.'

'I've loads of time, Mam. Stop fussing.'

'I won't be bringing you. And your father is up the walls.'

'I know.'

'I know you know, but don't forget. Milk?'

Gerard gave his Mam a swift peck on the cheek and left for the butcher's shop next door.

Moist, cling-wrapped mince and steaks were piled in the shop window, and Gerard wiped sweaty condensation from the glass with a greying tea towel. He bagged up dozens of chicken breasts and left yellow post-its on the plastic for the usual customers. On Wednesdays, there was a standing order of odd bits of offal for the Rottweilers at the bottom of the road. Gerard would make up a special bag with whatever livers, kidneys, or tongues were freshest. The Molloy's didn't charge for the offcuts, as the woman of the house was often in the butcher and kept a standing appointment in his Mam's hairdressers. Gerard hunted

all over the back of the shop for the off cuts, but there was nothing in the fridges, or the prep area or the freezers.

Where's the fecking bag? Dad will be so pissed if I don't have the order ready. Mam will throttle me if I don't make the bus.

He whipped off his apron and headed out the back door of the butcher's, through the side gate and into the back of the house. Just as he kicked off his wellies to collect his school bag, he noticed a big, clear bucket bursting with sandwich bags on the back step. He peeled back the lid and weighed up the neat bags in his hands. The insides felt cool and dense when he squished them and they moved like lava in a lamp under the plastic. There were some shiny kidneys, a heart and a mass of liver.

Thank Jesus.

He grabbed his bag, dumped the cuts at the butcher's with a note for the lady with the dogs, and made it to the bus with two-and-a-half minutes to spare.

Mary Molloy had completed three perms and a blow dry by 11 o'clock, and her arms were aching. She had barely stepped a foot back in the house when her husband called down to her.

'Mary?' he shouted. 'Have you seen my black tie?'

He saves every ounce of his composure for those masses. Otherwise, he flaps about, perpetually late and disorganised, expecting me to pick up the slack.

'There's a pile of them under your socks in the drawer,' she called back.

She could understand why he was stressed on this particular occasion. John 'The Stick' Daly had been a tough man to get along with in life, and he wasn't proving to be much better in death. At his wake, Nell Daly had complained that the incense was too strong, the coffin lining wasn't glossy enough, and The Stick's hair had looked flat. Mary took umbrage at this, but reminded herself that Nell complained

about her blunt blonde bob every time she went into the salon. But she never ventured elsewhere. Anyway, it wasn't as if Nell and John Daly had been close. He openly declared, to anyone in the pub that would listen, that she didn't bring 'any land at all' into the marriage. Nell was a much-maligned daughter-in-law. And she behaved in a manner that was frugal and miserable, attempting to show the family that she wasn't a frivolous woman.

On top of the family drama, Father Donie had developed a touch of dementia and he'd forgotten the name of the departed at the wake. *I must remind Tom to meet the Father before the mass. I still can't believe he called The Stick a 'man of good faith'. He must be further along than we thought.*

'Mary?' Tom shouted. 'Did you take that container from the yard? I can't find it.'

'What container?' she asked. 'I've been at the salon all morning. I haven't touched a thing.'

'I left a plastic bucket out the back this morning. If you see it, call me,' Tom said as he blundered back out of the kitchen. Even in his agitated state, his black tie was knotted impeccably, and his polished shoes reflected light. 'Have to run. G'luck.'

Nell Daly had spent the morning slaving away, scrubbing the house and baking scones for whoever might drop by after the funeral mass. She wasn't going to cry for her bastard father-in-law, but she felt she should at least keep busy and offer that busyness up as grief. Her husband and sons had been up late drinking pints of black stout, reminiscing about what a shrewd man their father and granddad had been. She couldn't bear to listen to them and had gone to bed early with a migraine. They were in a disgraceful state this morning, and she knew they'd need something substantial to sober them up before mass. Nell never claimed to be a saint, but even so she often wondered

how she had raised such ungrateful, bratty young men. They sat and watched as she laboured around the house and chopped vegetables for their stew. They shoved the dogs off the couch and she saw Jimmy kick at one of the Rottweilers. They bickered about who would get land in the will.

‘I’ll sell it to the first man who comes asking,’ Jack said. ‘No way I’m going farming.’

‘Feck getting up at the crack of dawn to milk cows,’ replied Johnny.

‘I’ll get into property development.’ Jimmy stuck a hand down his shorts to scratch himself. ‘Buying and selling is easy money.’

‘I’ll never work again,’ said Johnny. ‘Why would I? I’ll be a house-husband and lie around all day watching telly and spending other people’s money. Isn’t that right, Mam?’

Nell fumed as the three boys laughed. ‘Go up and get changed. Iron your shirts, and don’t make a show of us.’

Nell stewed some beef in a battered pot. She unwrapped the kidneys she’d gotten for the dogs and added them too. The boys ate her out of house and home, so occasionally she bulked up their dinners with offal and they never even noticed. *It’s extra iron and anyway, they’ll devour it without so much as a thank you. At least the dogs would be grateful!* Her resentment bubbled with the stew and threatened to boil over. She threw the pot and a mound of boiled potatoes on the table for the boys and went upstairs to get changed for the funeral.

Later, once The Stick was in the ground, Nell conceded that the spray of white lilies Mary had arranged was tasteful, and the turnout was good. She thought the singing at the mass was awfully nasal however, and the priest clearly didn’t know who he was talking about. He had praised the deceased again for his ‘patient manner.’ Still, her boys made it through their prayers with just one untucked shirt between them. *It’s a nicer send off than the man deserved.*

Other than the mix up that morning, Tom Molloy thought the mass and burial went smoothly. Father Donie said the correct name after some coaching, and even offered a sweet eulogy. It had been a struggle to shoulder the overly ornate, solid oak casket, but they had managed. It had rained overnight, so the ground at the graveyard was soft, and he noticed a few ladies' stilettos sinking into the soil. So, he offered a discreet elbow where he could.

Tom listened when Gerard eagerly recounted the points he'd scored in his football match when he arrived home, mucky after training, and excused him from the tidy up to go do his homework. Tom wiped the table and made small talk with his wife about the slurred speeches after the funeral. Eventually, he broached the topic.

'They wanted Daly autopsied, Mary,' he said.

'Right.'

'And there was no room in the fridge above.'

Mary ignored him and leaned out the kitchen window to light another cigarette.

'So, after the postmortem, I left a few bits at the house overnight.'

Mary held up a hand like a stern guard. 'Tom, don't tell me.'

'I'd them packed up all ready to go first thing this morning.' He hadn't seen her smoke like this since she thought she'd blinded Gerard's teacher in a dye job gone wrong.

'Holy Mother of God. You didn't leave remains in the fridge again, Tom. How many times have I told you to get a bigger fridge at the parlour?'

'Not the remains, Mary. Just a few organs. That's why I was looking for that bucket this morning.'

She paused. 'And did you find it?'

'No.'

'I feel sick, Tom. Are that man's insides missing?'

‘Don’t fret, we’ll find them,’ Tom said quietly. ‘They were just sitting on the back step.’

Mary anxiously flicked the ash build up from the bottom of her third cigarette. ‘We should tell the family, Tom. What if bits of him were stolen by a fox and are rotting, half chewed in a bush somewhere?’

‘We can’t tell them.’

‘What will we do if they’ve already packed the grave by the time we’ve found them?’

Tom heard a creak at the top of the stairs.

Gerard peered out between the bannisters and listened to his parents’ muted argument. *I know that plastic bucket.* He could smell bitter smoke rising with the heat in his face, and he broke out into a cold sweat. *Why are they talking about a grave?*

Horried, he considered going straight to bed. *What did I do?*

His hand slid wetly across the banister and he descended the stairs.

The Last Catch

Ava Palmer

The trees are ghostly in the dark, branches laden down with snow like winter's fruit. The cold air is sharp, but the hunger in my stomach cuts me like thorns. Catching prey is a skill to master and comes with many fails. But despite how hopeless it gets, I never come back empty-handed. My paws do not feel the cold, but my nose does. My stomach is empty, as are three little ones. We will survive to see another winter, I promised. I always do, and so will they.

The woods are so very dark and deep, but they grow smaller with each passing year. For they take it all away, the humans do, the edges of the woods curling in like burning parchment. There is no night where they live. It is as if they have made the stars fall from the sky, and now they live amongst them! It is not ideal for hunting. I dread the thought of what the world will be like for my children, and my children's children.

The blackbird no longer sings the way he used to. The rabbits are growing thin, so much so that I am eating mere skin and bones. Too many I have caught that have a horrid disease in their eyes! It is as if they cannot move, and are already dead by the time I catch them. The moon is my only constant in this changing world. Maybe that is what

the world will look like, in a few summers' time? A grey land, devoid of life. Where weeds sprout through the cracks in concrete, and the only birdsong is the crows' ugly caw.

I pause. My breathing goes shallow, and my heartbeat quickens. I hear something. A rustle in the undergrowth. My nose smells prey, perhaps a rat. Yes, definitely a rat, with a stench akin to bird droppings and urine. Not my favourite thing to eat, I admit. Rats are nasty things. But I am hungry, and it is better than nothing.

Now, watch me closely, take some notes. Catching prey is no laughing matter. It's all a game, and I am the best player. I hide in the direction that the wind flows towards, so my scent is concealed as much as possible. It may be useful to be covered in muck and grass, too. However, the most important thing is silence. That is your key to secrecy. My feet are light, and I walk without a sound. I hear some more rustling, and though I cannot not yet see him, I can pin exactly where he is. My instincts urge me to pounce, but I am still a distance away, and if I lose him, my chances of catching him are slim.

The silence stretches. It is deafening. The night is dark but alive.

I am very much alive.

My muscles tense up, my ears and eyes are sharp. And there I see him, so close, and blissfully unaware of me.

Perfect.

The ground begins to vibrate, and a deep, rumbling sound disturbs the silence. My attention slips, and the rat jumps into a bush. I run to catch it, but come up empty. Damn it. The car drives down the nearby country road, the driver oblivious to the fact that my night is now ruined and that was the only source of food that I had seen all evening.

Humans on their own are such measly, pitiful things. They run on two legs, with no fur, no claws, no speed, no teeth worth talking about.

And yet, they have these tools that make them the most dangerous animals alive. Too many of my family have been shot. There's no

escaping it, just hiding and hoping for the best.

And so, I plod on. My cubs are at home, safe and sound. I won't come back with nothing, I told them. I always come back with something. The hunger is beginning to take its toll on me, but I do find some berries. They are not as good as rabbit, but they will do to keep me going. The ditches are full of burrows of all kinds, so there I go. There is a path that threads through the ditch. It is older than me. I am not sure

when it began, but it is convenient for me now. I pass by a badger burrow. They are larger than any belonging to a fox. Badgers are so different from us though, so don't loop us all in together just because we are both predators. Foxes do not associate themselves with badgers.

Strange animals, they are. Though I must admit, I do admire their homes. Some even have underground tunnel systems.

A pair of green eyes stare out at me through the darkness. A cat, its tail curled around a branch. It hisses at me, as I walk past. I ignore him. I have no time for house pets. Or any cats, really. Foxes are solitary creatures, I'll have you know. I am not being antisocial for the sake of it.

After some time, I come across a house. I have seen it before. An old couple live there. It is a quaint little bungalow, with a well-kept garden. Rabbits are drawn to their vegetables, and I have nicked a hen from their house once or twice. They used to keep chickens, but only eat the eggs. Very clever, I must admit. When I took a hen, they would just get another one. It was good while it lasted, until they never brought another chicken home again.

This night, however, I notice something new. A timber shed at the corner of the garden, painted copper. I creep closer, noticing signs of bird droppings on the grass.

Then, I sense them. The humans had brought chickens again, but this time they have a new shed, with a door that is locked and a window that is sealed. Hunger claws at my stomach. I circle the shed, looking for crevices. There are none, save a small hole close to the ground,

scarcely big enough for a mouse. There is no hope there. I try to look underneath the shed. There is just enough room for my nose. I crouch lower and squeeze my way in under the shed. I can barely move, but the wood is damp above my head. I draw myself back out again. I can dig. And so I do, as quietly as I can. For if they wake, they will alert the humans of my presence with their shrill cries and stupid clucks.

The burrow itself took little time, but now I begin scratching at the wood. There is no way of getting around the noise now. It is tiresome work. I use my teeth to tear away at the damp wood. It is painful work: I can feel my claws wearing down, and the harsh timber brushing off my skin. With bleeding mouth and claws, I finally make an opening, and I am in.

I will leave out the details of what happened next, but a fox in a hen-house is like a buzzard flying over a field of rabbits.

I make my way back out, a hen in my stomach and another between my jaws. I leave the rest of them alive; I'll save them for later.

The path back home is longer than I would have liked. I cannot run fast enough, my paws are bleeding and my jaw is sore. I am sure I leave a trail of bloody footprints in the snow, black in the dark like ink stains on a white page. The road should be quiet in the night.

With ginger steps, I head back along the road, as it is easier. The snow is getting heavier now, and the hen is already growing cold. Through the snow, I can make out a small, dark shape up ahead. I approach with caution. If it is a cat, I can deal with them, a badger too, but I still don't want to cause any trouble. It is probably dead.

My stomach lurches. A small, limp form is sprawled on its side. I would know it anywhere. The unmistakable scent. His fur the colour of autumn leaves. I would know him blind. For he is my child. Cold, alone, and dead.

At some point the hen must have fallen out of my mouth, for I let out a cry that shakes me to my bones. It is a raw, animal cry. I can hardly

process the reality of it, the lifeless body at my feet. The tire tracks are fresh on the road. It could not have been too long ago. My child must have been out looking for me. And that car must have been the only car to pass this road all night. I have had it with humans, and their infernal machines. Death follows wherever they go. They never give back to the land, only ever take. And he was just collateral damage, caught in the cogs.

He looks like he is sleeping, but he is flatter than he should be. His eyes are open, but unseeing. My beautiful boy is gone, and never coming back.

I cry until my throat runs dry. I remind myself that I still have two more kids, who need me. They are depending on me staying alive. I take the hen in my mouth once again, and head back home with a heavy heart. It pains me to leave him there. I placed his body in the ditch, away from the road, before I said my last goodbye.

At long last, I reach the burrow.

It is empty.

Bloodsport

Brian O’Kane

Dust floats beneath my feet, filthy and alive. It too waits for the show. It pulses up in bursts; the thumping music makes a puppet of even atoms.

My opponent is a shadow on the wall. He sits waiting, puffing his chest; a throne of straw piled like corpses. He is well versed in bloodsport. His last bout lasted 20 seconds, that neck he split open, his bloodshot, manic eyes—Can he smell the adrenaline in my throat? Or must he taste it?

I lean my trembling face against the bars and gaze up at the spectacle above the arena. With greasy fingers, they tear into meat—drumsticks, wings, fillets: ground up and scraped over crackers—waiting for the savages below to begin.

Men in multicoloured fabrics clutch paper money with white knuckles. Some wear dark glasses obscuring their faces; others let their hair droop like velvet curtains, concealing all but their peering eyes.

Those with black garb and uncovered faces bow their heads. Their keen eyes trained on the floor, soft and nimble, fluttering between tables—filling glasses, clearing trays. When the songs are raucous, they perch idle. In the quiet, they emerge, swooping to the floor to scrub

spilled drinks, then vanish again. When the blood's spilled and the crowd thins, they will pluck through the remains for shiny things, coins left over—the second stage of evolution, from chicken to crow to human.

The bamboo shakes before me, snapping me out of my reverie. I flutter my wings, feathers steeling for the duel, practicing my war cry:

Bu Bu Bukaw!

The crowd swells. Most have selected a champion—I expect almost all have chosen my foe. The bars lift swiftly and I stumble forward, eyes a blur. The pit is jagged and oblong, wooden planks for walls, haphazardly pressed into place. They loom overhead, splintered and menacing. Built by men who would never see it from below.

He emerges leisurely, inhaling the cheers of the crowd. Fully upright, I see him for the behemoth he is—towering inches above me. He preens, gloating before victory. His wings are bigger than mine by half. He stalks forward, circling—a hawk with hunger in his eyes. My legs are spaghetti, wobbling back. Blood pulses in my eyeballs; mouth bone-dry. I turn to face him, always, he circles faster than I turn. Dizzied by his steadfast, hungry approach. He nips at the air—a cat playing with its mouse.

He pounces with bloodthirst. I flail back, my skull knocks against hardwood. I see stars—and his deranged eyes. His beak is upon me, raining daggers from above, tearing my cheek, flesh from bone. Slicing, nipping, pecking—a vulture to a cadaver, the thousand jagged teeth of a beak on my brow. I press my feet against his torso, feeling for any weakness, any give.

His jaws close, squeezing my left eye, squashing the fleshy ball between them. I scream—hellfire flashing before me, legs writhing against the monster. With a squelching pop, an inferno unleashes in

my head.

My voice finds war songs, joining the chorus of roars. My legs are sledgehammers, drumsticks on a recoiling chest. My talons carve into his cheek—his neck is pastry before my beak—flesh peeling, confetti on my wings. His trachea, straw beneath my jaw, torn in euphoric ribbons. The rhythm of his heart pulses into my mouth—slowing, slowing.

He slumps, lifeless, to the floor. The crowd rises in ecstasy. I inhale the sweet electricity, reanimating my half-dead body to glory. My eye hangs out of my skull, a battered, skinless grape loose on a stringy pink tendril. It swings as I roar in triumph. The crowd and I scream in unison—the arena has become my own. I plant myself on his head and greet the world from my podium. Crushing his skull beneath my foot: I become human.

Murder or Bust

Evan Keohane

For as long as Doug could remember, he had been killing things. It started small, as most things do. With his father in a near-catatonic state after his time in Okinawa during the Second World War, it was Doug's job to keep pests out of his family home in rural Idaho. He began by catching and picking apart flies and small insects. Then he moved up to cockroaches, before advancing to rats, raccoons and eventually possums. His mother was overjoyed by her son's ability to keep the house free of vermin, but the task itself was reward enough for Doug. Over time, however, the task became more and more mundane. Doug's victims entered of their own free will, and there were only so many places to hide inside the small house. He had become so adept at killing things that when he finally did catch his prey, there was hardly a struggle.

As a teenager, Doug took up hunting. He would spend hours in the nearby forests and attempted to kill anything that moved. This was much better. Animals were harder to find, and had more places to hide in or escape to as well. Things were far more interesting than back at Doug's home. He went after rabbits, hares, foxes, birds and even the odd wild boar. Occasionally he would see wolves or even

bears, and while he wasn't dumb enough to try to hunt them, he did consider it. Over time, however, hunting defenseless animals became more and more mundane. Wild animals were predictable creatures, always relying on their instincts. They would usually just try to run away, rarely fighting back, never making interesting blunders like begging for mercy. Once Doug did catch his prey, they usually weren't that hard to kill either.

Things changed when Doug was sixteen and he discovered an older man in the woods. The man, like Doug, was on his own, and they decided to keep each other company while they hunted. Doug came to a realisation when a large bear wandered dangerously close to the old man. He watched the old man shrink down, slow his breathing and try to remain as quiet as possible while Doug thought to himself:

Is a man not just a very smart animal?

And so, when the bear had moved far enough away, Doug took his shotgun, aimed it at the old man, and fired. The old man screamed, not dead yet, and began to crawl away. The man pleaded with Doug not to kill him. He told Doug about the family waiting for him; a foolish attempt to appeal to Doug's conscience. When that didn't work, the old man tried to appeal to Doug's greed instead, and promised him all the money in his wallet if Doug let him live. Animals did not do this. It was fascinating to behold. Doug cracked open his shotgun and the empty shell flew out. Doug loaded a fresh one, feeling an excitement he had not felt in a very long time; not since he killed his first raccoon using nothing but a Swiss Army Knife. A loud crack rang out through the forest, and the deed was done. Doug realised that hunting animals wouldn't cut it anymore. He had moved on to something greater.

Years later, Doug found himself waiting at the side of a major road in Washington. Fortunately for the local community, he hadn't had much luck murdering people throughout his college years. He had hoped that college would be full of silly, drunk, vulnerable people.

And while it definitely was, they were *always* together in large, noisy crowds. Staying close together for security was something even the dumbest animals did. Doug wanted to hunt real, thinking humans; not animals with degrees. What hadn't helped was a string of high-profile serial killers throughout the decade. The Mansons, Ted Bundy and the Zodiac Killer had left people on edge. It had become harder to convince people to come with you on a nice walk down a dark alleyway, or into the forest late at night. However, despite the seventies being somewhat infamous for grizzly murders, hitchhiking was more popular than ever. People had never been more eager to get into a stranger's car while they were on their own and far from civilization. In the last few years, Doug had managed to get a few high-profile killings under his belt by posing as a hitchhiker. Yet as the decade was drawing to a close, and the Bundys and Gacys of the world were brought to justice, people became less and less welcoming of strange men getting into their cars. Fortunately, right as Doug was considering leaving, an old car pulled up.

The car was an old red sedan. Doug liked red. He thought it was a bit cliché, but it reminded him of blood. Doug particularly liked this shade of red. It was a deep crimson that was not unlike the deoxygenated blood that spilled out from people's veins. He felt as if he could impale the car's occupants on its gaudy, spiked hood ornament and the average passer-by wouldn't be able to tell where blood ended and paint began. He then began to lose himself in thought, coming up with a myriad of imaginative ways to kill his next victim. Should he break off the hood ornament and use it like a dagger? Maybe it would be better to try and run his victim over. Would they get dragged under and crushed by the wheels, or go over the bonnet? Maybe if he did it just right, he could skewer them on the hood ornament as he ran them over. There was also the snub-nosed revolver hidden in his trousers; that was always a good option. Reliable too. Most people didn't survive

getting shot in the head; and the ones who did rarely survived for long. Right as Doug was compiling his top ten favourite ways to kill someone using only a fork, the car's driver rolled down the window and called out to him.

'Where ya goin', son?' said the man, who appeared to be at least five years older than Doug. He didn't sound like he was from around here, or the West Coast in general, but he was the first person in a few hours who had been willing to let a complete stranger into their car, and that was fine with Doug.

'Just down to Portland,' replied Doug, 'meeting family.'

'I'm headed to Eugene myself; hop on in.'

Doug threw his suitcase into the boot of the car. It was empty, but it added to the illusion that he was actually a hitchhiker. Then, he sat in the seat behind the driver. Doug had found his victim. The hard part was over.

That's what Doug thought anyway. Doug and his newfound driver, Sam, had more in common than either of them realised. While their lives differed hugely, they shared one incredibly niche hobby. They were, in fact, *both* serial killers.

Sam was born about half a decade before Doug, in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Great Depression had hit hard and his life was difficult, but he had found a reprieve in superhero comics. The city was scary, and it only seemed to get worse and worse as time went on. And so, the idea that one person could dress up like a bat and single-handedly clean the place up appealed to him. As he grew older, however, he started to notice issues with the comics he adored. None of his favourite heroes dealt with their enemies permanently. They would always hand them over to the police or the asylum, only for them to come back a week later to terrorise innocent people all over again. These people

were supposed to be heroes—*super* heroes—and yet they gave these dangerous individuals seemingly infinite second chances. If someone would just kill these people, no one would have to deal with them ever again. Sam believed it was just a part of the formula. If Batman finally just killed the Joker, or if Superman killed Lex Luthor, there wouldn't be anything to write about for the next issue. The writers could come up with any excuse they wanted, but Sam knew that was the real reason. It was just the way things were. A real superhero would understand that the safety of the many outweighed the lives of a few, and that the best way to get rid of pests was to kill them. Unfortunately, superheroes weren't real.

Things changed when Sam grew up and went out into the world. He didn't go to college, and finding a job proved difficult. But eventually he found work driving taxicabs in the city. Work showed Sam a world that he thought existed only in his comics. The night shift suited him best, and as time went on, he noticed all the unsavoury characters who would come out at night to prey on those who couldn't help themselves. Drug dealers took advantage of people's addictions for profit. Pimps sold women like property to anyone willing to buy. Some men weren't decent enough to even pay for their thrills, and would just grab women off the street. A few people tried to use him as a getaway driver, and typically got angry when he declined. Perfectly decent folks who happened to be extremely drunk were also capable of violence from time to time. After an unhappy customer had landed Sam in the emergency room, he began to keep a small handgun in his glove box for his own safety. One night, though, he had to use it for someone else's. Sam was on his usual route when he had to stop outside a bar. A married couple, who looked to be in their late twenties, were looking for a ride back to their apartment in the city. The man looked as though he had been dragged through a hedge, and it appeared to only partially be the alcohol's fault. His shirt was quite

dirty, with bits of God knows what strewn across the garment's surface; but Sam's attention was drawn to a large stain that trailed down the front, which was presumably vomit. His skin was red and covered in sweat, too. Sam was worried the man might drop dead in his car on the way. His companion didn't seem much healthier. But it didn't look like excess was killing her; it looked like worry. She seemed on edge from the moment she entered the car, entirely due to her husband.

The journey felt like an eternity, although in reality they were only going to the edge of the city. The man, in his inebriated stupor, refused to stop talking. He spoke about all manner of things, none of which were interesting. He felt the need to express his opinions on the names of passing shops, how ugly the people outside were, how ugly their dogs were, how ugly their children were, how, in his opinion, all babies were ugly when you really got down to it; then he took a few potshots at his wife and how ugly she was. His wife, in contrast, only spoke when absolutely necessary and was quick to quieten down again. Her husband still thought she spoke too much despite this, and made this clear to everyone in the car.

Eventually Sam had had enough. He knew the world was host to some nasty people, but he did not think someone could be so utterly repugnant in every regard. His passenger was fat and ugly, yet shallow and superficial. Sam imagined that the man's house must have no mirrors, because if he ever saw his own reflection he would almost certainly critique it until he starved to death; although his rotundity would have drawn out that process quite significantly. While Sam may have personally disliked the man, he did not seem particularly dangerous, and once Sam dumped his passengers at their destination, he could go home and enjoy something more intellectually stimulating, like navel-gazing or watching paint dry. Unfortunately for Sam, the man began to paw at his wife, and became aggressive when she fought back. The man then began to hurl insults at his wife, but it wasn't

long before he pulled his arm back and planted a fist in her eye. Sam thought back to the superhero comics of his youth. By now, someone like Batman would have shown up to save the day. But Sam remembered the one flaw of all those old comics. No matter which hero showed up, they would only offer a temporary fix. The culprit would always be back again next week to terrorise more innocents. It was then that Sam realised he had the opportunity to do something not even Superman could. He reached into his glove box, and in one smooth motion whipped his arm around and shot the man in the head. There was a flash of light, then a loud bang, a spurt of blood and then silence. Sam took a moment to consider what he had done, but before he could form a coherent thought, the woman started screaming. So he shot her as well. She should have been more grateful. Sam soon realised that he couldn't bring his taxi back to the depot covered in blood and missing its passengers. So he drove it to the river, and pushed the car in from behind.

Officially, a taxi driver went mad and committed suicide, taking his passengers along with him. In reality, a taxi driver had seen the truth, and had gone on a crusade against evil. And so, he moved from town to town, culling society as he saw fit. His car, a second-hand sedan he had acquired for free thanks to a bet, became his home. He made a few modifications along the way that made his job easier; made it less likely that he would have to dump this car in the river. His magnum opus, in Sam's opinion, was the paint choice; blood would always blend right in.

Despite there being two murderers sitting in the car, the ride was mostly uneventful. Doug sat in the back, mostly silent, waiting for his moment to strike. Sam sat in the front, also mostly silent, also waiting for his moment to strike. His views had changed somewhat since he began his crusade. Sam could tell, just by looking at Doug, that he was some

loathsome hippie, or perhaps even a communist. Sam had honed in on hitchhikers in the last ten years. Any proud American worth his salt owned one of Detroit's finest automobiles, and it was his duty as a red-blooded American to keep his great country free from devious bad-actors. That's what Captain America had taught him, anyway. Normal people would find the tension unbearable, but Doug and Sam thought the exact opposite. Both had been forced to put on friendly faces for their whole lives, and now, for once, they were both acting 'normally.' They both knew something was up, but they couldn't tell what. Usually Doug's drivers would have tried to strike up a conversation with him by now. Similarly, Sam thought it was weird that Doug hadn't begun lecturing him about the evils of napalm or some other communist gobbledygook by now. The tension was starting to get to Sam. Murder wasn't fun unless he had a moral reason to do so. And so, he lowered his window for some fresh air. This didn't help as much as he wanted, however, so he asked Doug to do the same. The hand crank was old and the window was somewhat difficult to open, but the window, once open, was surprisingly large and allowed a nice, refreshing breeze into the car. Doug was beginning to feel the pressure too. There were no other cars on the road, so he decided to do something a bit risky. He took the revolver from his trousers and pressed it up against the back of Sam's headrest. This was probably a bad idea, but Doug thought something was definitely up with his driver. Right when he was about to pull the trigger, however, the car swerved violently. Doug's arm flew out the window, there was a loud bang, and the pistol jumped out of his hand.

'Woah, Jesus!' exclaimed Sam. 'You okay? I think I blew a gasket or something. We should pull over. There's a clearing in the forest over there.'

Doug didn't quite know what was going on. Had his victim seen through him? Or was his car genuinely breaking down? It was certainly

old, but the ride was smooth. Why did he swerve? Did blowing a head gasket do that? For as much time as Doug had spent in cars, he didn't understand them very well and he couldn't know for sure. Either way, he couldn't lose the initiative.

'Yeah, you're probably right,' replied Doug.

Excellent. That forest is a perfect place to get rid of him, both of them thought simultaneously.

Sam drove the car into a clearing in the forest. He could have stopped right at the side of the road, but he didn't. He kept going further and further into the forest until Doug couldn't see the road beyond the trees anymore. He couldn't even hear the cars passing by. Sam wondered why his victim was allowing him to drive so far away from the road when he could have stopped anywhere. Doug wondered why his victim was taking the car so far out of sight for a bit of simple maintenance. They both considered that this would make killing their respective victims a lot easier, however, and so they carried on.

Finally, Sam stopped the car, popped open the bonnet, and went to look inside, with Doug coming along to help. Doug noticed that the engine, as far as he could tell, looked fine. It was well maintained, and there were no noticeable signs of damage. Sam, however, was giving the car a good look over, seemingly oblivious to his own well-maintained engine. *Surely it was all an act,* Doug thought. There was definitely something wrong with the Good Samaritan who had offered him a ride. How could he not have noticed the gun going off inches from his head? Why did he swerve precisely at that moment? Doug decided to act decisively. He pointed out a funny-looking part of the engine and encouraged Sam to take a look. When Sam's head was fully inside the car, Doug slammed the bonnet down with all his weight. Sam, partially concussed and surprisingly still alive, decided to act decisively as well. In one swift motion he snatched the pointy ornament from his bonnet, and embedded it into Doug's liver.

Doug collapsed from the pain, and would slowly bleed out on the forest floor. Sam, heavily concussed and currently stuck inside a car's engine, would die soon after. No one ever figured out why hitchhikers stopped going missing in the Pacific Northwest, and Doug and Sam's deaths were ruled as a bizarre car accident.

Marmalade Through a Concrete Wall—The Story of Nick Evans

Cormac McCarthy

Nick Evans couldn't sink. Plain and simple.

It was a peculiar trait to have. It was first discovered when, after accidentally burning herself with the kettle, his notoriously short-fused mother took her anger out on her poor son by throwing him into the local river. To her surprise, he didn't drown as she had hoped but floated as a well-made canoe would be wont to do. She quickly fetched him from the river and brought him home. Curiosity running through her for a shortcut, she drew a deep bath and tried with great strength to shove him underneath, but it was impossible. She excitedly rang her husband who rushed home from work. He tried and tried to shove him down underneath the surface of the water but he wouldn't budge. He would later recall in a retrospective interview with a well-renowned newspaper that it was like trying to shove a jar of marmalade through a concrete wall. This quote became Nick's legacy.

His parents were both excited by the discovery and rang the local paper. A reporter and a photographer arrived and were invited to try and drown the child themselves. Without hesitation, they gleefully rushed to the bath and stood on the child who just lay there floating in all man-

ner of confusion. The reporter was in awe.

The story made the cover of the local newspaper and almost overnight, the barely-a-year-old Nick was turned into a national celebrity. He was on the cover of every magazine and was dubbed the “unsinkable child” by one journalist. Far and wide, people were invited and, in exchange for a small fee, were allowed an attempt to drown the poor child. Alas, none even came close.

It wasn't long before large network television production companies approached the family with a concept for a reality show. Nick's mother and father, who had fallen on hard times ever since the local typewriter factory had shut down, were eager to exploit their child's newfound celebrity. And so, *TitaNick – The Unsinkable Boy* was first televised at 8:00 pm on Monday the 13th of September, 1994 on Channel One. The reality show, the first of its kind, followed the family as they attempted, through various means, to try and drown their child. The first episode focused on the family tying their child to the bottom of an Olympic swimming pool using steel chain and slowly filling the water up. It received twenty million viewers.

To everyone's amazement, the water just wouldn't fill up past the length of the chain when extended fully. The fire engines arrived with gallons of water in an attempt to force the water up but they were left dumbstruck. It was said that all of the firemen were left so shocked by this news that they were unable to perform for their respective partners for the next six months. Such was the shame. Not even going down the pole could excite their poles.

He was an overnight sensation. Everyone was talking about Baby Nick, and those who didn't talk about him were considered outcasts. These people were so chastised by their family members and colleagues that television sales went up by 349%. They had to see what would happen next. The second episode was even more daring than the last. Here, the child was strapped to the side of a decommissioned cruise

liner as it was slowly rotated onto its side. However, the effort was all for nought as the ship simply could not be shifted. The episode brought in fifty-two million viewers and a further ten million viewers on its Thursday night repeats.

The following week's episode brought in twice the previous viewership, a whopping one hundred million people worldwide. A popular comedian joked that it was ironic that this unsinkable child was the only thing keeping the television station afloat. Some people laughed, however it was widely agreed that this joke was so unfunny that he subsequently lost all of his fanbase and never worked in comedy again. He showed up on an episode of *Celebrities That You'd Be Surprised To Learn Are Still Alive*, fifteen years later. Unfortunately, by that time, he actually was dead.

In the third episode, it was theorised that if the child was brought to the bottom of the ocean in a submersible of some kind and then released through a hatch, the time that it would take for the infant to reach the surface would surely drain his body of enough oxygen that he would finally drown. Naturally, there were some critics of this plan but they were quickly silenced by the overwhelmingly enthusiastic scientific community who were eager to see if the child would drown. The plan seemed fool-proof.

The television station no longer cared about the rising budget as advertisers were paying millions for just a thirty second timeslot in the ad-breaks. Baby Nick was now the face of Microsoft computers. Happy Meals from McDonald's now came with a toy of a dead child with the words, "Drowned" written on its forehead.

And so, the child was taken in a boat to just above the Mariana trench, the deepest part of the ocean. He was then placed in a submersible and was lowered over the side of the boat. The submersible was initially intended to be piloted remotely by television personality Jeremy Clarkson, who hoped to accomplish a lifelong dream of drown-

ing a child. However, the insurance companies would not allow this, as the producers declared that the submersible was a rather expensive vehicle and would require a professional. Clarkson subsequently broke one of the producers' sternums in a fit of anger.

The submersible seemed to go down a few feet at first. The crew cheered as they believed their efforts would pay off and they would finally witness the child drown. However, as the submersible reached a depth of just three metres, the engines of the once-thought-indestructible submersible shattered and the vessel shot back up to the surface.

The production team was dismayed but the audience at home lapped it up. Fanclubs were started. College societies were formed. People began to wear t-shirts with the slogan "Will Nick Sink?" Bookmakers were receiving bets worth millions on whether or not the child would drown. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. Other production companies were attempting to create their own copycat shows but were unable to find anything else that had such an aversion to sinking. The closest they came was finding a Puerto Rican child that had similar traits. However, it was revealed the child was concealing a safety buoy in his left eardrum.

The fourth episode was watched live by an estimated 300 million worldwide. It was said that some districts quite literally shut down for the hour that the program was on. Such was the anticipation to finally see the child drown. This episode was its most ambitious yet. The production crew had hired out an orca from a local whale leasing firm. Orcas are known for both the great depth of their dives and their sheer strength. The plan was to attach young Nick to the side of the whale and film it as it dove underwater.

The parents of the young Nick Evans watched on with pride as their boy was strapped to the side of the killer whale and released into the Arctic Ocean. There was some concern that, while the boy was special, he was still not impervious to the freezing arctic waters. However, a

local paediatrician, who was an expert in such matters, highlighted that children under the age of two can't die due to hypothermia as they have not developed the ability to feel heat. This doctor was later found to be a complete fraud.

It all seemed to be going well. The live footage showed the child placidly strapped to the back of the whale. Disaster struck after twenty minutes when it was observed that the orca's blowhole was obscured by some of the ropes that were holding Nick secure. If the whale were to go for a deep dive, it would surely not survive when it breached the surface for air.

Panic ensued in the production team and they attempted to cancel the footage but it was too late. The orca attempted to breach the surface but could not remove excess water and subsequently died. This would have not have been so controversial if it had not been for the release of the film, *Free Willy*, the year prior. The public's adoration of orcas was quite potent and they simply could not bear seeing such a beloved whale drown. A child was one thing but an orca was a step too far.

The show was immediately cancelled and the public's intense interest in seeing young Nick Evans drown was quenched. Instead of the family being associated with the drowning of a child, they became associated with the murder of an orca. The media, those loathsome crones, twisted the story and framed Nick Evans as intentionally murdering a beloved whale. The public lapped it up like an Alsatian finding a puddle on a hot day. His parents chose to distance themselves from their child in an attempt to curry favour with the public.

And so, Nick lived the rest of his life surrounded by this intense hatred from which he never recovered. An attempt to change his name in 2012 only attracted further odium.

Hooligan of Cork City

Daniel Gavilovski

This is a true story of a young man I knew when I was living in Cork. Here I'll call him Adrian. We had become friends during the time when you didn't need any common interests to become lifelong friends, just proximity and pressure. But still, it happened that we bonded over our shared distrust of authority. I saw less of him during secondary school, and even less after the Junior Cert when he dropped out because of issues with an alcoholic father and chronically unemployable mother. Soon I'd finished my Leaving and it was around the time I started going to CIT, now MTU, that I was so bored I began distilling and bottling high quality poitín in my student accommodation. Often I'd traverse Washington Street on Thursday nights, when crowds of drunk students fermented at bus stops and the pissed girls in leather skirts dined on silver squared bin tops, and I would go by myself right into the middle a little drunk myself and declare my wares like a ringmaster, and a few were always guaranteed to buy something and they'd let you keep the change. I went on like this for weeks, getting sadder and drunker each time, when finally I was surprised to see that I'd just sold a bottle to Adrian. I had bumped into him and not realised who he was until he handed me the money.

He was still his same old self, a razor straight fringe and fade and a wispy moustache on his lip. He wore Adidas hand-me-downs with a fancy pair of Calvin Kleins and as we went to share the warm vodka I noticed how opulent they looked compared to the rest of him. He told me how he'd gotten them and how he'd been getting a lot of things since I'd last seen him. His Northside friends would often goad him into petty thefts like stealing e-scooters or pick pocketing but he was ambitious and he said to them if you're gonna rob then at least do it well.

On one occasion in a back alley on Washington Street, he had gathered a group of friends and watched from the shadows the entrance to a student accommodation apartment complex.

"I know you've done well with the student gaffs before, but do you have to pick the busiest street in the city?" said a member of his gang.

"And on the busiest night of the week?" someone else chimed in.

Adrian told them, "If you prefer stealing nothing but tins of beans then by all means stick to the outskirts."

"At least blind man Cormack in Blackpool doesn't have a security lock on his door like outta a James Bourne film. We break open that yoke there and the Siochana will be here like piss on a snowman."

And then instead of Adrian rebutting, an odd thing happened. Though he hadn't had a drink all day, on command became drunker than drunk, acting as hammered as someone with twelve pints in their belly. To the apartment's entrance had come a pair of young men wearing their best pub jeans. They were idling by the door arguing about something that happened in class when Adrian stumbled up to them, said "excuse me," and squeezed between them right to the entrance. There was a silver keypad by the door and as the two men continued debating, he started pressing random numbers into it. After every five digits a loud beep would sound. Still, even though he didn't know the code to the door he continued inputting random numbers,

and the obnoxious beeps blared again and again. The two men felt uneasy and their debates dwindled until finally they turned to the drunken young man trying to get into their accommodation (clearly a student since he was wearing GAA shorts and a backpack) and said "Having trouble there?"

"No not at all," slurred back Adrian and fixated right back on the keypad, frantically pressing digit after digit as if the next combination was sure to work.

So they looked on at the poor drunkard trying to get in and urged multiple times to let them help, and only after denying them multiple times did Adrian finally capitulate and let the relieved pair put the code in. "Nine, and then five. I was putting in five first!"

"No worries, man."

Adrian held the door for them drunkenly as they passed and he kept holding the door until he was sure they had disappeared into their apartment when he stood up straight, gained his composure, became cold sober once again and motioned for the rest of the gang to run inside. "Ladies first."

I guess it was a stroke of genius for Adrian to figure out that the best loot was the easiest loot. And the easiest loot was in the student accommodation apartments, where the kids were gullible and the prices were higher than Adrian's gang could comprehend. Because of success after success, everyone soon saw the merit in the operations, where they'd never know what the next haul would bring. Soon, in some manner, Adrian had swindled every student accommodation complex in and around the city.

In response to a slew of burglaries, a complex just off Grand Parade introduced unbreachable security measures. CCTV cameras observed every corner. Instead of locks or codes, each room was accessible only with a plastic keycard given to students and checked by a security guard who was stationed at the reception 24/7. Despite his friends

urging him to move to something simpler, Adrian persisted and took their warnings as a personal challenge. Through the school's website he found the names and Instagrams of the residents and narrowed them down to the wealthiest suspects. One of them consistently posted himself playing his guitar (poorly) on his story. Anyone who has time to play guitar poorly must be wealthy, Adrian told me. The keycard pass was a plastic card attached to a bright yellow ribbon, so he acquired an old yellow vest from his friend who cleaned a warehouse, and diligently cut it into a neat strip about an inch wide. On a quiet night he went to the complex with his friend (residents were allowed to bring one guest), and Adrian made sure the guard could see the ribbon hanging out of his pocket.

Usually, students never bother locking their doors because they put their faith in entrance security, and they haven't encountered enough real poverty or theft to be afraid of it. But here, each door they passed could only be unlocked with the keycard the two men didn't have. Adrian, seeing a flock of American students passing, put on his best general Irish accent.

"Excuse me," he said to the girls, "I don't suppose that ye know your way round this place?"

The girls looked at one and one of them said "She does!" and Adrian said:

"That's a lovely accent ye have. Are ye from Donegal?"

The girls giggled and told him "No, we're from the US."

"What a coincidence" said Adrian, "I have a great-great-grandson living in the US!"

The US girls must've found him fairly funny because when he showed them an Instagram picture of the guitarist and asked them in what room he would find his fellow bandmate they obliged without hesitating. And once they were on the street and gossiping about something or other, they thought nothing of the fire alarm that flared

up from the building they had just been in.

The two men scoured everything, from the kitchen cupboards to the bedroom dressers. They stripped the place bare. An electric guitar and amplifier, sherpa jackets, Canada Goose jackets, jewelry, a PS5, a goat horn, whiskey, runners, sound systems, fancy looking soap. Someone was keeping those good Fox's cookies in the cupboards and they took those as well. What the boys couldn't fit into their backpacks they threw out the window to an accomplice who was on the street beneath the window. The only thing Adrian didn't bother with was textbooks, although he told me he had once grabbed a Jane Austen novel. And so, with the alarm still blaring, they waltzed back out onto the street without a single eye on them, schoolbags filled to burst.

Eventually, Adrian and I said our goodbyes. I didn't know what I thought of his escapades, but I knew I was glad I commuted. In any case, I'm glad I didn't say anything, because I could see that he was a restless person, unsatisfied, always clambering farther and higher than his peers, repulsed by the sight of them stagnating. And in that sense he was more innovative than anyone I knew. In another life I'm sure he would've done very well for himself but as it was he had to do the best with what he had. And he did it very well. Occasionally an article will drift into my feed about some student rooms that got swindled, and the first thing I do is always rush down to the bottom to see if there's a report of arrest, and there never has been and anyway, I'm sure they'd put it in the title.

Mary and I

Aoife Imray

The Virgin Mary looks at her, and she looks back at The Virgin—capital V. She wonders if Mary knows that this girl is going to hell.

It's that simple; she is going to Hell. One-way street, no return flight. Hell—capital H. Who knew it was so easy to fall from grace, such a simple thing. The series of missteps were so easy they felt like a dance.

She'd never been religious before, bar the morning of her communion. That morning, God had visited her. Granted, it was in a dream. He was there to tell her how pretty she looked, warn her that she would be inundated with presents. She remembers the whole day well, 18 hours of being let into Heaven. At the altar, her mother had let go of her shoulder and cupped her own hands gently for the communion wafer, light and white and pretty in her worn palms. The priest sounded bored, reading out the old psalms. And she had stood still and obedient, quiet as a lamb.

That was a different day, before it Happened—capital H. Today, she is going to Hell, and she is not happy about it.

When she was younger, after her encounter with the divine, she had looked for God in everything. Sitting at the table and eating her Coco-Pops, she looked for God in every dried, crackling grain. She was

certain the face of God would appear any moment. Walking to school, she knew that the Messiah would spawn in to take her away. God was somewhere, hiding, just waiting to be found. In the beetle she saw scuttle under the rock, shining her own face back at her—gap-toothed and shiny, grotesque in his bulbous back. In the rat she saw in the kitchen near the washing machine before her mother chucked a shoe at God’s twitching, hungry body.

But after a month without God—an eternity when you’re eight—she decided she could come back to her quest later. God was there at the creation of Heaven and Earth; He could certainly wait another few years.

However, now that she was going to Hell, her meeting with God had been permanently postponed. Had it been a better reason, it wouldn’t sting so badly when she thinks about it. If it was blasphemy, or eating meat on Sundays, or reading Harry Potter, she could have survived it.

This is not one of those things. This Thing is a boring one, an oversight. To her, nothing seems a more boring, run-of-the-mill reason to burn forever than the tiny abortion pill the chemist had handed over the counter. There is something rotting inside her. There is something rotting its way out. And because of this, she is now doomed to rotting herself.

She was young for her year in school, always the late bloomer. She was last in the foot races, the shortest on the chart, the meekest in the classroom. A plain girl. But she knew she had love in her. That was how the entire mistake had begun after all. Too much loving. She was young, and always had been one of the youngest for her year, a perpetual youth. But Mary was too. In the Bible, Mary was only 13. She had read that on Twitter. When she was 13, she had been learning how to do eyeliner and searching for the perfect dress for the disco, hitting the exact middle point between slut and prude, wishing for a third option. Yet somehow, she felt that Mary knew much more than

her. When Mary looked at the beetle, it shone back a Halo. When Mary saw the rat, it curled up in her lap. And when Mary looks at her, she looks right back, entranced. She understands suddenly how the Children of Lourdes felt, staring up at The Virgin, except they were fast tracked to Heaven.

The Boy had been a nice Boy, but he'd never get it. He said it was her choice all along. Which it was but that didn't make it fair. He wasn't going to be the one condemned to Hell, she'd be there burning all on her own. She'd be looking up at him, again. On her knees, again. Waiting for it to end, again.

When she smokes weed with him, her throat always hurts. The hurt travels down to her chest, slimy and prickling with each step of new ground it conquers. She loves him like a cough. It tickles the back of her throat, fighting its way out of her chest. No cough can be hidden, or stifled. She tries to stifle the coughs under a blanket, she tries to stifle the love under the same. Both keep on bursting out—unexpected and embarrassing. When she coughs it's contagious, mass hysteria confined to two. It's as if their lungs, both pairs, have realised they aren't controlled by the mind but by the brain. A rebellion in breathing. And it feels like they are a real pair—like they have a lung each. Like she is made of him, Eve comes from the Rib and she comes from the Smoke-Filled-Rattling-Lung.

But when the coughing is done and they are both sober again, he asks her to leave. And every time she does, embarrassed to want more. Her need is humiliating. Her wants betray her.

She looks at Mary. Mary never needed. Mary gave it all up, lived immaculate, never even touched.

The longer she finds herself looking at Mary, the angrier she gets. While she burns in Hell, Mary will be by the side of the Almighty, All-Knowing, King. But at the end of the day, they did the same thing: got pregnant. Mary was touched by Him, while she was touched by the

Boy. Why did He get a capital and the Boy didn't? The Boy at least lets her see him, when it's late and he is lonely. That's more than He ever did.

But when She feels lonely, a girlish need, all that is waiting is the quiet staring statue and the cold, creaking church.

Éile and the Ghost

Aoife Imray

It was only once she was down on her hands and knees with a bucket of bleach that Éile realised the hard truth so many middle-aged women before her had conquered: divorce is never an easy thing. But she was sure it would've been much easier had she been the one to bring it up.

It was bad luck really, at the core of the matter, because she truly had been thinking about it. Of course, to say that now would be entirely useless. Everyone says that once the *proceedings* are *underway*, as Pat had put it. But, it was true. She really had been thinking about it. It may have been a foggy pipedream but daydream or not, the thought had been there.

Now, instead of telling the girls from the walking club that she had finally done it, she was sat at home alone—glass of wine in hand like a sword being wielded—while Pat was down at the pub, gallivanting, probably raking in the congratulations from the lads. He had always been a bit of a peacock. In the beginning, his showboating had been one of the things she loved about him. She wished that things could've stayed as they were in the beginning.

At the start, it had all been light. The way she remembers it, it was a perfect romance. The kind where they used to dance around in

the kitchen together, Pat always landing on her toes, the way people did in the old movies when they were really in love. And over time, things cooled down. She had never thought it was such a tragedy. Everyone's marriages stagnate eventually. They weren't the type to be having notions about romance, like in those films—silly really. Éile had no expectations of being chased through any airports. And they weren't teenagers anymore. Éile's face was pulled down by wrinkles. Her back ailed her. Makeup seeped into the folds around her eyes. She knew that her youth was long gone.

It didn't affect Pat the way it affected her, the aging business. He didn't feel the same red-hot shame. She had always quietly expected to be a graceful ager, a glamorous old woman, like the ladies in Paris. Instead, she was met with pity when she walked into the make-up sections. She was certain the younger workers had laughed when she bought her red lipstick. She had planned to wear it for her wedding anniversary. Instead, it was sitting in the drawer, next to her unused lacy red bra, just collecting dust. Not such a tragedy really, she thought, as there was no need to think about it now.

And yet, think about it she did. It was this realisation, the slow rotting of the venerable, hard-won lipstick, that prompted her cleaning spree. It was as if by cleaning the home, quickly becoming a mere house, she could manage to rid herself of the hold the walls had on her. She scrubbed the place raw. Once the inside was sparkling, she moved on to the unruly garden. Pat never did get around to cutting the grass. She didn't know what she'd do in the summer without him, once it started to get out of control. Once she had heaved herself through the impossible bush and weeded every godforsaken corner, she decided it was time to move on to the most daunting area of them all: the loft, or the ghost's room as she thought of it.

A tiny space, the attic was full of nothing. There were boxes upon boxes, housing boxes of their own like little families. Éile almost envied

the warmth, the care of the mother box holding its baby inside. The thoughts further confirmed what Pat had told her a hundred times, she was away with the fairies. Not that it mattered what he said now. An ex-husband's opinion doesn't have the same stature. With this in mind, she heaved herself up the wobbling ladder and into the asbestos-filled chamber of antiques and decay. "God forbid the ghost is in a bad mood," she thought to herself as she climbed. At least if today was the day she left God's green earth, at least she would be doing it as herself—not an accessory to a man who pitied her.

The attic was as frightening as she remembered it, even more so with no one downstairs to protect her. Although, towards the end, it may have been more likely that Pat would've fed her to the monsters as a means of escape. She could never understand what it was about her that irked him so. She didn't mean to be a bother, or annoy him at all. The worst of it was the haunting. When she woke him up in the middle of the night to warn him of the keening she was certain she could hear, she could see the disgust on his face. She was too ashamed to admit just how convinced she was. There was something up there in the shadows. She didn't want to be the one to say the word "ghost," but the thumps and creaks in the night got into her head. She tried to suggest the idea to Pat, but it only made him angry. Why couldn't *she* deal with the ghosts this time, why was it always up to Pat to solve every one of her problems? The more she aged, the more like a toddler she became, hiding behind him, relying on him for everything. She didn't want to be the kind of person to drink alone and attempt a conjuring in her attic.

In her youth, her glorious early twenties, she was a different woman. When she and Pat had first met, she was full of fire. She had been bursting at the seams with sugar and honey, after hearing men's sweet words for years. But as time passed, the sugar eroded her. She felt sticky inside. It was a shameful thing, the decay. And there was no one there to talk about it with. Her family were hours away, her son was long

gone on a one-way flight. The worst of it was the pace of the world. It seemed to spin on its axis so much faster now. People were planning their moves to Mars while she was still trying to master the technology of the noughties. Sometimes, it seemed to her that the world was much too big to live in. She was constantly scrambling, trying to find her place inside the molten rocks, always searching for that little bit of warmth.

Inside one of the loving, mother cardboard boxes, she found a photo album, weathered and cracked, the pages seemed to snap as she turned them. Inside, it was full of photos of Éile. No wonder it was collecting dust. As she opened it, she was certain there was a watcher there with her. Although it was unideal for it to be a ghost, company is company.

She cracked the crusty book open wider, as wide as she could, and showed it one by one to the four corners of the room, moving slowly between them. By God, she needed someone to see who she used to be. It was unbearable to let that self live only in her own memory and a discarded, uncared for album buried deep in an attic alone. Someone needed to bear witness, even if it was a possibly imagined, proof-she-was-crazy fucking Ghost. It was hard to recognise the young woman in the photos. She wished she could've reached inside it, pulled herself out, and shaken her until she confessed something. Quite what the confession would contain she wasn't yet certain, but anything would've been appreciated.

Maybe she would say the confidence she was so sure she had possessed had simply been wishful thinking. Maybe it was all faked. She had always been this way, odd and difficult and pitiful. She didn't know if that would be a damnation or an absolution.

She wanted to reach through time and grab her youngest self, at six or seven when she was just learning how to be a person. This was the little girl she wanted to hug and kiss, and submerge in amber. She wanted to keep her most miniature self there for a hundred years, unmoving and unchanged, a permanent snapshot of all of her

potential. She could have been something maybe, if it hadn't been for the nuns, or her ever-insensitive mother, or the other girls in school who never let her into their circles. Or maybe if she had never met that goddamn Pat, the dimmer of her sparkle. The reaper of her passions. He had blinded her to the beauties of the world. Every morning the sun woke up and put on a lights show, just for Éile. And every morning she missed it. And why? Too busy making the lunches for school and work, or washing the uniforms, or cleaning the kitchen? She must've loaded and unloaded that cursed dishwasher a thousand times. It was more times than she had been held, or kissed, or loved with an open heart. Was it such a crime? To want to be loved so fully, so kindly, to have someone who would always answer her call. She wanted a constant.

Sometimes, Éile just wanted to hoard her time, spend none of it. As she aged, she felt herself turning into a scared dragon, sitting on its gorgeous hoard of hours, minutes and seconds. Maybe if she stays still enough, the hunter won't see her. Maybe she'll be able to save it. To turn back the clock and be the sole objector in the church on the wedding day.

Before she could be swept up in the injustice of it all, she snapped back to herself. The ghost was likely gaining on her, she could feel him leering over her shoulder, probably seeing the photo of her in her youth and wondering what went wrong.

But Éile didn't close the book. She didn't hide the poor, naive girl. She didn't hide the poor naive woman staring at the photos. If a ghost was going to devour her, in her own lonely attic, then so be it. At least there would be someone there to see how she had shone. Let it happen. She could only make herself so small, cower in her own home for so long.

She had every right to be there, sitting with her ghost in the dust and feeling something in her chest. It was something long and tough, unspooling like a roll of film. Something simple; something endless. She could almost see it gathering before her, the long list of everything

she could've done. She could've been anything. And what had she to show for it? A son over in Oz. A husband on the lash in the town, probably making a show of her by now. A lonely house with only a half-arsed ghost to keep her company. Not even paranormal enough to send her a stronger sign than a shiver up the spine and an uneasy feeling...

It made her mad, filled her up with the fighting kind of anger. That girl in the photos had been smart, and funny, headstrong even—she had to have been. And Éile had no idea where she went. The injustice of it all struck her hard and left her breathless. She still couldn't put her finger on when love had turned to tolerance.

Before she let herself get too carried away, she was moving again. Rising up, she decided that was enough of that. Pat always said she was one for self-pity, and now he wasn't here for her to finally tell him where he could go. If she could go back and meet Pat again, she wasn't quite sure what she'd do differently. Maybe she would try to make him love her again, the way he used to. The fumbling hands, the stomach-turning nerves. She would try to capture it like lightning in a bottle and keep it in one of those boxes in the attic. Or maybe not. Maybe navigating life on her own wouldn't have been any worse than this. Although she was alone, at least she was herself. If that self happened to be the kind of woman to get wine drunk and perform a makeshift seance in the attic, then so be it.

She would leave the attic soon, fall asleep on the couch. The memories of the ghost's breath on her neck would be gone by the morning. But Éile would be changed. Pat had no hold on her now. She was no longer the cowering fool behind his legs. Although she might not be sure what she'd do without him there, she would know she could be there without him—her own person as she had been at the start of it all. And she would keep whatever company she so desired, ghosts included.

51.86370° N, 8.33256° W

Mark Kelleher

The first week of that summer, I boarded up the house with all three of us inside.

The strain of the hammering brought bruises to my arms and made my brain feel stretched beyond the limits of my skull. My fingers blistered. The pounding sounded louder than it should have. Afterwards, I passed out on the floor and had a dream that replicated what I had just been doing.

When I awoke, I found my parents where they had been all along, sitting bolt upright next to one another on the couch, oblivious to what was happening around them.

My mother's face was concealed by a Soviet-era gas mask she had outbid a stranger for on the Internet. She bought it because it seemed to her to be the kind of thing you needed to keep around the house. It stayed in its box until she appeared wearing it at the top of the stairs one morning. She hadn't taken it off since. The fit was two sizes too small and hugged her face so tightly it gave the impression that her head had shrunk to the size of a child's. On the rare occasions when she spoke, her voice sounded like a cartoon character. I couldn't make out any of her words. She didn't seem to notice this.

The hose from the mask wasn't connected to anything. She kept the loose end in the pocket of her cardigan. She kept a small, laminated picture of Padre Pio and a stone from the garden in the other.

My father, meanwhile, was slowly rewinding into the past. All his wrinkles flattened out. There was a new shine to his eyes. His expressions were boyishly unpredictable. Even his hair appeared to be returning to its original black. Looking at him felt like coming across a slightly altered version of myself in a dream.

In between little whispered prayers he kept asking where his own father was, as if he had gone out earlier in the day and was now late. He had never known him. He had fallen off an oil rig and drowned when my father was three weeks old. They only found his shoes. I reminded my father of this just once before understanding that he didn't recognise me anymore. Even when I explained that I was his son, it was clear I was a stranger to him.

I imagined he thought I was insane.

We only interacted through touch now. He let me hold him as he cried, which was often. In those moments, he would take my hand, place it over his heart and ask me to confirm that it was still beating. I sometimes fantasised about placing my hand so firmly on his chest that it would pass through it and exit out his back. Most of the time I couldn't feel a thing. That didn't stop me from cherishing what passed between us. It felt wrong to admit it, but I preferred this reduced version of him. He wept beautifully, silent and slow. I removed his tears with my sleeves and told him he was a good man. It didn't matter that it didn't register with him. I was saying it for myself.

My sister, Mia, had been gone for about a year at this point. Her disappearance wasn't without forewarning. She was a student of conceptual art whose end of first year project was a repurposing of missing persons narratives, to be presented at an exhibition at the local community college at the end of the semester. On opening night, there

was no sign of it or her. The whole thing was a stunt. She let me in on the secret the day before. She would go missing for a week and then return. Her own vanishing would be the real project. She was more than happy to risk pissing people off. People needed that, she figured. To be shocked and angered into an awareness of the world's greater pain. I was the only one she told.

I don't know where she is. Nobody was surprised when she didn't show up. It was true to form for her. Three days went by before my mother finally contacted the police. They looked in all the usual places. They dragged the canal. They searched every disused building in town. They examined flight and hospital records. They questioned her friends. None of it ever came to anything.

Sometimes the phone would ring late at night. It was always an older woman saying the same thing every time: "I'll be right back." There were traces of Mia in the voice and now and then I considered the idea that she was somehow calling us from the distant future.

The calls ended after the media stopped reporting on the story. Soon after that, my parents and I gave up talking about her, too. I think the three of us silently agreed that the only way we would ever get through this was to convince ourselves that it had never happened in the first place.

I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't been going through a series of separate crises of my own at the time. I was adrift in a cosmic sadness too mystifying to put into words. There were no great dramas at play in my life right then. No deep love interest to set off the inward spiral, no health concerns I could trick myself into thinking were terminal, no unlocked ambitions to usher in rupture and ruin. I just felt deeply and inexplicably off-kilter, as if some internal wheel inside me had ground to a sudden halt.

Most days it felt like my entire skeletal system was hollowed out. My ability to verbalise even the most basic of sentences became

compromised. I went days without speaking. It wasn't that I didn't know what words to use or how to use them. Language simply didn't work for me anymore. I dragged the husk of myself from bed to work and back to bed again. It was only in the total darkness of my room that I felt anything close to being alive.

My parents were still functional at this point. They didn't need to say it, but it was implied that the psychological hole I had fallen into was a direct consequence of Mia's disappearance. I let them believe that it was. You have to be kind to the people who are pained spectators to your suffering. Even the very worst answer is better than none.

In truth, Mia's absence was an extension of some deeper void at play around me. I could pin my pain on her, but she wasn't its root cause. At first, I felt the only way to resolve my issues was to take an existential leap out of who I was. I spent days reimagining the reality of my material self and what else I could be. Surreal new ways of being flashed before me with little effort on my part. I don't know why this was. Something deep in me craved total transformation. A sort of suicide of the fundamental self. It all felt euphoric and unreal.

I saw myself as a decommissioned water tower just visible off a highway in an Eastern European city in winter. I saw myself as a fading political slogan spraypainted on a suspension bridge. I saw myself as a wire through which untraceable communications were firing in impenetrable code. I saw myself as Bruce Conner's *BOMBHEAD*. I saw myself as volatile weather events. I saw myself as a bird in its first and final flight. I saw myself as a pool of sunlight rapturously alive on the ceiling above me. I saw myself as trade winds and white heat. I saw myself as pink smoke. I saw myself as 1,159.9 miles of road and sea.

Seeing myself through the distant lenses of all these images worked briefly until they no longer did. No sooner had a fresh image stirred me than it dissolved into a grainy nothingness again. I kept coming back to the who and what of myself. My imagination and my options burnt

through, I finally did what I had been avoiding all along: I accepted who I was and attempted to properly fix myself the way other people did.

I engaged in a strict jogging regimen. I dug into the depths of myself with a Bulgarian psychoanalyst who had trouble understanding the complex theories I had already built up around myself. I took Melatonex, I took Citalopram, I took Zoloft. I touched my pulse and reflected on the wonder of it. I read six books that championed the virtues of Taoism. I wrote my thoughts down in rushed bursts every day for three months. I resuscitated my inner child. I contorted my body to the point of breaking. I sent anonymous letters of praise to strangers. I gave up coffee. I gave up alcohol. I gave up screens. I gave up my ego. I observed the fire inside me from a safe distance. I practised kindness. I lit incense sticks. I attempted to appreciate nature. I viewed everything through the lens of an impossible beauty. I removed the thought of romance from the idea of suicide. I chanted “I love you unconditionally” to myself when I knew no one was around. I ran even faster and harder and further still.

None of it worked. My blood continued to scream “NO.”

I don’t know what would have happened if things had continued the way they were. It was only when I resigned myself to the fact that nothing would change that everything started going weird.

The serendipity of it all still astonishes me.

It started with a week of solid daylight. Soon after came the shortage in the water supply. The electricity grid started experiencing problems a week later. The power kept coming and going. We were told to stay close to home and go about our normal lives in any limited way we could. People didn’t panic until they were advised to stay calm by the President in a televised address. His speech was stilted and contained no poetry. The grainy footage provoked speculation about the true nature of what was really unfolding. The consensus was that he was

already dead.

It was the arrival of the drones in their thousands that drove people to permanently stay inside. The collective sound they made was nearly as intolerable as the sight of them filling up the sky. It felt like living on a film set.

It wasn't possible to theorise. Our imaginations were blunted into disbelief. We stumbled mid-thought when trying to formulate ideas about what this meant for the future. We weren't scared. It wasn't real enough to be terrifying. People forgot what day it was. Time was stripped of its old texture. The past seemed more distant than it had ever been. Everything slipped into confusion.

It wasn't until my father started regularly crying that I decided it was time to lock ourselves away. He appeared at the foot of my bed one morning, smiling with tears coming down his face. They moved at a speed I had never seen before.

In the raw moment I thought he was about to announce Mia's return and the world with her. Instead, he lightly touched my foot and in a low voice told me that one day all of this would make sense. I loved him more then than at any other time in my life.

If the world wasn't going to return to us, I was going to make us a new one. No one would ever get in. I was convinced of that. We would figure it out. I had the capacity for hope then.

I asked him where the hammer was. He seemed to understand.

Even with all natural light extinguished, the outside found its way in. The overhead buzz of the drones crept through day and night. It wasn't unusual to hear gunfire. At times, all that could be heard was a low insistent hum, as if some benign force was trying to make itself known.

To drown it all out, I spoke relentlessly and loudly for hours on end—to my parents and, when they didn't seem to be listening, to myself. I frequently sang to them. I lost my voice every day. When my mother reached for the radio, I grabbed it and turned it off. Nothing good

was going to come from it now. She shouted through the mask when I did this. My father would do nothing but laugh and look at us like we were two wild animals playing behind a pane of glass. His response always saddened me. I wanted to get into his mind and witness the scene as it played out inside him.

Even now I don't know if that desire was driven by a want to be closer to him or to simply free myself from my own experience of what my life had become.

They both vanished on the same morning.

Even before I passed through the rooms looking for them, I knew they were gone and would never be back. Their absence was communicated by the house itself. A home is a living thing with its own way of speaking. The atmosphere of each empty room held an unspecifiable poignancy. The air was heavy with it. I couldn't stop running my fingers along the walls. I had seen them only a few hours before, but now I couldn't even begin to visualise their presence there anymore. Beyond their few possessions, all of which they had left behind, the only trace of them was the imprints their bodies had made in their bed and on the couch.

I didn't even need to check the windows and doors. I knew they would still be boarded up.

I am still here. I sit. I try to work my memory. I stopped thinking ahead. I spend no time second guessing. I pace the floors for exercise. I ran out of food and water months ago. I look at old photographs and then I burn them in the kitchen sink. I never hear voices from outside. I sleep dreamlessly. I am trying very hard to unlearn certain words. I disassemble anything that can be taken apart and then I put it back together again. I no longer reimagine myself as anything else. I do not expect to hear a knock on the door. I have destroyed everything that can reflect an image back to me. I am not waiting. I still sing the same songs I sang to them.

POETRY

Keep driving
(for Sola)
Rob Worrall

Inside this room – housing the bible
carefully set aside – always close by
outside – supercars, gloriously number-plated “*Sly*”,
waiting patiently for one more drive
the day before you died.

Too vivid, you bent double
visceral pain
morbidly half-asleep
my daughter smiles
through veiled tears
eldest brother – wiser than fading daylight
watches solemnly over.

I could sense death
waiting patiently in the wings
to usher your soul away
ghastly kind to let me visit you
in living flesh, one more time.

Yet in August just gone
you were the one
driving us back to the hotel

animated, alive with stories
of racing model boats and go karts
admitting that the younger ones –
despite all your strategies and plans –
now had the upper hand.

Not my place to fall apart
can't take it in
so, we'll take to the wheel
for your warm smile
and for the last mile
up the road, round the bend –
keep driving,
dear son, father, brother and friend.

Protocol

Omar Aftab

The old language
of straight backs, stiff handshakes, stale weather –
abandon it.
They serve no purpose anymore.

Let words burst into existence like flames
and truths rise,
smoke, collide,
fill the air.

Unshackle the tongue, unravel the spirit –
feel matters flit, ideas bounce,
consonants lapping at the shadows.

Clouds recede
and walls collapse.
Dawn licks over the sky.

And when breath sputters and voices crack –
then recite your idiom,
knowing much can be said
with a pat on the back.

Green-fingers

Rowan Bradshaw

In quiet longing, I yearn to delve
beneath my flesh, unearth the bones.
Pure, gleaming ivory ribs unbound
like cigars in a row, unwound

sharp needling, a rib from whence we came,
from which we all will come –

a remedy to folly, autonomy and defiance
if his rib held wisdom, beauty and compliance –
What of mine?
If unhindered by my soul's reliance?

My twenty-four silent scouts stand
protecting lungs a pulsing,
and heart convulsing.
How silly, to defy them with this restless chase
of fleeting euphoria, in a frantic race

so should I reach beneath my skin,
nestling in terracotta, a new tale
hidden between cactus and kale.

What blooms of beauty would arise?
If untainted, free from inner cries
undefined by my moans, groans and sighs.

Cormorants

Peggy McCarthy

They hover above water –
their wingtips skim circuits like blades
over ice – then plunge beak first,
spear through weighted ocean
like underwater missiles,

rise and swoop in from choppy seas,
flock to the rocks, spread their wings
like celebrants on an altar,
throw themselves open –
purge their drenched souls,

spin through arcs
of instinct and ritual,
plough through sea and air,
wrestle rites of gravity –
skirt the loops and troughs

of my dizzy heart.

Fitzgerald Park, December

Samuel Wingfield-Karpowitz

One yellow rose furls itself
as the finial of its dark
thorny stalk, and the world
of the garden does not wish
to heal, or sweeten, but to dwell,
to quietly live. Swaddled people
hunch on the pondside benches
like boulders. Bread torn, tossed, white
gulls, snow globe. Something here
outside of words. Something
near this way of love: a boy,
smooth-faced, unpockets
his chalky hands to reach
for his girl, and she draws back.
His lips move, she stills.
Dusky mallards in the pond
flip tails-up for dinner. With fingertips
he tugs the soft ends
of her knit blue hat down
over the bottoms of her ears,
which have become the same
salmon color as the sky.

Eavesdrop

Samuel Wingfield-Karpowitz

Meaning first the water fallen
from the eaves, then the ground
to which the water has fallen.

And then meaning me, in its newer verb,
strolling the river behind a girl and her father.
Dull palette today: all muted tones
except for flecked beads of Hawthorn red.
Mushrooms like wild turkey feathers
flutter-shingle dark oak trunks, and the air
smells of chimney smoke, wet soil.

She alerts him that, across the water,
the rumpled brown plants are like
elephant ears. The pair walks slowly,
her stubby, dawdled steps, hand in hand.
What do you make of that, he asks her,
as if she is much older.

They might represent sustenance,
I suppose, father and daughter, how minds nourish
kindred minds, how we are fed
our ways of being. And they seem
to elicit a like symbolism

from the Middle English *eavesdrop*,
something about rainwater
dripping off an old slate roof
to saturate the soil, to be returned,
in time, to the sky, the eaves, the soil again,
and, by the early seventeenth century,
to a person listening.

Several seconds have elapsed
since the father's question: *Oh*,
his daughter says, *I don't know*, and sighs
as if she is much older.

Salt Meadow

Janne Sophie Borgaes

Stretched between the pines and levelling waves
You lie in wait for me one last time.
Leggy birds stilt through your shallows,
Flutter from the tough weeds that cover you.
Despite the calm, this is no place for peace,
And when you seep into my boots,
I realise where this has always been going.
So make me bite earth and sharp herbs,
Force pools of you between my teeth,
Grind them down with sand dragged from the tide
And cut me with whetted cordgrass blades.
Give me your touch that maps our flooded bodies,
Among caraway and sea aster and samphire,
Don't stop until you reach the waterfront.
So swallow me like the dark turf,
And drown me while the golden plover mourns.

Architecture of Heart Break House

Claire Dineen

You
sat outside
and formed skyscrapers
from your breath. I furnished the
home I made for you in my chest. You
kissed the moon through a skylight. I gazed
at your lips as if at stars. We held hands like kids

You built the church. I tucked myself into a
gravestone. You chased me up the unfinished
staircase, laughing. I picked out the wood
splinters from our feet. You wanted to build
something beyond two honey-boned girls
awaiting rain. We made a den out of sheets.
I scribbled hearts onto the black edge of
blueprints. We poked our heads through new
doors together until. You had sketched the
foundation and then I tried to move in. You
told me I wasn't worth the bridge building.
So I waited inside the river until the bed just
gave in.

Leannán-áit, teanga-áit (love-strange, strange-tongue)

Claire Dineen

I sat with dictionaries, combing through
for what it was that I am to you.
The novice forgot to sharpen his quill here.
Even where we have

iarmhaireacht,
sclimpíní,
camhanaich,

The loneliness at cock-crow
Supernatural dancing lights in your eyes
Half light of dawn, dusk

There is still no word for the soul stitched to yours, unpicked.

Leannán-áisteach. A lover strange.

M'anam-fuaite, still.

My soul-sewn

Ach

D'anam á thointeáil, now.

Your soul torn

(Agus bíonn anam dlúth le ainm.)

(And soul is close to name)

Bíonn cruth mo bhéil, ag feannadh duit,
dlúth leis na dathanna de do chroí.

the shape of my mouth, keening you
close to the colours of your heart

This is why I come back here.

But it has been so long since I carved my lungs around this tongue.
A child running back to its mother, sobbing without sound.
How is it that I must stop and consult and check
to find the words you sent across me?

In another life, your name would've lain on my tongue

cosúil le faireog mheala.

Like a nectary, honey-gland

Sin go bhfuil tú dom.

Go raibh tú dom?

Is that even correct?

How can a woman write in a language her foremothers couldn't ache in?

How is it that you have shaken the heart out of me,

sent it flying out and running home

to a mother that will no longer hold it?

Logh dom, mo ghrá-sa, logh dom,

mar thit mé i ngrá leat

gan aimsiú na focail chun tú a chailleadh,

gan aimsiú na teanga chun filleadh air

le iníon caillte.

Forgive me, my love, forgive me

for I fell in love with you

without finding the words to lose you

without finding the language to return to

the lost daughter

Prayer

Stephen Carragher

Does fear of God
equate to strength of faith?
If so, I was very holy
and every illness was divine intervention.
How I dreaded the cough,
and trembled at the thought of it.
It was an ever-present fear, I was surely punished
for my weakness, and I made deals, promised
all sorts, actions, good deeds
that I might recover quickly,
and this bark,
would not go down into my chest
and my throat that felt raw wouldn't close.
When prayers seemed not to work
I sought out holy water.
The holier, the better.
For I was surely bad, and
only Lourdes and relics could heal me.
So the cycle repeated.
And I prayed prayers to supplant my guilt.

No longer do I fear that wrath.
Nowadays, I am comfortable with my sins.

Dante

Stephen Carragher

Around the roads
My mother and sister drive
Calling out for our lost dog, Dante,
Listening for a reply.
But here in bandit country
A stray dog is a danger.
We never find him.

Down the meadow
By the neighbour's garden fence
I find the corpse of a
Rotting fox
Its flesh pulped by nature
And wonder
If it really is a fox.

Everest
Patrick O'Sullivan

High
And mighty
Majestic peak
Monumental creation
In everlasting, virgin snow
Cocooned, as infant, to infinity
Where seasonal changes shape
Randomly, sculpt her transient nature
Showing her to be both high and mighty

See a western cowboy out for sport, pay
To play his weary way upon her face
Implant his boot in powder snow
Sink knee deep in awe of her
Suck her breath too pure
Call His name in vain
Then rising claim
His throne.
King!
(For a day)

Unkkkle Sam's Travelling Circus

Jake M.M. Griffin

Headspace gathers topsy-turvy when pinwheels curly-wurly
Itsy-bitsy secrets are the wood-lice in hoodoo
Beset with hocus-pocus UFO beams dilly-dallying,
I'm issued with a Rorshach at the splash of an *achoo*—

Attention's rendered misty-twisty at the open conspiracy:
Poltergeists have overridden all the rides so *hush, boo*—
Rollercoasters can't halt for claims of heebie-jeebies
Nor for notions of an up-and-coming nosedive boogaloo

Conmen congregate for waived admission freak shows
Jugs of foreign policy duct-taped to their claws
All chant: "Oil, oil for Transatlantic Paradiscos."
Trading blood-of-ancients for still-birthed law

Terrorists wield teddy bears and striped cotton pyjamas
They're seen on posters, live streaming into cyberspace
Hawking serpent-oil, bottled-clouds and alligator-tears
Unkkkle Sam's soon opening a terrorist-orphanage

You never begged a ticket, bless your sideshow view
Love it now or love it not, the circus needs *you!*

this is how the world works

Jessica Anne Rose

hatred runs and buries itself deep,
scorching and salting the earth behind us,
instinctually we scrape grooves and borders into
the cold clay that holds us, desperate
to mark our territory over ten times stolen land.

perhaps that is why humans relentlessly seek
a common enemy, prey to satiate our hot blood,
we feel it oozing and licking away at the ego like lava,
cementing itself in splinters of glass shards between
cracks in the cobblestone, the weathered rock
surviving the cleaves of another fruitless flood.

will we remember our humility and look down
at our reflections, the ones with wool pulled over
every inch of the face but the smoked, blind eyes
that cannot break their hazed stare long enough
to realise that history is repeating itself yet again
and we are complicit by partaking in and facilitating it.

see the charred remains of the trail we have carved
for our children to follow, is it the fate of humanity
to pass on the torch and the bricks and the bombs,
setting legacies alight to kindle the sensation
of our own self preservation and security?
for if we smash the glass ceiling first as sabotage,
nobody else can aim for it.

The Ageing Queen's Mirror

Faye Boland

A glass circle trapped
in Sunflower-gold
hangs on her stone wall.

Youth and beauty
perfectly framed.
Reflecting daggers of light

it tells the truth no woman wants to hear:
crow's foot, expanding girth,
hair greying like sky before rainfall;

that, children, sacrifice have a price;
that beauty is ephemeral
like scented stock, sweet William.

A flash of colour, sudden bloom.
Flowers fade as quickly
as they blossomed.

Heirloom

Ríonach Reid

There is broken glass on the kitchen floor
Of my family home.
Little tiny fractals sparkling
Casting rays of light
From where they lie scattered

It made such a racket
When it smashed, the glass,
The sound of something delicate
Smooth, nail-thin, shaped like silk drapes, dropped from your
hand,
Breaking apart. Irreparable.

And I felt it then – fury.
Bright as the ruins on the tiles,
In my shoulders, my jaw, in my hands.
Broiling in the back of my throat
Like a mouthful of fresh tea
Too hot to swallow, scalding the tongue.
I wanted to douse you with it –
the hand-me-down wrath of
My God.

And I saw your face,
Reflective, open, round,
like a silver serving tray.

I swallowed the tea,
Horried at the ripple on the surface
Horried it was in me.

And we cleaned up the glass together
And I laughed –
How easy it was to sweep away the mess.
Yet as I brushed I couldn't tell
In the little mirrors made
Did I see myself, or a child, or its mother?

They crunched
When I emptied the dustpan
Into the bin
I whispered back to them
That I was sorry. That it was an accident. That they were loved.

The shards gazed impassive
Remained apart

I Killed My Succulent

Sinéad Mulcaire

Sickly vines creep up the frame of my bed,
Pinning me to the paper-thin mattress.
They worm their way into my head —
A desert where dreams come to die.
I can see the oasis, just within reach,
But the water evaporates at my desperate touch.
It always does.
Is it my fault that my hands are burning?

Happiness is a flower I am trying to grow,
And even though it is a futile thing to nurture a flower without water,
I will keep shoving the seeds into this barren ground —
No matter how many times the petals wither before my eyes.
No matter how many times my poison kills it at the root.
And maybe one day this wasteland will look like a garden,
Maybe one day I will finally bloom.

Tethered Nomad

Mona Lynch

They will not be towing me away from here. Where the walls are thin and
the neighbour near.

Where neither Gaelic nor Shelta is spoken. My pony could not survive in
my kerchief garden, but I have my dog and my memories.

Using wheels from prams, we'd make go-karts and fly down the hills,
ignoring the cuts and bruises. My father brought us road bowling
out to Waterloo on Sundays after mass. I loved the shouting,
the betting, the lofting, the grassy sops marking the road.

I miss the sound of rain on the roof of the wagon, the buzz of a sulky race
on a good, coloured colt, the pull of the road and the wind on my face.

He taught us how to hunt, with a whippet – the best dog for catching
rabbits, a lurcher for hares, sometimes he would cross
a greyhound with a saluki and get the best dog of all,
the Arabian Saluki.

The butchers paid us for the rabbits, but in the end, Kerry was the best
place for travellers to make a living. Picking periwinkles on
Banna beach when the tide was out, filling buckets with
holes to drain, paid €120 per hundredweight.

Tin smiths we tinkers were by trade, who needs tin now.

I am filed under “settled”.

A Symmetry Placed on Par with Cheese

Kyle Barron

Assorted dairy, weighed per uncorruption,
Is accordingly sorted on the grated gondola:
Drag-driven down the tarmac — bumpy
As though a river, wave broken
By shrieks and stalking, grim;
Air cooled by intense fanning is propelled,
As I pry open the counter-tomb,
Past its pale walls — bloody freezing.

Feet stumble in through the sliding doors
Like they're hungry ghosts — lists in hand.
They hobble in from under the dull clouds
That haunt; above the cheese I'm after
Putting the yoghurt — perhaps placed upon
A new layer of woven steel
Would have done better, than them
Haphazardly stacked — one fall away
From death before life.

I'm tired and cold, but in command still
Of this Samsaric shopping system.
A few more hours to sacrifice —
Suppose I best get to it then.

Gaul Gull Gall

Kyle Barron

Birds of a feather flocked and flagged
Around waste, from a certain perspective,
On quay wall — unkeenly left. Food for all things
That fly about in bouts of balderdash,
Of 'also!-also!'s. Caws draw a hell's bells of sorts —
A cause for condemnation, I imagine
From some other perspective. A view of an onviewer
Without two views to give. And here I'm rigid:
I run, fall and fly, jump jack and feast eye —
And so on and swan and whatn't and what not.
It's all so 'also!-also!' I suppose so.
Food for thought, and on I went.

the Very Early Morning, Jamie Moss

From my window

I hear a drunken song,
One of soul, of triumph,
Of all that is Republic.

And it's its soul that makes a stupor of me,
This delight of tunes that tend, I say, could tend any unpatched mind
Because for a moment, I forget— nay

Am freed the woes and sorrow. I look and see:
No Romans conquer here for here's no Gaul, nor Cairo
Named not by Latin—
And if it were,
Then I

Cast a net: Nostalgia.

As caught in amber, Scouts sat by bonfire glee, I smell

The stink of charring wood
Pleasant, full, its smoke rising freely,
Rising freely to the sky.

By wrattle crack of flame

We sung,
As they sing;

They sing Republic, till

Then, on the beak of morning birds, death of song begets the death of night.
The birds crack the egg that runs of dawn with chirps and

Clapping wings;
O, wings clapping in the Interregnum;
An applausal slaughter the song of Republic suffers.

The ebb and flow of triumph,
As infinite as feathered fashion. For birds will come and go,
As night turns and turns back time till then again
I am standing there by my window under the fallen sky, to
listen and hear,
Those same old drunken ballads,
That same
Old drunken song.

where home is
Kalleigh Young

my hand enclosed in yours,
we stand where the water kisses the bank,
the change of seasons calling the fish from ocean waves to
river waters cascading down,
abound in migration and musk.
i wonder how many corners of this world the fish have seen,
and i think back to when you asked me,
where are you from?
the first time you spoke to me beyond simple niceties,
and how i fell not long after,
like the fish jumping to fly
their red bodies glossed with sun,
and their small eyes that shine
with yellow upon their heads of slick green,
and after a moment they fall,
returning to the water where they belong—
where they belong.
and i remember they are swimming upstream to their home
after years away in the ocean and estuaries,
where they have smolted to grow in saltwater
and grow old enough to love another
and despite the river always flowing,
they still know where home is.
where are you from?

i've never known.

but somehow,

the fish know.

with magnetic fields,

the fish sense their way home,

happy to return.

where is home?

if home is found by a sense.

you bend down, your soft lips upon my forehead,

and i look up with a smile,

and i realize,

home is the hand i hold.

The Bridge

Ben Donnellan

I'm on the holy bridge, a cigarette passing between my thumb
and forefinger — strumming a forgotten tune on the grimy rail.
Idle, I stare at the marbled abyss below, devoid of light and life,
trying to make out some distant reflection in the murky swell;
my head rolling downstream.

I let it sink below the horizonless sky, not silver-lined, but grey
as the wet stone walls that barely hold its borders — crumbling
into its depths. The black water, bitter-black and streaked white
in the wash, like a mirror fractured by the raw surge, reflecting
the white noise of my mind.

Still, the world moves on, the crowds of salarymen spilling out
onto Grand Parade, made flickering shades in the waters stirring,
the cold breath of morning trembling on the back of my neck.
While I remain in place, static as the sky unchanging up above,
stalled by some broken part.

I watch the grey river lift toward the grey sky, the hissing foam
churned up then folded before it reaches fullness; a deadly flood
intent on devouring itself. It reminds me of the last time I stood
here, a stranger to courage, feeding my grief with contempt,
for fear my heart might be played again.

It was a palm upturned and begging then — not the man I knew,
or thought I had, his face blurred by some absence in my brain.
I had no change to offer him, so we stood and smoked, tobacco
rolled in foreign hands, foreign words diffused through the fog,
before his song of home.

He caught the rhythm in the sails of his palms, compressed then
released the bellows of his battered music box — his sorrow
resounding through the vaulted chamber like a dying breath,
forced up from the belly and pushed through hard gritted teeth.

A release of years at sea.

When he'd finished, ocean-spray clung to the corner of his mouth
where the cigarette was tucked — great plumes of smoke sent up
into the grey, dissolving against the colourless air. Then silence
overcame the river, its own bellowing made quiet by his grief,
as if the water itself was to blame.

Back on the bridge now, the memory comes up choppy and white,
seeping into every wet cerebral wrinkle till my caulking fails,
and the sudden spate unbound, drowns all potential for restraint.
I saw my brother, he'd said, cut off early in the years of his youth.

And I'd promised I wouldn't be the same.

I've lived with grief for long enough, refuse to be buried by it too.

The Boxroom

Ben Donnellan

I'm up in a bog of sweat, unsure of the time or place
I've wakened — a dim sensation of your breath, cool
against the back of my neck; a half-light, half-moon
and halide glow come streaming through the breach
between two twisted louvers, a near perfect diamond

beam bisecting the room. I trace the silvery slit-shaft
with eyes still unadjusted, unaccustomed to the glare,
that, like a drop from heaven settles on your suitcase,
illuminating the blue plastic shell till it flashes back
a vision of Shannon Airport in the glint and gleam.

It stands in the corner of your boxroom, a monolith
unearthed, undiminished in its stature and cumbrous
bulk, though, hollow now, the clumsy pillar is lifted
without strain — displaced from one crook to another
to make space for my own. I think, heaven and earth,

each speck of dust in the air become a star or planet
against the indigo slate — a brilliant gem-like nebula
captured for a moment in the halcyon ray: cosmic lint
refracting a faultless rainbow of all that's been before,
and all that will be again. In its dazzle I almost forget

what it was that woke me: a dream of blood and mud,
the heady wine-dark scent clotting in a nose pressed
firm into the dirt; a skull like a bone-socked plough,
driven down into sharp-pointed scree, grit and gravel
scraping till it's polished clean. A prophecy divined

from our oncoming separation, an image of my exit
to earth: an upward slope, a pitch-dark track, and you
sinking back into memory on the platform, marooned
for a second time. Uneasy now, I shift toward the edge
of your bed, the pair of us packed in a twin-sized slip

like mackerel tinned between two paper-plaster walls.
I move to find some sheet or scrap of cloth to blind
the streak of light — your moonlit case transformed
to a sinister stele, a grave marker of our brief reunion;
a sneering cenotaph taunting in its immense emptiness.

Though, as I shield my eyes to conceal the vinyl slab,
one foot unbound from the tangle of fastened limbs,
I feel your palm come grabbing 'round my bare frame,
a hot hand on hot skin, pulling me back in. I stay dead
still — stiff as the plastic pillar, tamping down breath

after laboured breath, afraid the illusion might slip free
of my mouth and wake you. Until I feel your lips trail
a kiss along the nape of my neck, your hips shifting in
to fit the small of my back; and a whispered promise,
that I've to go on ahead, that in time, you'll find a way.

Abandon(ed) Ship

Dante Kunc

I am not sure where I first heard

The way to tell a ship is sinking

Is the scuttle of rats' feet on deck

As they throw themselves into the ocean.

I wonder who first saw the rodents panic,

If they thought it a good omen,

If they saw the unnatural act and rejoiced.

How do the rats know it's time to leave–

A pit in the stomach? Sudden panic? Or is it more

Clever – hearing the whispers of the captain's ineptitude

As they sail further away from the blaze of the lighthouse.

And what makes the waves more alluring than clinging to

The precious hours – minutes – left on dry ground?

Maybe they know they were never welcome here anyway.

The realisation that we'd never reach harbour didn't

Crash into me, no, I couldn't even see the water for the waves.

Less a storm, more a gentle rocking –

Normal, Normal –

Unnatural.

The altitude changed not enough to notice,

But when the world shifted, I stayed in place. Frozen in hope.

Women and children first, but lifeboats speak of uncertainty

And we were all so sure. I am not the captain, never wanted

Anything but peace. The ocean looks charming
When complacency is the alternative.

I don't know if rats are really the first
 To run when water starts seeping into the hull
 But I never imagined that amongst their panicked paws
 I'd hear my own feet against the wood.

NON-FICTION

Searching the Wardrobes

Darius Whelan

Sunday, two days after the phone call. It's a dull, cold November day in 1986. We're watching as our father opens the front door of the new house. The house is nearly completed; it just needs painting and finishing. Dad unlocks the door, hesitates, and shouts in, "It's OK, Tomás, you can come out, we're here." There's no reply. We follow him as he proceeds from room to room, checking all of them very carefully. His knees tremble and his hands shake as he walks. He opens all the bedroom cupboards to look inside. "Maybe he's unconscious in one of the wardrobes," he says. The floors are bare grey concrete. It makes no sense that our brother would be here, but nothing makes sense any more, and we're terrified of the alternatives. Dad checks behind every door and in every nook and cranny, just in case. We follow dutifully. The search is unsuccessful. Dad sobs, and we awkwardly try to comfort him.

Friday, two days earlier. The phone call. I'm sitting in the UCD Students' Union office and am told that there's an urgent phone call for me. The guards have been trying to track me down. My mother is on the line, calling from home in Limerick. She quietly tells me that my brother's car has been found parked beside the river that morning. All

his clothes, apart from his underwear, were found in the car. He had been out drinking and it seems he had gone to the river on his way home.

“Listen, Darius, this is very serious, we can’t find Tomás, you need to come home,” she says. After the phone call, I try to keep my composure but the enormity of this hits me, and I break down in tears as I try to relay the news to my friends. They help me with the practicalities, bringing me to the chaplaincy office. A staff member there offers to drive me to the train station. I watch as she puts a dust cover on her electric typewriter before we leave the office. My thoughts are racing, and I’m screaming internally to her and to the world. *Why are you acting as if life’s going on as normal? How can you be so matter-of-fact?*

On the journey to the train station, I hear myself speaking out loud about subjects I never allow myself to think about, never mind talk about. I tell her we’re just an ordinary family, we communicate with each other by slagging each other, we’re not particularly close. On the train, I’m thinking that Tomás was sexually assaulted, this would explain why his clothes were left in the car. I’m wondering, has his abductor killed him? My father collects me from the train station. There’s no hugging; we don’t do hugs.

At home, my mother’s very quiet. She’s wearing drab clothes. Her eyes are glazed over and she’s barely functioning. That evening, my father tells us that if the worst happens, he thinks Tomás should go to Kilmurry Cemetery. I can’t fathom how we can possibly be discussing that when Tomás may still be alive.

Saturday. My father takes my brother and me down to the river. Gardaí comb the banks, accompanied by volunteers. Divers from local sub aqua clubs are checking the river. Somebody has put holy candles in a reed basket and floated them on the river. They believe that the basket will be carried by the current and stop where the body lies,

if there is a body.

We're waiting, still waiting, dreading and hoping at the same time. I'm thinking of the clothes left in the car beside the river. Was Tomás sexually assaulted, then imprisoned in a basement? I wonder has he escaped and will he be found on the side of the road, battered but alive? Or has he been taken away to another country? Did he meet someone who fought with him, strangled him and then drove him to Cratloe Woods, brutally stashing his young body six feet under, never to be found? Will we ever see him again, alive or dead? I think maybe he was swept away by the current, he got to the shore, and has been stuck in some bushes since then, calling for help. This means we'll see him again. But wait, did he jump in the freezing, black, rushing water, get into difficulty, desperately seek to get back to the shore, gulp in water and become weak? And then did the silence descend as the life left his body? Has his lifeless body floated out to the Atlantic, never to be found? How long will it be before we know what happened, if ever? Was it just an attempt to sober up after a night drinking?

Sunday morning. We spend most of the time at home in stunned silence, sometimes almost bored. Neighbours call to make us sandwiches and tea. There's a graduation picture of Tomás on the mantelpiece. We discuss his life and our strange situation with friends, neighbours, priests. We look at pictures of our times in Spanish Point. Tomás is in his red swimming togs. We would spend most of the school holidays there. We talk about how we'd spend all day at the beach and how our mother used to dote over all of us. We had a deeper connection then, before we all grew up and went to college.

Tomás is smart and studied civil engineering in UCG. He co-authored a paper for an academic journal with one of the lecturers. As it is the eighties, he needs to emigrate for work. He's due to fly to America within the next few days to take up an engineering job. In his college yearbook, there's a black and white picture of him sitting on the

bonnet of a car, grinning, with two of his best friends. The caption says:

"Tomás Whelan.

Visited a field in Gort once.

Much sought-after flatmate.

Ambition: to own a wench."

In college, he was thriving, stimulated, full of life and surrounded by friends who loved him. He was on the editorial committee for the yearbook. Those few lines about him probably say a lot to his college friends; we'll ask them to explain them when we get a chance. Did they know the real him, better than we knew him? He left college a year ago, and moved back to Limerick. Maybe he found real life, after college, too difficult? Was he under pressure, feeling the weight of making such a drastic move from Ireland to America, away from Limerick, Galway and everything he knew best? Had his interactions with us been too distant, not loving enough? Was it suicide? Was he depressed? Was he anxious about moving to America in a few days' time? What did he want? Did my father's rows with him become too much for him? Was my mother too distant from him? Why didn't he just drive home and sleep off the drink? Did we really know the real him at all? Who was he?

My mother is still very low. She's not talking much. She doesn't want to go to the river, or to the new house. We sense that she's already feeling the loss of a son whom she loved deeply.

John is the eldest and is a year older than Tomás. John is trying to appear strong, but I get the feeling he's missing a brother who was always by his side. Growing up, they were like twins and did everything together. They laughed, and also fought like demons. They both went to college in Galway and when they were sharing a house, their fights were so intense that Tomás put his fist through a wall in anger.

Tomás is often angry with the world. This includes being angry with

me. Even though he bullies me, sometimes violently, he can also be gentle and kind. I'm willing to forgive him his bullying if he'll just walk through the door, alive, and explain why he went into hiding. He loves building and DIY. From an early age he was mixing cement, laying tiles and climbing ladders to fix things. My father and he bond over this, but also fight constantly. They almost come to blows. My father can be controlling, but Tomás is also well able to stand up to him. They care so much about every detail, and they show how much they care by arguing over it. The new house is their big project and they're excited that it's nearly finished.

Dad says, "You know, in the past few years, I sometimes had dreams where Tomás died and was in his coffin." I find this weird, and I also feel guilty for wondering if my father has ever loved me enough to imagine me in my coffin. Dad is much closer to Tomás than me and he also knows there's a dark side to him, which appears on the surface as anger but runs much deeper. My father is very happy with my academic achievements, but can't understand why I'm so incompetent at DIY.

Sunday afternoon. My father comes up with a new possibility. He says, "Maybe Tomás got out of the water, he was embarrassed that he was nearly naked, and went to the new house to hide and warm up. Let's go to the house to check." This theory is absurd, but nobody can distinguish between reality and absurdity any more. We're worrying about Dad as we go to the new house and he does his thorough search. Is he losing touch with reality? He's normally the sensible, practical Garda sergeant who's not disturbed by peculiar events.

Monday. Down at the river, Garda sub aqua divers arrive. We're introduced to them as they put on their gear. My father has a special connection with them because they're part of "the force," like him. He trusts that they will do a thorough job. They have better equipment and better training than the local diving clubs. I wonder

how they can act in such a practical manner when the world is shattering all around me. It's not normal to be searching for my brother's body. Dad tells us, "If a body is found, don't worry, a signal will be passed to us, so that we can leave and go back home as it's being brought in." He's preparing us for the worst. I wonder, is my brother's body really in the river? What will it look like if a Garda diver comes across it? Will it be bloated and unrecognisable? How did Tomás change from the guy grinning on top of a car, full of life, to this?

Tuesday. We're at home in the morning when another significant phone call comes, the one that tells us that his body has been found. We've experienced the longest four days we've ever lived through. Now at least we know that he's gone and there's no hope of finding him alive. There's a relief in that, but also a terrible realisation that our family has been torn apart.

Thirty-eight years after the phone call. It's two a.m. and I'm chatting with my friend, Justin. We've had a bit too much to drink and I'm talking about Tomás again. Tonight, I've spent time thinking about how those years must have been for my parents. They never mentioned the possibility of suicide, but it was always in the air. How was it for them, wondering how Tomás was feeling in those final weeks? Did they question whether they had contributed in some way? Did Dad replay those rows with him and regret being too harsh with him? What was it like, never speaking to anybody, even each other, about this? My Dad died in 2019 and my mother in 2022. Tonight, I'm also saying to Justin that I'm pretty sure Tomás killed himself. But I know that in a month's time if I have the same conversation I might just as easily say that he didn't, he just went for an innocent swim to sober up and was swept away by the river. The doubts, the torment, the grief, the anger, the guilt, the sadness, the anxiety, the confusion are sometimes as severe as that day searching the wardrobes.

Farting Around with Kurt Vonnegut

Billy Whyte

“We are here on Earth to fart around.”

Yes, a quote about farting made my day, and then my week, around mid-September, summer’s end in Ireland. And if you’re like me, and often take life too seriously, I think it could help you too. It could shift your perspective, maybe even change your life. Alright, I know, ‘life-changing’ sounds like an exaggeration. I have an inner cynic too, and he’s protesting already: *How can a quote about farting be life-changing? You’re full of shit, man.* Well, inner cynic, why not? Oh, and by the way, man, you’re full of shit too. You’re Irish, why are you talking like an American? Who do you think you are, The Big Lebowski? Where’s the money, Lebowski? What the fuck am I talking about? Bad start, Bill. Ah well.

Oh, and for the rest of you . . . just bear with me . . .

Since I was a kid I’ve wanted to be a writer. I’ve always loved reading and writing, even if our relationship has been somewhat on and off over the years. In August 2023—after a summer spent reading and dreaming about the works of many of my favourite writers, including Jack Kerouac—we were very much on, and I announced to my parents that I was not going to go ahead with the Professional

Master of Education I was due to begin studying in September, and instead go on the road, work odd jobs, and write.

"You said *what?*?"

"You're trying to be like Jack Kerouac!!"

My parents were allergic to my vague and somewhat idealistic plan; they wanted me to become a secondary school teacher, have security, and write in my spare time. We had a few heated arguments, the exact details of which I won't divulge, because I'm so merciful.

But what I will say is this—after our arguments I fell into old patterns of self-doubt and self-betrayal. Suddenly I was afraid of the prospect of working odd jobs and writing, and the security of a teaching position seemed more attractive. I hushed my loud inner call to go on an unconventional path to a faint whisper, and instead listened to soundbites I was creating that promised me, with the glibness of a dishonest politician, that everything would turn out alright and easy if I became a secondary school teacher. In September I started studying the PME at UCC, which involved a year-long placement teaching position in a secondary school. Truthfully, if I had never argued with my parents I most likely would have gone ahead with the PME anyway, but we love having someone to blame, don't we?

I taught for the whole academic year, or, in a more accurate way of putting it, I subjected myself to seven months of self-torture! Okay, it wasn't all that bad, I learnt a lot about myself and I connected with students and staff. In my English class we discussed, through study of the novel *Stargirl*, the importance of staying true to oneself in the face of pressure to conform or contort oneself to be accepted. I was heartened when the novel resonated with some students, particularly passages where the main character decides to be who she is instead of who the world tells her to be. The deep irony was though, as the teacher and leader of the class, I was engaging in constant self-betrayal. I was repressing the truthful part of myself

who didn't want to be a secondary school teacher, and even though my body kept screaming at me to give up, I kept going because I felt I had something to prove.

I finished the year teaching, and in August of 2024 I took a leave of absence from the Professional Master of Education, deciding to be a writer instead. Then I moved down to Glenbeigh in Kerry to live in my parents' mobile home (thanks mom and dad), work in a restaurant, and write. I moved to Glenbeigh for various reasons, namely that it was my childhood haunt and holds a special place in my heart. I wanted to forget myself in the big blue dream of sea and sky in the West.

Overall, relocating to Kerry was a good move. The sights were stunning, and in August I enjoyed sea swims, long walks in nature, and reading and writing in the mobile home. I was feeling optimistic about the future, confident that I could create a life I loved, and I decided to apply for a Masters in Creative Writing through a teaching assistantship in the US.

But my time in Kerry was not without its challenges; soon after deciding to apply to study in the States, I got caught up in inner conflict. At times I was still enjoying what was in front of me in Glenbeigh. At other times I was distant and irritable. I became so fixated on the possibility of going to America, that I began to overlook the beauty and opportunity already around me. In fact, I began to romanticise my imagined future so much that I began to resent my reality. *Things are not okay here, but they'll be great, maybe even perfect, over there. And Jesus, aren't the people here so flawed, compared to those lovely and sweet people in idyllic, imagined, illusory there?*

Old patterns of self-criticism had returned, and I was projecting my criticisms onto the people of Glenbeigh. I was comparing myself to my friends all over the world, who had 'real jobs', while I was working in a restaurant. Somehow, distorted by my self-critical perception, working in a restaurant didn't seem like a . . . 'real job?'

I was also beating myself up for having no material success with my writing to date, and I questioned the purpose of continuing on the route I was on, if I was going to fail anyway. Worst of all, I speculated whether my decision to live in a glorified shack in a small town in the West and spend most of my free time writing was an excuse to flake out on the 'real world', whatever the fuck that means! I was talking myself out of tangible change. My ego was trying to steer me away from the strange scary sea of the unknown I had set sail on, back to the familiar shore of safety and security. But I knew better this time than to let doubts guide me. I just walked around grumpily sometimes when I was out and about, criticising locals in my mind.

On a run of the mill Tuesday in mid-September, I went to the library in Killorglin, near Glenbeigh to write. A few hours in, I wasn't happy with how I was writing. I promised myself I'd write for four hours straight, but I kept faltering, taking breaks to check my phone or just . . . fart around. Even when I was writing, I didn't feel connected to the work. I wasn't involved in it. The library was noisy, and I was starving. A fresh sourdough I had just bought was laying across my desk, taunting me, begging me to eat it. I refrained. *How can I make it as a starving artist, if I can't write while I'm starved!?*

I took a break and moseyed around the library. I began reading a play about Rimbaud. In the passage I read, Rimbaud takes part in a poetry contest in school against his classmates. All his classmates rush ahead to write their poems, but Rimbaud takes his time before starting, eating some bread with butter, to his classmates' bewilderment. Eventually he picks up the pen and writes something great, claiming the contest his own. Well, he was Rimbaud, even after he ate his bread and butter. Or maybe, especially when he ate his bread and butter. Or even, because he ate his bread and butter. I know you're probably thinking: *Is this story just about bread and butter?* No, it's not. But it kind of is. As I said, just bear with me . . .

I kept walking around the library. Two books caught my eye: *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* and *A Man Without a Country* by Kurt Vonnegut. I flicked through both and liked what I saw. I brought them home.

That evening (after I ate my sourdough), I regretfully decided that I wouldn't write, and instead I lay on the couch and read Vonnegut. It was the right choice. A few pages in I was laughing, another few pages in, goosebumps were running up and down my arms. Then I came to a few lines that really hit home:

If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possible can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something. (Vonnegut, 2005)

Suddenly it hit me—mom, dad . . . I'm ggg . . . goooing into the arts! No, wait, not that part. The part about practicing art for the love of doing it. Falling in love with the process, not the outcome, as they say. Looking back over the few weeks prior, while there were spells when I came alive while writing, overall, I had lost sight of what I love about it. My perspective had been distorted by the imagined notoriety, approval or security that I was hunting, that I imagined I might one day obtain, if my dreams came true. I was distracted by the outcome I wanted, not paying enough attention to the work I was doing.

It's not like I hadn't thought about any of this before reading Vonnegut. Ruyard Kiplings' line: "If you can dream—and not make

dreams your master," came to mind a few times, but I never let it settle, often forgetting that wisdom and rushing away from the present moment in pursuit of my goals. But Vonnegut's disarming style—his humor, his forthrightness, his tenderness—cut through my defences, and settled in.

I read another passage that resonated even more deeply. Vonnegut describes how he would often make a trip out of walking to the newsstand to buy an envelope and then to the post office to mail his writing to his typist. He recounts some simple, yet meaningful experiences he shares with beautiful people on one such trip. He closes the chapter with the lines: "How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different."

The chapter stopped me in my tracks. In the few weeks prior, I had shared many meaningful, even if fleeting, experiences with other people. But they never felt like they were enough. I'd quickly forget, or even dismiss them, moving on to my next future hurdle, or my next complaint about how things could be better. I reflected—*Do I really want to miss out on my life that is happening right now, waiting on some possible future success, that might never arrive?*

Plus, taking things so seriously and obsessing over an outcome is no help in making art. Look at Vonnegut, talking about farting around and singing in the shower. And he wrote one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century. Sure, he did a lot more than fart around in the end, but one can't deny that his lightheartedness was integral to his work and his spirit as an artist. Reading his memoir, I sensed that Vonnegut knew how to appreciate his life for what it was while facing the uncertainty of a career in literature. It took him twenty-three years to write *Slaughterhouse Five*. Can you imagine how many trips to the newsagents, post office, and other such places he took on his way there? And what would have become of him as a

writer if he hadn't opened his heart to each step? It's like Rimbaud with his bread and butter.

I lay on my couch that evening, with Vonnegut's book in my hands, and I promised myself that the next day I'd pay more attention to my life as it was, and the simple moments of beauty I was sure to experience.

I woke up the next morning, with familiar self-critical thoughts circulating. *Why did I say that to that person yesterday? Could I not have just said it this way? Do they think I'm strange? Boring?* My bedroom became a very small place.

I remembered what I read the night before: "We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different." I chuckled to myself, picturing Kurt Vonnegut's amusing, smiling face, the self-proclaimed reptile. No, not one of the reptilian lizard people who supposedly rule the world and wear the skin of dead babies, he just had very wrinkly skin in his old age and once joked that he looked like an iguana. I rose from my bed, changed, and headed for the beach, with a gentle intention of . . . farting around (*C'mon Bill you've overcooked that term already, she's done, finito, dusht, let her goooo*). No, wait, I'm not finished . . .!

RTÉ lyric in the car. Marty Whelan was away, but Simon Delaney was doing a good job filling in. The classical music sounded good. I was fucking freezing though. It was 10°C, wet and grey. It was still only September. Winter comes fast in Ireland, for fuck's sake.

Outside of the car, by the beach, I was even colder, and negative thoughts were still circulating. Fuck it, sure they're only thoughts. Just . . . *fart around* now (ya see).

I walked. I enjoyed the crunch of stone under my feet. There was a low-hanging fog concealing the bulk of the mountains nearby, but underneath it I could see the dense green Glenbeigh Fairy Forest and the mossy, rusty base of mountains. Birds were gliding up and down,

landing in some perch for a while and then taking off again. The marshy reeds were atmospheric, especially with the low-hanging fog. I felt like I was in the midst of some story. The sea was, of course, the sea—wonderful and blue. I could never tire looking at it. The coastal air brushed against my face, crisp and salty. I skimmed a few stones. I watched as waves rose up and fell down like deep, calm breaths. Then I returned to my car.

Just outside of my car, I stopped for a while, to keep looking. I noticed an English Springer Spaniel running enthusiastically nearby, and an old man trailing behind him. The spaniel had a white and brown coat, and not a care in the world. I think he must be the most beautiful dog I've ever seen. The old man following the dog shot his arm up in the air, and waved at me. I waved back. *People wave at each other a lot down here, It's nice.* As the man walked on, I paid closer attention to his gait. He was hobbling a little. His body must have been stiff, probably sore. I thanked Life for my youth, and for my legs.

Back in the car the classical music hummed like a hymn straight from the heavens. Driving away from the beach, I started thinking about my grandad. He was from Kerry, and he's the reason I have a connection with Glenbeigh in the first place. Wouldn't it be great if he never got sick and died? We could have worked out in the fields, then enjoyed tea and scones, and he could have given me advice. My dad would have loved that. Ah well, my grandad did a lot of living when he was alive, I reminded myself. Then I thought about all the living I still wanted to do.

Driving over the bridge into Glenbeigh town, a man wearing a grey poncho was waiting on the other side, crouched down, holding his greyhound by the collar. As soon as I pass over the bridge, the man unleashed his dog's lead, and the greyhound bounded over the bridge ahead of him, free, no constraint.

The man beamed at me, and I beamed back at him. We relaxed into

it—the magic of a moment. I drove on, and I thought to myself: *I'll be alright, you know. I'm just here to fart around.*

*

Seven months later, and I am currently living back at home with my parents in Cork city, working odd jobs, and writing (I dropped out of the PME). I have self-published essays on Substack and people have been very supportive, especially my parents, who are my biggest (only?) fans. *Noooo, don't make a joke about only fans!!!* Honestly though one of the most rewarding things about my journey from secondary school teaching to where I am now has been realising just how much my parents are rooting for me. I still take myself too seriously, or lose track of the present moment at times, worrying about how to earn validation for my work, or how I will fare throughout the rest of adulthood. But I still believe I can create the life I want to live rather than the one that I think is expected of me. Incidentally, right now I want a steady job that I like. Writing and creating are still my North Star, and one of the best ways I know of returning to and enjoying the present moment is opening myself up to receive the sacredness of what is around me, and then taking a pen in my hand to transmit this sacredness into words. Revising this piece for the Quarryman has been a real eye-opener, to the beauty of life in Cork city, and the joy of working on something I love.

I guess you could say I'm still farting around.