Quarryman

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2026

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Foreword

A question that writers are often asked, besides 'where do you get your ideas', is 'do you write for an audience or for yourself?' Some writers come down firmly on one side or another. In *On Writing*, Stephen King instructs us to 'write the first draft with the door closed … Don't worry about making other people happy.' On the other hand, Kevin Barry admits that he goes against the grain: 'Some writers will tell you they never think about the reader, but I think about the reader all the time.'

In reality, for most writers it's not a binary choice, but a blend of both approaches; whether we're writing for ourselves or for an ideal reader likely fluctuates depending on what stage of a project we're at. We write for ourselves, of course – to make sense of our thoughts, and to make sense of the world. We're compelled to write because something we've experienced has caused a frenzy inside of us; we write towards something, or against something; we write to figure things out.

But we also write to communicate. We write to understand ourselves better but also to feel less alone. In our writing we say, 'this is what I think' or 'this is what happened to me' or 'this is how I feel,' and then we offer it to a reader. At that point, our story or poem is no longer ours; a reader might love what we write, or hate it, or worst of all, feel indifferent. But every so often, what we write is reflected in the reader, and they might respond by saying, 'This is how it is for me, too.'

As Alan Bennett wrote in *The History Boys*: 'The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling,

a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.'

Publications like *Quarryman*, and the works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction inside, offer these outstretched hands. In a world as cynical and throwaway as ours – where tech bros cozy up to autocrats to accumulate more millions; where Grok, Gemini, and ChatGPT steal the work of artists in order to chew it up and spit it back out again; where whole days can be lost to the doomscroll and the algorithm – the continued success of publications like *Quarryman* is all the more essential. In the haze of digital smoke and mirrors, it's important and commendable to provide a space for something genuine: a safe haven, a true labour of love. Congratulations to everyone involved in this beautiful volume: writers, editors, proofreaders, designers, organisers and committee members alike. What a generous gift to the reader. Now, let's dive in.

Eimear Ryan
March 2026

Editorial

Quarryman literary journal has been in on and off again publication since 1913, beginning its life as a university newsletter featuring poetry by UCC's students. It's possible to now find this first issue on our website, and it's remarkable to see how the journal has persevered despite its occasional periods of dormancy. *Quarryman* has greatly changed since its first issue, but its main goal remains the same, uplifting students' creative writing and creating a space where people can share their works and connect with one another. The world now is also much different to the one in which *Quarryman* first came to be, yet it is also very much the same. We are still living in political instability, still fighting for our rights, still hoping for a better future.

It's not easy to share one's work, in fact, it takes a great deal of courage. I am incredibly grateful to everyone who took the plunge and sent us their poems and stories. It was such a joy to read them, to briefly enter these inner worlds and to have this fleeting kinship with the author. It's a great honour to have been able to be involved with *Quarryman* and to be able to work with all of these incredible submissions. They really are something special. For this volume, we are very lucky to be able to feature a poem by Gerry Murphy, an alumni of UCC who had his works published with the journal in 1980 and 2015. He has kindly allowed us to publish one of the poems from his upcoming poetry collection, '*My Last Day as an Altarboy*.'

Lastly, I would like to thank Sarah Fitzgerald, who was the most excellent of co-editors; Liam McDonagh, for all his advice with

everything *Quarryman*; Paul Davidson who helped us to get *Quarryman* online; and the *Quarryman* subcommittee for the time and work they have invested into making this issue come to life.

Inga Balchaites

POETRY

Feeling an odd sort of kinship with the Granary's floor

Marij Bernart

Here's the thing, we'll probably not make it out of these things alive.

Not without crushing worlds so we can leave them, first

Poem I ever read in Ireland told me that nothing we know is of use now.

Three years packed up tightly in a suitcase.

But baby, I have gotten so good at walking. There is whole

worlds in what I can think of when I place my foot on

the lines of the carpet – I can't help it. I love a woman in armour.

What if the lines were the roadmaps to the stars?

What if the stairs were rooftops, and I could balance

on them and fall?

What if time takes a day off, and I could go home without the cracks?

What if you are right behind me and I can just glance back?

How is this; you could wedge your foot in the space in between

my ribs, and keep it there.

Baby, I have gotten so good at walking,

All the way to the bathroom like a very cool girl

short hair, tattoos, and everything I have loved
on the soles of my shoes on the carpet,
there is a whole
world in that.

Here's the thing, I'll change without meaning to, anyway.
The holes start burning anyway, first
poem I ever wrote dissolves into the carpet. I can't help it.
Love a good woman in armour. Have gotten so good at walking.

Here's the thing, some nights, I clutch my chest so tightly it's
like I have pushed you right back into my body. Spent three weeks
tracing all of our city into the soles of my shoes, so now that I sleep,
you come back to me.
Baby, I have gotten so good at missing you.
There is a whole world in that.

After Sappho – rewriting your life

Marij Bernart

–

[…] if, not

--- - the sun

just a dot on the horizon

… the dawn, […] cold sweat.

The way her dress drapes,

The way her hands taste,

You can't see the

She … kissed her on her [head]

[and then ran home in the rain and cried]

It's getting colder – tonight,

I was just a boy

but I was happy there.

[…] five years

… Alone …

But still […]

Known.

Glimpses

(in the scraps of a
Danish-English dictionary)

E. Croke

In the twilight, grimalkins wail under gorse
grotesque hymns to graceless gods;
gospels of grating teeth and broken sanity.
My ghost is haggard, mind mad
and heart stained with guilt.
Staggering though the grotto
I'm surrounded by walls of glyptic faces
left to starve on the judgement of truth.
This is my punishment.

Mum

Jack Dower

My mother said she can't sleep when I have a cough,
And I wonder if every parent is as good as her.
I wonder if every child is as sick as me.
And I know the answer, like everything else.
She rests on my desk,
Framed and picturesque.
And instead of holding me,
She is holding an award, a typewriter, a life
A whole life in her hands.
She is not my mother.
She is young, well-travelled.
Ineffable, maybe a writer.
I was convinced she was an actress,
Famous in that 90's dress.
In her dreams I am a stranger.

Cooking in the other room

Sarah Fitzgerald

A faint whistle and a resounding tap –
Glass or silver or marble.
Two minutes of bubbling
And the silence of a lid lifted,
air reaches places previously
uncharted.
Shuffle of wood under stone,
Perhaps that small, biting sound
mapped the course of the ceramic bowl –
Journeying from cupboard to round table,
the centre of Hestia's home.
A crackling sonata
of tealights and dripping flame-boats,
undercutting the bright clank of silverware.
An off-beat scratch of a worn timer
anticipating an oven's aged sigh of steam and
the smearing of tiles with perspiration.
The smooth clang
Of glass against glass
to punctuate the phrase.

Slowly,
the song fades and
Cuts. A brief
Dripping,
Tapping,
Humming,
Then ebbing.

The Path

Elsa Forrest

What has been falling away for years,
Peeling off me like the petal of a flower,
Has now unfurled fully in front of me.

Before me it lies,
Orange bricks,
Burned grass and square bales.

Trees form angry claws,
Blistered by the sun's heat,
Their only sign of life-
The green olives that dot each branch.

Grass is singed,
Skin is leather,
Wine is water.

Waves make their way to my feet,
Begging me to put my next foot forward and
the hills fold against the weight of each other.

In between them lies the path I will follow

Gravelled,

Rough,

Uneven.

Water dries up in me,

My scalp tingles,

telling me it is time to walk,

It will hurt but under the scorching sun

I am no less sure that this journey is as steady as the concrete of home.

My skin will burn

And then it will harden.

Deluge (or, Ophelia)

K. A. Jagai

The words for moisture sound
like what they are, which is to say
sluiced is the juiciest word
to describe both the summer storm
slicking the windshield and the blood
seeping unending from the wound within
my belly. Neruda said *sometimes I wake*
up and even my soul is wet and
you hated that didn't you. You
who haunts my every step, whose loss
is a ragged-edged hole in the back
of my skull, leaking wants and memories,
wherever I am a grisly trail. I leave
damp in my wake, tacky grief
drying in imprints like a cunt
or a stab wound deep inside
where not even lovers touch.
Where you touched, no lover could—
places that no longer exist anywhere
outside of my mind, but those too

are leaking into the world, staining
every word I speak to anyone who knew you
biblically, as blood, as passing strange,
as a bearded face on a stage.
I am trying to remember everything
you ever said—every foolish thought
and the time you vomited all over the yard,
and the first time we held each other, sharing
the same armchair in A's house like we did
it all the time, which as all intimacy begins,
became true. Twenty years
is most of my life, but soon it will be less,
and some day I will have known you less
than half, and nothing
makes me want to follow you off
a twenty third storey windowsill more than that.
How am I meant to go on living?
Every question is another cunt, more
life sluicing out of the wound to pool
upon this page. Death I know
with the intimacy of worship. Death goes
on and has no patience for sentiment.
Asks nothing. Says little. Holds
nothing but nothing in its hands.
You have chosen to go where I have

always longed. You have beaten me.
I run through the deluge, everything sluicing
over me, through me, from me.
These days, even my soul is wet.

As It Flies

K. A. Jagai

An hour out of Mesa Verde, driving west
on Route 160, a single black brushstroke circling
overhead. A hoarse cry. A lament.
One for sorrow; this I know.

We listen to *August and Everything After*, an ominous quiet
over the car and then a smell I know with a visceral ache—
the firefighters rappelling down from their choppers, the ash
inches deep, enough to hide a stick burnt to a perfect cylinder,

enough to roll my ankle. My body turns boneless, slinky-ing
sideways like an inflatable tube man, nothing to hold in miles
of low mountain scrub, and then down on my knees
penitent once again, nine and eleven and twenty-seven and

kneeling at a pew in St. Patrick's, the whole miracle cathedral
mostly empty because of fucking COVID. I am praying for the first time
in over a decade in the hopes my dead grandma will come
to my homosexual wedding like she didn't think I was gonna burn.

Memory, always, like matryoshka dolls. I remember you—
the church, the name, you're dead—and then we come around the

corner
and across the valley,
thousands of skeletons.

Like the dream you had—uncountable silver skeletons
climbing into the sky, and the sun is setting now, the smell
of pine smoke rising up with the evening exhale
of what was once a verdant forest. Mesa Verde. Green.

Black spines on the back of the mountain
like a porcupine, shaking gently with every step
or in the wind—but this place is dead and still.
Skin of the land burnt crisp, the warm scent overwhelming

and gorgeous. We love the smell of a campfire.
We love the way the wood crackles in the pit,
the way sparks fly up into the starry heavens, dancing gold
against watery blue, ink-blue, the blue-black depths

like the ocean, like caverns, and the spill of the Milky Way
sprinkling feather dust down as Cygnus spreads his wings,
wider than the planet.
Oh, grief. How it envelops the body

calls us back
to ourselves, to our every self

who has felt this ache, like a cancer overtaking the cells.
I turn the radio down, listen to four bodies breathing

in sacred mourning.
We drive through miles of ashblack,
empty death.
Up above, the seer screams on.

Hadal Zone

K. A. Jagai

I sink into the trench abyss of grief
        as whale fall—
too vast for tender human comprehension,
        bringing life to the deep.

In this place, my unravelling is a feast
        for those in need:
to gorge upon memory and devastation,
        to take only

what one must take to survive
        in the dark.
How quiet it is, down here. How empty
        speckled with light

not from stars but within that which lives
        in the direst parts
of existence, places where no man can go
        but by force.

Open your hands.
Take what you need from this carcass
of spirit, and live.

Rise up into the light.

DÚN CHÍOMHÁIN: 07-09.11.25

Valentine Jones

We took the road around the peninsula's stomach,
saw distant grey islands stretch themselves off the rim,
saw birds like grains of rice tossed to the sky
flurry to small heights, glide on invisible breezes, fly
between the shafts of light splitting the intolerable grey
blanket of clouds. All that is allowed
to be is beautiful, the thick walls of the heart
clenching and loosening in turn, forcing blood
to pump through veins that feel less like soulmagic
and more like pipes in a car. Mechanical movement.
The islands drop away.

Escape

Emily Anna King 锡萍芳

I.

i remember running from everything — the dishes half painted with jelly and peanut butter, blankets unraveled, messages asking if i need anything from the store, a dust bunny in the corner, fern leaves drying, my father's old age and my mother's calls to remind me about family dinner tomorrow, the book dog eared on the counter, cold coffee forgotten in the mug, playing cards shuffled from before, my best friend's news that she's moving, the plane ticket i cannot buy yet to visit, memories of a city where dogs wander alleys filled with gems and cigarettes, my self and the responsibility of knowing her, the future and its mirages of unknown made of shapes of colors like patches of leaves changing —

II.

i knew i would return, but first,

silver stream,

first,

smoothed stones beneath bare feet,

first,

this animal we are, blood and bone and a compass

made of brine and hunger, bare skin to earth

stepping forward, away, beyond

III.

i remember snow
and your voice soft and gentle
like steam over tea

we laid in the field
beneath hawk wings, maple leaves
a feeling of calm

when i think of us
a deer leaps over
small stream towards wildflowers
and waiting rabbit

神话 Myth

Emily Anna King 锡萍芳

I
myth leaves me
rain jacket blown open
and there is only the dog
who follows me as i remember
        the way to hell, close like scent of lilac

seven turns and a stop light
brittle voice stripping birch trees,
bare and exposed
the wound tender and blooming
        violets trampled beneath our feet

there is a corner store
the sign is blinking
about a discount while
this life has no discount
        but death in the alley, the ashes, the eyes

light through the branches, stray plane above

the dog knows the color of wine spilled,
crook of an arm drawing her closer,
softness of a smile because of her
        running onward through the wood

II

hades wants to know what it is to die

hades wants to know what it is to love

hades wants to know what it is to live

i tell him:
sometimes they are one in the same—

temporary, desperate

last call like a fading youth

seven carnations blooming in a mason jar

        severed from their roots

placed in the light

i tell him:

i'd stay longer,
but someone is waiting for me

above

III
at the airport:
lives are condensed, disassembled
not unlike late night pondering of disappearance
beyond gate C12
shampoo bottles mislabeled
cherry blossom, sunscreen half open
crumpled shirts for warmer weather
frayed teddy bear, anxiety medication
extra change, contact solution, sun dress
the color of carnations dried, photos

of the dog in the woods unburying a path
to last call in the underworld, shaking out her fur
leaving darkness behind as i stand behind the
camera calling her home;

when i am alone, the dog becomes
brown spotted myth and my body floats

through the world, untouched
until her nose presses wet against my cheek
and we return
return to violets blooming once more

and the corner store dry after rain

Home Early

Ruby Lynch

Nine P.M, June. The sun sinking.
Drunk, but just enough to smile
I walk home, through canopies of trees -
stomach sloshing, strong and content.
The muscles of my heart are thicker,
blood lethargic. I am caught up in the soft air
but to be caught is to be held.
Wading through the honey of the sun,
seeping across the road in slants
I wave at a baby, tottering like a wind-up toy.
A fox that crosses on the leafy backroad
is still for an odd amount of time;
until I notice, then - it scampers.
I walk forward, unnoticed for a while.

A Sheep Grazes on the Shoreline in the Last Flush of Day

after *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Cian Morey

A sheep grazes on the shoreline in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes on the coarse grass of the shoreline in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes on the coarse dark grass of the surf-shorn shoreline in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes on the coarse shrub stubble of the lumpen shoreline while the shepherd looks skyward in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the lumpen shoreline while the young shepherd lifts his tired eyes skyward and the ships set sail in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the lumpen shoreline, while the drowsy shepherd heaves his gaze skyward to the ripening night, and the stout carracks float out in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline, while the drowsy shepherd,

poor of pocket but fortuned with wishes, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, and behind him the stout carracks float out in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline as it fills out into a soft green down, while the drowsy shepherd, peasantry to his boots but with his hardened feet crossed in a dream of softer times, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, past all the many reaching trees, and behind him the stout carracks, with their pale sails, float out in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully, complete and self-sufficient, on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline as it rises and crests into a folk-green hill, folding to the ploughman who layers steps upon steps into this tender earth, while the drowsy shepherd, hugged to his staff, peasantry to his boots but with his hardened feet crossed in a dream of softer times, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, past the ceaseless rivers of trees that flow up and up through their leafy deltas, and behind him the stout carracks, with their pale sails, float out in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully, complete and self-sufficient, on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline as it rises and crests into a folk-green hill, folding to the ploughman who layers steps upon steps into this tender earth, a whole staircase into this ancient new earth, carrying on, like the angler who casts out his line once again, carrying on, while the drowsy shepherd, hugged to his staff, peasantry to his boots but with his sore feet crossed in a dream of leisured living, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, past the ceaseless rivers of

trees that flow up and up through their leafy deltas, and he thinks of all the poetry he could write, and behind him the stout carracks, with their pale toad-throat sails in full bloat, float out in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully, complete and self-sufficient, on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline as it rises and crests into a folk-green hill, spongy and giving, folding to the ploughman who layers steps upon steps into this tender earth, a whole staircase into this ancient new earth, and lowers his eyes from the wondrous sunset to hold to the path and keep true to the work, carrying on, like the angler who flings forth his line one more time on this broad leaden evening of unbitten bait, carrying on, while the drowsy shepherd, hugged to his staff, peasantry to his boots but with his sore feet crossed in a dream of leisured living, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, past the ceaseless rivers of trees that flow up and up through their leafy deltas and are forever disgorging more wandering distributaries into the malachite ocean of heaven, and he thinks of all the poetry he could write, and behind him the stout carracks, with their pale toad-throat sails in full bloat, float out from the bay and its cradling of mountains solid as adamant but pale as smoke, invisibly in motion in the last flush of day.

A sheep grazes peacefully, complete and self-sufficient, on the coarse shrub stubble that bristles the length of the lumpen shoreline as it rises and crests into a folk-green hill, spongy and giving, folding to the ploughman who layers steps upon steps into this tender earth, a whole staircase into this ancient new earth, and lowers his eyes from the wondrous sunset to hold to the path and keep true to the work so that six months from now there will be food on the trenchers of his shining children, carrying on, carrying on, like the angler who flings forth his line one more time on

this broad leaden evening of unbitten bait and unbidden remembrance of the wheelwright's daughter, long gone from the village with the alderman's son, but the angler still is carrying on, carrying on, while the drowsy shepherd, hugged to his staff, peasantry to his boots but with his sore feet crossed in a dream of leisured living, heaves his gaze skyward to the bubbling dusk, past the ceaseless rivers of trees that flow up and up through their leafy deltas and are forever disgorging more wandering distributaries into the malachite ocean of heaven, and he thinks of all the poetry he could write, if only he knew how to shepherd the right letters into all the right words as he shepherds his flock into all the best pastures, week after week, year after year, carrying on, carrying on, and behind him the stout carracks, with their pale toad-throat sails in full bloat, float out to the promise of faraway ports, to the notion of a homecoming in a land they've never known, far from the bay with its cradling of mountains all white as antiquity and gossamered with distance, in imperceptible everlasting motion with the infinite drift of tectonic time, and somewhere a man falls out of myth and into the sea, and the world carries on, as it has always carried on, as it will always carry on, as a sheep grazes on the shoreline in the last flush of day.

Dieppe
(after Beckett)

Gerry Murphy

again the last ebb
the dead shingle
the turning then the steps
towards the lights of old
ah jaysus.

A Twig Girdler's Proposition to an Oak Tree

Edward Myers

Let me inside
to what you hide
underneath.

Let me wedge
between the cracks, reveal
rivers of your skin.

I've seen the woodpecker drill his skull
into the hull of
fruit-bearing flesh.

What makes his beak more noble?
My mandibles are just as sturdy.
They're searching — nosing through nooks,
desperate to breathe
the musk of rotting wood.
Oh, I'd tear through you
like hound through carrion,

wet my carapace with you

as I dig, dig, dig.

You

Jamie Ó Duinn

Raging and drowning in the
Waves of crowds and counsellors
I sink further only to see

You.

And like yesterday's underpants
I am turned

In-
Side out.
Up-
Side down.
Back-
To front.
Over-
And out.

Distance

Mikołaj Raszewski

In a dark ocean of people, it is hard to find the horizon.

I am drowning in my hesitation, misremembering the metres I have swam through and where I am heading.

Yesterday was your nineteenth, but wasn't it September a day ago, and I still recollect the leaves shifting colour as I picked every hue off the overhead maple.

The world was still supple and ready for conquest, and with every step, we were skipping past weeks, months and memories, hands cradling naivety. Bitter frost settled and melted before you, unnoticed, and days stretched like amber silk;

We spent such days in each other's heads, memorising verses. You beamed sunlight through branches when I laughed, and the earth warmed under my feet.

That summer, I wrote you messages of promise which you wept at; words I clung onto firmly; a part of me for you to store away in your lungs.

My dear, sentences of brightness shine through you yet; when I pass you by and listen for the exhale. Despite my distance, the skies of home stay lit as long as you breathe.

Leftovers

Mimmi Riikonen

It used to be the next best thing.

The connection breaks down
again; your mouth freezes
before finishing the sentence.
You say the story isn't
worth repeating —

We used to dress up to slouch over the computer,
buy frozen meals and call it a restaurant. You used to hold my hand,
somehow.

you're sorry to be tired,
it's
been a long week.
I ask for details and you promise later —

An ocean between us, yet I wouldn't end
the day without you saying good night.
I used to think it's the sweetest kind of love,

you show pictures of your
birthday;
it fills me with
spite
to see you smile —

maybe I still do. If only we could remember how to pretend.

a movie replaces our words
I'd give anything for you to say
any
thing —

I've begun to only get leftovers of your days.
I could cry about it, and you'd still be just as far.

— the connection breaks down again.
It takes time to notice.

On Missing Weir River

M. M. Stone

My little ribbon of muck and rock,
scent of low tide, yawning
at the crack of muted dawn;

its mirror body, in a coat,
woven of mist and cordgrass;
breathing in the chill of quiet

morning. In a 2008 silver Honda
Pilot, I pass through mornings,
years over the speed limit.

My fingers brushing
along my little ribbon,
a falling strand of hair.

Sonnet of a Bygone New England Winter

M. M. Stone

We wandered past grocery store aisles,
chicken noodle soup, saltines and honey–
you held my hand, tightly, as if a child;
a moment, I believed that once you were me.
That evening we drove down to the lake,
you ran, free. Your innocence grew lithe,
the ice formed a blanket for us to play;
we laughed like children, floating into life–
A crack; you fell. Your eyes, drowning in the sun.
I pulled you from the water, held you alone,
brought you to the car, cried like a harp, unstrung;
I prayed to God that I could bring you home.

I awoke, sunlight peeking through the window–
for memory was a dream; winter, a ghost.

Sublime Flight

After Georgia O'Keefe's *A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills,* 1946

M. M. Stone

I

create white mountains, contort my stone spine,
ivory staircase I am never to climb.
I am a skull I will never touch.
my breath, a dark bird,
too soon, turns to dust.

Hunt

Viktor Ziak

Glistening blood trails through trees.

The bone must have broken through the animal's skin.

Snapped branches stained crimson trace an easy path to follow.

She is exhausted but certain the animal is more so.

She is closing in.

A child running through the tall grass,

laughter spilling like marbles over warm fields.

It is just before dusk when she finds her prey.

The small body lies curled up on the forest floor, thin limbs twitching feebly.

Shallow breaths escape the lungs, surrounded by the growing pool of blood.

A memory then, of screams,

feet hitting warm asphalt, a tumble and scraped knees. A delicate, steady hand wiping away tears.

The huntress steps closer and kneels. Not woman nor man, just a child, and the fear in those dark brown eyes that mirrored her own.

They always made her think of deer.

“Mother.”

It comes not as a question. It is acceptance, a simple greeting. It is nothing at all.

The one who has not been called mother for so long

(to whom the title will soon belong no more) pulls out a knife.

And as the gut hook breaks the afternoon light, colours dance on her face.

No protests, nowhere to run. The soft skin parts easily, the knife cuts like a diver through water, elegant and smooth.

Everything cold.

Eyes turn deep gold in the sunlight. Smell of pine and salt water,

sharp metallic taste.

Pulsating warmth escaping upwards in streams of pungent vapour.

FICTION

Checklist

Bana Aassy

Sawsan walks along HaNassi Avenue, quick and determined in the jungle that is the city of Haifa at midday. In its own way, this is new. The sky, the trees, and the color of the concrete main road are so saturated compared to the nighttime setting Sawsan is more used to. She'd always leave work after her coworkers, taking advantage of the quiet stillness that the museum had to offer before taking a bus to her small apartment. The *dirah*, as she's gotten used to calling it, adopting the Hebrew word. She can't call it home yet, despite living in the city for almost two years now.

It's only when her body responds with headaches and bad mood swings that Sawsan neglects her coffee and sandwich-fueled meals for actual home cooking. She craves mujaddara. Her body is already bracing itself for the spices, the softly cooked lentils, and the fresh, vegetable-heavy salad rich in olive oil and lemon juice. Home or not, she still has to cook meals from time to time. And this time she miscalculated, staying in the city without getting her groceries from her trusted vendors at the farmer's market in her hometown. And it's too late to catch a bus to go outside the city on *Shabbat*.

The air conditioner slaps her skin at the entrance, evaporating the dampness too quickly for her body to handle. "*Sogrim ʿod khatzi shaʾa!*" A man yells out at one of the cash registers. Sawsan checks the time on her phone. Half an hour, that's forty minutes, tops. She lifts her hand to him in acknowledgment. It'll be short, just a few things, and she can get back to the apartment. Sawsan takes a basket, her eyes constantly avoiding the blue-and-white color combination and the new addition of yellow ribbons, from bake sales to insurance ads. Everything smells of plastic and the faint

chemical smell of cheap soap.

She walks past shelves and aisles, passing dozens of brands for every one product. One, two, three, four kinds of pasta, canned tuna, canned corn, pickles, tahini that doesn't have any Arabic written on it, chocolate, sour candy, chips, pretzels, rice.

The rice makes her pause.

It comes to her in a flash. An image of a little boy. No, not an image. A video. A little boy in the scorching heat, in tattered clothes, drops a pot of soup on a dirt road. No, he *has* dropped it, and now he's crying in a pleading Gazan Arabic dialect.

She takes a deep breath and continues down the aisle.

The bulgur is nowhere to be found. Her eyes scout for anyone in uniform. A woman in a navy-blue shirt in the next aisle is sticking price tags on air fresheners. "*Slikha*," Sawsan approaches, the change in her accent instinctive. The name tag on the woman's shirt reads *Rooti*. Next to it is a yellow ribbon pin. "Where can I find the *burgool*?"

"What?" Rooti winces. Sawsan repeats. "Ah, the *booghgool*. We don't have any." Her voice is a droning monotone. She turns back to her task, leaving Sawsan to doubt whether the small exchange ever happened.

Disappointment heavies her step as she returns to the rice section. *It's not that bad*, she consoles herself. *Well, the Lebanese make it with rice*, she thinks. *But we're not Lebanese, we're Palestinian*. And it's not the same. Sawsan bounces the sealed rice bag in her hand.

The little boy wouldn't have complained. Neither would his mother, father, grandmother, nor grandfather. Whoever remains alive. She can see their eyes, deep brown like hers, vast, always wet at the edges. She can see their hollowed cheeks, glistening with sweat, tanned from lack of shelter rather than a fun day at the beach. What a stupid thing to do, to worry about preferences

when she can so easily imagine little ribcages protruding through thin skin.

The bag of rice drops into the basket. Momentarily, its weight brings her down with it, and she holds the shelf with one hand. A kind of paralysis spreads from her toes, throughout her body, to her fingertips. Her stomach tickles, then goes numb, and instantly, Sawsan loses her appetite. Is this shame, or rage?

Her heart beats rapidly in her throat. The yellow ribbons mock her, everywhere, all the time. Her knees tremble. Her breaths are shallow. Her ears are hot. Her heart is still pounding. *Rage*, the word echoes in her mind. Rage that boils and threatens to burst at any moment whenever—

A little girl screams.

Sawsan shudders and immediately follows the sound. A woman with a head covering drags a crying little girl next to her. She yells that her little girl can't have any grape juice. Their long skirts and long-sleeved shirts match in design. "*Ima, ima...*" the little girl calls out through wet eyes and red cheeks. Sawsan's heart throbs. She's willing to buy the juice herself if it means a child stops crying. As she hears the mother marching on outside the supermarket with a full bag already in hand, Sawsan stares blankly and convinces herself that, surely, it's for the daughter's own good. Surely, not satisfying your sweet tooth isn't the end of the world. It's not the same. Unlike a little boy dropping the only meal he's acquired for weeks. Sawsan shivers.

The items run in her head like a checklist. Further into the supermarket, right next to the fridges, the fruit and vegetables are boxed together in crates. No more tomatoes. No more white onions, only green. Very few bell peppers, green more than yellow, no more red. Cucumbers that don't look particularly fresh. A few small heads of cabbage. Lettuce browned at the edges. Bouquets of parsley speckled with yellow across the tips. Some apples. Some

oranges, cartoonishly orange. The smell is pungent, like something beginning to rot at low temperatures. No citrus tang from the lemons or the oranges. No sharp scent of soil.

Sawsan's feet drag her closer, heavier still, and she inspects her options. That's the traditional Arabic salad out of the question, too. She toys with a cabbage head, wrapped in plastic. She can chop it thin, with cucumbers and green onions. But with lentils and rice? It's not the same. It's just not the same.

The white sticker pops against the fruit's dense color. The distributor's name is written in Hebrew, in black font, with a wavy Israeli flag sweeping through like a ribbon. The stamp glares at her like a declaration of ownership, jabbing at her like a needle in the brain. All the slogans that have been surrounding Sawsan every minute for the past two years rush back. She can't keep ignoring them anymore.

Sawsan stands in front of the courgette crate. The vegetables are small and pale, the bottom of the pile, in what begins to look like an open prison cell. There's a paper label wrapped around every crate: *Totzeret haaretz.* She measures the words, how they sound, and what they are meant to mean. *Homegrown*. It continues, *honoring the unbroken thousands-year tradition of Israeli farming*. The chuckle that leaves her lips is lifeless.

Haaretz. Al-bilad. She swims in the rhythm of the Arabic equivalent as if she were in lake water. It invokes the warmth of home. Fields and orchards she never got to see. Fields and orchards long burned and replanted with metal and concrete. Her grandfather's stories of running among the trees, guarded in the shade as he played with his neighborhood friends. His stories of the soil that offered in abundance, of courgettes plump and rich in color and taste, and of the ever-cooling sea breeze.

Now, Sawsan stands over the produce, and it feels like a death sentence. It's not the same. The shriveled items stare back from

their crates under an air conditioner that's too cold, like babies plucked out too soon now fighting for their lives in incubators.

The little boy returns, in the same tattered clothes: quiet, still. He stands next to her as if they were honoring the dead together. She imagines his eyes piercing through her, judging, perhaps, pleading. *So, this is how it starts.* Sawsan registers the apparition as if he were real. *Are you punishing me?* she thinks. *For my silence? For eating? For being alive?* The little boy only stands in silence, a mirror reflecting her own guilt back at her.

The basket drops to the floor. There is a growing stink engulfing her. She takes a deep breath through her mouth that quivers as it leaves her lips, shaking her insides. Her stomach pumps acid rather than gurgle out of emptiness. Her entire body aches to move, to leave, to taste real food. Out of sheer politeness alone, she picks her basket up again and returns every item to where it came from.

Sawsan walks out to the hot and damp Middle Eastern afternoon, unchanged and just as loud as when she'd entered the supermarket. The buildings overpower the trees, and the concrete roads are enough to forget this was once a mountain. The breath she's taking is not enough.

Humours of Irish Life: Under MacGillycuddy's Reeks

Frank Eager

There once was a man from Norwich, who lived in an old bothy cottage, on the cliffs of the south of Ireland, and his name was MacCarthy, William Seward MacCarthy, and for one thousand years, his sect of the MacCarthy clan moved from Ireland and England and vice versa, one generation after the next, through changing economic and legal statuses.

But, with only sisters and rural, ascetic seclusion, William seemed to be the final high twig of that family tree. He was the intelligent, easy-going man of the pronounced Celtic type, with a round, good-looking face, a humorous mouth, abundant, twinkling eyes and only a shrewd volubility. He had a small volume, a slight man, his body only slightly escaping the broadness of his neck.

In terms of William's national out look, the fact of each successive generation of his family emigrating back and forth led to a dizzying mixture of religious and political alignments and persuasions, often, living under the same roof; IRA men, Orangemen, Conolly socialists, Parnellites, Catholics, Protestants, Quakers, Huguenots, conversos, Blueshirts and, well, William.

In small metal ammo boxes, William, unemotionally, kept the artifacts of his family history, the tear stained letters about returning to the homeland never seen, or letters lamenting life in Picadilly, Strand and Lester Square, the pages upon pages of opposing pamphlets and flyers emblazoned with "Never Never Never" and "Our Day Will Come," with means-of-production, will-to-power and name-of-the-Father. In his will, William leaves all these bits and pieces, too

varied and many to be relayed, to whatever National Library or Museum will take them.

The plans for his own bodily artefact are also equally undecided. "What the parish will do with me," he was known to say when asked, "Is what the parish will do to me. Throw me, sure, outside the walls of this island into the Atlantic ocean," he would conclude, throwing his eyes to heaven and sounding out an annoyed tsk, "Give me a stick to beat off anything that wishes to be ateing me... Sure, what care do I have when I'm gone?"

He was known by the members of the parish as a sound man, then as a "quare" man. He spoke largely in little phrases to everyone, typically just listening to whomever he met and never replying for very long, but always satisfying, never speaking too little. On a conversation about politics: "Sure, T'was Irish blood they were shpilling in any event, like." On the changing of the seasons: "Sure, jasus, the hours are really sinching in, aren't they, and it only six o'clock, sure." Giving advice to young men: "Sure, make a mouse o'yerself and the cat'll ate ya. 'Tis a true shaying alright. 'Era, Shaint Pether himself cuddn't shtand it and the piper that played before Moses, Lord blessh him."

With this general ease and solemnity, this outward calmness that indicates wisdom, most of the people that knew him believed William to be a relatively pious man, while he didn't always make it to mass or observe the Angelus, he was never seen working on Sunday or never seen behaving in any way estranged from the pulpit, so, in the eyes of the community, he was a sound man, and a good man, if a bit quare, but a sound man.

It is a common phenomenon, especially in these tight-knit communities, to operate with a strange sort of moral calculus, weighing up a fellow's unusual actions and character against their normal qualities within a staunch and often highly biased system in order to form an opinion of any given person. Too strange, you're a fool or a lunatic. Too ordinary, you're a dryshite or frigid.

A healthy dose of Saint and Sinner is needed in everybody, to keep you a good young lad or a good young one and still interesting. William was a bit quare, but a good man and a sound man, he was a reserved man and a blow-in, but still nice and sound enough as not to fall into being an off-putting man. He was a fine man, a sound man, one of life's good guys. It is a shame he does not go to church more often, or does not chat very much or come down the pub at all (unmirthed and unrevelryed by the busy haunts of men), but he's a sound man and a fine man and a lovely fella, and a respectable man for the young lads coming up, because, sure, don't they all call him 'Sir' when they see him on the road?

But, unbeknownst to this small world, he had one secret that he would never allow to darken the confession box or the drunken snug pouring out of the heart, that he would never utter out of his pleasant, intoning voice, never insinuate or hint at. That late at night, the many nights out of the month that the Pooka MacPhellimy, now an obscene drunk after the events of "At SwimTwo-Birds" (1939), would accidentally leave his tremendous heifers roam the field against William's property, William MacCarthy would strip off in his kitchen, in the dark and cold quiet and lubricate himself and sneak through the darkened grass in his socks and vault the small stone wall into the heifer field, in covert darkness, hunched, and sing the song of himself among and with the cattle, to relieve himself of the loneliness that tweaks him by the nose and rips at his beard and fills his heart, in his depths, with sour blood.

But one day, to the knowledge of no one else in the parish, the Pooka MacPhellimy had a stallion out with the heifers. With a regal gait, a shimmering caramel coat and a lush mane, its muscles and fibres visible under its tight skin, its tremendous frame propelled with absolute beauty by angular legs, the stallion made its entrance into the field that first day like a king on the day of his coronation. William flushed and filled with sour and unwhole-

some blood at the sight of it, stirring his depths with sickness. And after a few days of silent observation of the Pooka MacPhellimy and of his heifers, the gate finally was left open and the drunk's animals, the ones who wanted to roam, came slowly trickling from the gate, their haunchebones hitting the gate into the wall it is affixed upon, their hips swaying bowsy into the dark.

But William MacCarthy this time wasn't looking at the heifers' hips. He was looking for the shimmering coat of the stallion, iridescent in the moonlight. He prepares himself in his kitchen, his lights extinguished, the sound of his padding feet moving around the cold tiles as he opens his back door and meets the cold air and moves through the night in his nakedness.

Matters progressed in the field. At the tonic chord of his song of himself, a powerful light blasted from the gate. The standing stallion's coat gleamed all over. With the pale tumour of William MacCarthy at his stallion's rear, The Pooka MacPhellimy, under the shroud of his camera up on its tripod, with a flashbulb held between his precariously slender fingers and long dirty nails clinking on the magma-hot glass, made a photograph of the ragged MacCarthy.

The next day, by only the morning, every parishioner and citizen saw the Pooka MacPhellimy's steel plate daguerreotype and knew his secret. He was caught in the act, and like many men who have been in accidents involving the mind, damaged it thoroughly through intense trauma, William changed, and became withdrawn and even more distinct from the people who knew him, who now knew his secret. He aged slowly, withering and eventually dying a short time later at the age of 56.

But, on what would have been William's 57th birthday, from the stallion's distended stomach was borne a half-man and half-horse boy, named Orlick MacCarthy. At the instant of its birth, it rose onto its spindly legs, bow and bend inwards and steadied itself. It started walking west. Gaining more and more confidence. It start-

ed running. Then bolted fully, at a bent, breakneck speed.

It stayed up in the Kerry Mountains for sixteen years, the rocky MacGillycuddy's Reeks. The creature reared into boyhood and adolescence, disturbing tourists and locals, hiding mostly under the bridge or in rarely traversed routes behind rocks during the day, watching the Germans in luminous red and green and yellow hiking clothes, slowly trailing across the ridge as he lapped water from the lough. This horse-creature, horse-boy, was like the first horses brought to Europe, wild and full of natural, savage knowledge of the world. He was not a centaur, but a certified monster, a body and soul savagely contorted and pulled between horse and man, pale and precariously pink, slightly hairy skin with large liver spots and warts, blotches and freckles, features long and bulbous, with a jawbone protruding in grotesque, asymmetrical deformity, with thick eyelashes fluttering atop tiny eyes in massive caves of dark, evil eye-sockets. But a young man's wish to roam took hold of the beast, and he ventured, ran with ungodly speed, out east further and further until he passed the Pale and ended up in Loughshinny and realised that he could go no further. He jogged down the long, straight road, the dark asphalt flanked by wild hedges and reached the bay, like a visiting royal to Hibernia, the horse-boy met the curved beach and tangent stone pier shooting out into the Irish channel.

The sky was full of gold, playing corridors of it on the water, and with a furious jump off a low point in the cliff, he met the ocean.

His huge horseshoe rings of teeth snapped with saliva and seawater. His hooves exploding huge upturnings and dollops of white water like the perverted jizzum that spawned the unholy behemah. It escapes from the Loughskinny Bay, out into the still waters of the Irish Sea. And after a few, long weeks, Gwilyn Chambers, from his vantage point on the South Stack lighthouse near the Penrhos Feilw standing stones, calls for a rescue of the

animal in the waters as the Louvin Brothers' record, playing atop a small pine side table, fell into the dead wax and filled the small room with a repeating, crushed washing sound as the disc spun. And MacCarthy's son was sent down to London to be studied and became a lecturer of Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) at Brasenose College, Oxford, teaching for a considerable time a future Prime Minister, who spoke during a state visit to Ireland, shortly after the passing of the brute, "the late Dr. MacCarthy was an instructor of mine of a first rate at university. And he instilled in me, the wisdom of not just the material he lectured on, but more broadly, the wisdom of the Irish."

You Are Alright

Elena María Calero Gómez

Your alarm stomps your dreams to dust, and you open your eyes on the morning of the 10th of October at 4:15 am. You are confused, but it quickly falls onto you why you are awake when it is still dark outside. You like the thought of being faster than the sun today, and with this in mind, you get out of bed, bloom out of your pajamas, and get dressed. You put on a hoodie and jeans. Better to keep it simple for now. You will have time to experiment with your clothes once you reach Edinburgh.

Your last night self thought of tidying the room in the morning so that Nora does not get to know the messy side of you. This morning, you think that the room is not that bad and that Nora won't mind. This morning's thoughts win over last night's, so you go downstairs and have some breakfast. Being able to flow around the house within the ruling darkness makes you realize that this house that you've called home for only two months is more familiar to you than you thought. You're still not really used to the light switches being so high up the wall, and to every inch of the floor being covered by the carpet. As if the floor is flooding with fabric. You still don't entirely understand its purpose, but you like the feeling of it under your feet. Moving around while being aware that your roommates are asleep makes you conscious of your every step. And this morning, you perceive the sound of running water and the beeping of the microwave as traitors to your silence.

Before stepping out of the velvety darkness of the house and into the swallowing darkness of the outside, you check for your wallet and passport and get your backpack. As you step outside, you put up your hood. The night is not enough to hide your long hair. It is not that cold, but the puffer jacket seems to be the right

thing to wear: you look more corpulent in it.

It is 4:35 am when you set foot outside. Last night, you checked how much an Uber from your house to the airport would be. And your wallet –suddenly a climate action activist– decided that the best option would be to walk to the center and get a bus to the airport there.

You have a forty-five-minute walk ahead of you. Last night, you felt so intelligent creating this little plan; you were going to save so much money. This morning, facing the endless endlessness of Blarney Street, you don't feel that intelligent. Still, this morning's thoughts win over last night's, and you start walking.

The brown leaves at the feet of the naked trees surprise you. You were not able to contain the pale rays of sun in your hands and its warmth in your caramel skin, and now Autumn is here. You decide not to wear your headphones; you prefer to listen to your surroundings this morning. Ignoring how stupid you can seem, you start taking bigger steps to try to appear tougher than you are. You look back to check if someone's there. The dim city lights don't touch anyone but you. The shadows on the ground only belong to the cars parked on both sides of the street. There's no one. Continue walking. Silence is not your best friend, so you start calling Nora because you know that she is awake in case you need something.

Nora: Hey, is everything okay? Are you out of the house already?

You: Yeah, I got out like five minutes ago. I just thought I could use some company while I walk. Are things with Mira better?

Nora: Right. Yeah, not really, I don't know how to handle this anymore, I don't know what to say to her. She gets all defensive every time I try to explain myself.

You: Yeah, it's been so long since I last talked to her that I forgot how she can be during arguments. What was it that started the

argument this time?

Nora: Nothing really. It's always nothing. I've been so busy with uni and work that I've not been able to see her for a couple of weeks. And you know she takes it personally. She thinks I don't want to hang out with her specifically.

You: Hmm... yeah... And what have you told her?

Nora: I explained to her how my social life has been nonexistent since uni started last month. But she went on to say how I must not be that busy if I have time to go and meet with you in Edinburgh for a few days.

You: But this trip has been planned for months now, Nora.

Nora: Yeah, you try explaining that to her. I don't know why I still bother. Nothing I ever say–

You: Wait, Nora, a man is coming towards me.

Nora: Who?

You: –a man. A fucking man is crossing the street towards me.

Nora: What is he doing? Is he bothering you?

You: –

Nora: Hey! Are you okay? Is he bothering you? What's happening?

You: He just collapsed.

Nora: Huh?

You: He collapsed. The man just collapsed behind me. He passed right by me. And then he tripped trying to get onto the pavement and fell to the ground practically at my heels.

Nora: What? Is he okay?

You: –

Nora: Hello? Answer me!

You: Yeah! ... I don't know. I got as far away as fast as I could. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I was scared to help him. He's trying to get up now.

Nora: It's okay... It's okay.

You: –

Nora: Are you okay?

You: He's getting up, Nora.

Nora: Okay, try to walk fast.

You: He's up. The man is up, Nora, on his feet.

Nora: –

You: Nora, he's coming my way.

Nora: Don't look back! He probably doesn't even know where he's going and hasn't noticed you.

You: How couldn't he?

Nora: –

You: Talk to me! Say something!

Nora: Yes, I'm sorry, I don't know what to say. Is he close?

You: I'm not looking back. I don't hear him. I don't think I hear him.

Nora: –

You: I'm looking back. He's gone. He must have turned left.

Nora: Oh my god, thank god. Are you alone? Isn't there anyone else around?

You: No, I'm alone. Jesus, what even was that? Oh my god. He just collapsed behind me. I didn't even see him coming up to me. I thought he was going to grab me.

Nora: It's okay, everything's fine now. You're alright.

Nora: How long until you're at the bus stop?

You: I'd say like thirty minutes? This fucking street seems to make itself longer to trap you in it.

Nora: Okay... I'm leaving the house now, but I can keep talking to you while I'm in the taxi.

You: No, it's okay. I forgot to charge my phone, and I'm running low on battery. I'll call you if I need something, and I'll let you know when I arrive at the airport. Let me know when you get there.

Nora: Are you sure? Are you sure you are okay?

You: Yes, yes. I'm hanging up now. I'll let you know if anything else happens. Keep your phone close to you in case I need anything, please.

Nora: Okay, please be careful!

You hang up.

You remind yourself that you are supposed to be taking big steps. Reign this side of the street. There is still half of Blarney Street left for you to walk. Blarney Street, the longest street in Ireland and the fastest route from your house to the center. You don't know how many times you have walked up and down this route in the past two months since you moved here. It's wild to you how there's only room for one car to drive down this two-directional street. During your walks, you enjoy watching drivers figure out how to make the situation work. They always look to you like kids who mess up the choreography at a school's Christmas recital and try to quickly get back to it as if nothing has happened. It looks a bit messy, but they make it work. You look back to check if someone's there. None of the windows let any light out behind you. There's no one. Continue walking.

Tonight, walking around feels like the biggest hide-and-seek game is taking place all around you, and you have just become

aware that you're part of the game too. You try to distract yourself. It's funny for you to think of how this street makes you feel differently depending on who you are walking with and what time of the day it is. How it seems to shrink into a five-minute walk when you are coming home with your roommates, gossiping about the night's events. And how it seems to grow into an insulting endlessness when you walk all alone under the rain, carrying bags full of groceries.

You like that it is mostly houses on each side of the street. Mostly windows and doors. You can't help trying to imagine the kind of people who live in each house after analysing the patterns on their doors and the arrangement of their living rooms. You can't help taking a quick look at their interiors when you pass by. Your favorite peekings involve a cat sitting on the window, studying the exterior as you study the interior.

Some of the people living in this street express a part of themselves through the decorations on their window sills. Going from the action of superhero battles to the lifelessness of a bowl of plastic pieces of fruit. By now, you already know how much of the street is left, depending on the figurines that look back at you through the other side of the glass. Spiderman lets you know that you have 7 minutes left to reach the end of the street. Fifteen minutes left to reach the bus stop.

Being surrounded by people, even if they are asleep, makes you feel a little better, a little safer. A scream would reach them if needed. You just need to keep walking. You think of Nora on her way to Madrid's airport in a comfortable and warm taxi.

At the intersection of Blarney Street and Shandon Street, you see an old man going down the street on your left. You continue walking in the direction you both seem to be going to: towards the bridge. The cold that the water brings to your exposed face would not be unpleasant any other night. You would prefer not to have to share the pavement with anyone. Before you have time to

reconsider your options, the old man catches up and approaches you. Try to appear bigger. It's okay. He's old. You're stronger than him. Here we go.

Old man: Excuse me, young lady, would you mind helping me get to my house? It is right across the bridge.

You: I'm sorry sir but I'm kind off in a rush...

Old man: It surely won't take you long! My legs are not what they used to be... But my house is right there! You can see it from here. Look! It's the one with the dolls in the windows!

You: Okay, sure...

Old man: God bless you, kid. I'm Craig, nice to meet you! Mind if I grab you by the arm while we walk? My knees are sadly not those of a footballer anymore.

You: Of course.

Craig: I thought I could go for an extra-long walk tonight, but it seems that I overestimated my body.

You: –

Craig: I like to go on walks when the city is undisturbed. That's the time when it has more secrets to tell. Plus, all the noise that the day brings to the streets gives me massive headaches.

You: I can understand that, I think.

Craig: Maybe it is an old people thing.

You: –

Craig: But anyways, where are you going with that enormous backpack at 4 in the morning, kid? Are you running away from home?

You: Oh, no, no. I'm actually twenty-one. A bit old to be doing that. But that's a nice theory, though. I didn't know I looked that rebellious.

Craig: I'm sorry, kid. Twenty-one? I can never tell these days. This youth confuses me.

You: It's okay! It confuses me, too, sometimes.

Craig: Part of the problem is that I should be wearing my glasses, but I find there's a certain charm in not being able to see everything that's there for you to see.

You: I suppose you are right. I would try that too if I were a bit braver.

Craig: Bravery came to me with age, kid! You're alright.

You: Yeah... I'm actually on my way to the airport. I'm meeting with a friend in Edinburgh, and we're coming back to Cork afterwards so that I can show her the city.

Craig: That's lovely! I lived in Edinburgh for a couple of years. Too many ghosts for me, though.

You: That's one of the reasons I'm going!

Craig: And it is a really good reason.! They are nice if you're just there for a few days.

You: –

Craig: Well, this is me, kid.! I hope you enjoy Edinburgh.! Thank you for helping me out. It's not that common to get help nowadays.

Craig lets go of your arm and shakes your hand. Its bony feeling does not match its warmth. He goes through what looks like an incessant amount of pockets to find his keys, and when he has them, he opens his door. His childhood-like liveness but wrinkled face disappearing behind it.

The bridge is now past you. You still have to walk ten minutes to reach the bus stop. You are already in the center of the city, but you don't yet know whether that makes you feel safer. There are still people on the streets: leftovers of the nightlife. You check your

phone just to see that the bus is getting to your stop in forty-five minutes. The idea of having to wait thirty-five minutes for it while standing by yourself on the stop makes you want to laugh hysterically.

The closest human being around you is an old woman carrying around a shopping trolley. The fact that she is alright somehow makes you alright. You are alright. You do not have any reason to think this is a night that asks for violence.

There is a group of guys at the end of the street. It does not look like they are moving anytime soon. You stop and pretend like suddenly there is something you need to check on your phone, like your life depends on it. What if it does?

You think of what to do. Of what your options are. You are still thinking of the man on the ground. What did you think he was going to do to you? Why do you always have to think so negatively of people? Do you have to think so negatively of people? Do you expect the worst?

You know you do not want to walk past these guys. You do not even have a specific rational reason as to why that is.

You get a text from Nora saying she is already at the airport. And you want to be at your respective airport too. You miss the elusive security of having walls surrounding you. Of blinding fluorescent lights falling all around you, policing the shadows. This morning's thoughts win over last night's. You unlock your phone and open the Uber app. It is done. You can see the driver's location getting close to you on your screen. You haven't met him yet, and you already know his full name and his license plate. You look up from the screen every ten seconds to look at the group of guys at the end of the street. They laugh, but the joke does not reach you. It's starting to rain, but that is not your problem anymore: the Uber is here.

You leave the backpack on the floor of the taxi and collapse into

the backseat. You recognise the latest pop hit playing on the radio. You are alright.

When the Forest Shed Its Veil

Annabel Hilgeman

I was eight years old when the underlying mechanisms of the universe began to reveal themselves to me. As I strolled between pin-pricky evergreens, my magic dowser steered me exactly where the forest wanted me, a handlebar controlling wispy legs.

It was a daily affair after my release from mom's homeschool lessons. After geography (dry), history (why?), maths (huh?) came the reassurance of moss, the generations of squirrel squatting and bird squawking, the flesh and breath of tree trunks teaching me the infallible syntax of the natural world before they were chopped down for paper so mom could attempt to teach me the same thing in our living room.

My walks were lovely and predictable until the pine aimed that pinecone at my head. As the dowser began to lose momentum, I was struck in the cowlick by its spines, sticky-outy like my stubborn hair. My vision pulsed once, twice, and I looked up, slanted, slightly indignant. The tree had caught my attention for a reason; it was changed. The top wasn't a treetop at all anymore. It had shed its tree-ness.

The tree's veil of polished definition had slid off and revealed the core, the inner molecular coilings, the magmatic roilings, the histories and future tendencies. The rest of the tree still looked as it always had—nibbled mushroom entrance at the bottom of the trunk, trunk carved in wrinkles like an elephant's skin, skin rings all present and accounted for by the students of the world, up-up-up, same old, same old tapering layers of tangible needles and pinecones that all worked together to create the expectation of a tree—but at the top, that razor-sharpness stopped. In its place was

a mystifying green hue, swimming with life. It was indescribable, almost four-dimensional, like hundreds of film negatives laid over each other, capturing eternal consciousness in one lively blur. I spun around to look at the other treetops. It wasn't just the one magical treetop; it was the whole canopy. It was beautiful and beyond comprehension, the undefined sky above it a vast treetopper of who knows. This should've confused me. It didn't.

It made sense that my human eyes didn't observe the true shape of things; that clarity in presentation obscured reality. After all, this forest had had centuries to figure out how to present itself. It felt like an act of intimacy that it had trusted me enough to drop a part of the facade and let me in on its ancient secrets. Or maybe it was just tired of keeping up appearances for the few people who came here.

Looking up again, I was thrilled to find a red shadow creature hiding in the treetops. It had little horns and in place of skin were strokes of green. Green for camouflage, said dad. The red shadow moved and morphed. A prehistorically large Cinnabar moth, a bouquet of roses, kindling of the Christmas hearth fire. Maybe.

This world was much bigger than I'd previously considered. I was okay with that. I spent hours trying to figure out what – and who – I was seeing from our kitchen window. Once, I saw a black shape circle the green of the forest. It had wings like a raven and a long, thin tail like a rat.

From the mouth of the forest I could see my house in the near-dusk. Even though my dad had built it with his own two hands, I found it in its true form, grainy except for the light of my ladybug lamp streaking up and down and right at me from my bedroom window like a halo. My house was surrounded by dozens of pixies, like golden-bright, flickering orbs. A figure stood in the garden. A lamppost (we didn't have one). A tree (could trees grow in one afternoon?). Dad.

Mom was alarmed when I told her. She demanded I take her to the exact spot where I'd seen the shadowy tree-man and rat-raven. I told her that wouldn't be possible, as they were ever-changing, and – more importantly – because the world had entrusted only me to see. That confused her. Confusion annoys moms. She dragged me to the forest, her sweaty palm sheathing mine as we walked.

I brought her to a little forest window that looked out on a lush green clearing surrounded by a dense blackness of trees. It was the ideal spot for watching the world at work. Secretly, I hoped mom wouldn't be able to see what I saw.

As we set our eyes on the distant landscape I enthusiastically pointed out the stag in the background. Mom said 'it's a toppled tree.' We walked a bit closer. His antlers grew beautifully, adding more boughs. I pointed them out. Mom said 'it's a goddamn tree.'

We walked through my invisible separation from reality. The forest put its veil back on. A tree stood in front of me.

'But mom, the fallen tree isn't true,' I said.

'Well, then what is true?' She spit out the last word like an insect had flown into her mouth.

I didn't answer. How could I explain that I could see everything and nothing; that that was the beauty? My silence annoyed mom. She sighed profanities and tugged me back through the clearing. At the edge, I turned around. A big deciduous lifted its arm to its mouth and shushed me.

With each passing season, my small world lifted its curtain a bit more. It embraced me. By the time I turned ten, large parts of my home had exchanged their faux clarity for buzzing reality. The world looked like a dream. Like magic. And when the threshold would finally cease to exist, I would become entwined in that magic. I was excited and slightly impatient. To me, the world before the threshold, the world I was still a part of, had lost all

meaning. It was empty beauty, like how dad assured me he had too much love in his life to die.

I saw him standing in front of the house all the time. Waiting. I cried warm, thick tears whenever I crossed the barrier and he became disguised as that horrible rotary clothes dryer. Jasmine detergent wafted from his old shirts mom still wore to bed everyday.

Mom had trouble coming to terms with my new appreciation for the world. Her initial worry had given way to apparent deafness whenever I talked about something new I'd seen. When her dismissal achieved no effect, it turned back to worry. Worry also makes moms mad. She began talking about 'taking me away' from my beloved home and 'sorting me out' or 'setting me straight.' I screamed and cried and hid and bit. I didn't want anything to mess this up. I was so close.

One early morning, she carried me, still asleep, to the car and drove us all the way to town. The town was unbelievable. The people were beautifully inconspicuous, like dewdrops on the cool morning grass. I told my mom how the gargoyle fixed to the cathedral fluttered its blurry wings, tired of performing the statue. Mom had reverted back to silence. Too captivated by my newly expanded world, I didn't realize I was being brought to its conclusion.

Less than two hours later I was in the car again. My pelting tears worked hard to replicate the true world, but as soon as they cleared everything was hideously defined. Glasses rested before my eyes like a sneering wall. Mom said I looked great, that it was better this way. I felt betrayed by her. Betrayed by my eyes. By the world.

As we drove onto the uneven road that led up to my house, I removed the round frames from my nose. Dad still stood in the garden, waiting to console me. Maybe.

A Small Clearing

Malaika Jawed

Late afternoon settles. Vera leans against the marble kitchen island, the one she had chosen two years ago, after extensive deliberation. Heaviness accumulates in her arms, as if dust from the cave in her chest—the one housing murmuring bees.

Loose sounds crawl and bump around the house: soup bubbles, Todd Chavez on TV, whistles from the radiator. A moment of sunlight rests on her, the press of it against her frame gathering warmth, then so much warmth that she shifts an inch to the side. The bees forage deeper into the belly. Vera bows her head, holding the slopes of her neck, tightening after the body's reflexive bob. Ear to shoulder, pull back. Other ear to other shoulder, pull back. Back to center, but there is a slip in her breath. Bending. Bent. Bend. She cuts her slow exhale short with a heavy, exhaustive one. The sun had shifted over, its warmth finding her again.

A cellphone goes off in a different corner of the house, then, goes silent mid-ring.

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Ronan's love had always been a quiet one, and Vera had been okay with that when they married four years ago. In fact, Vera found his presence serene, a welcome change from the rambunctious —loving, but incredibly loud— house she had grown up in. But the quiet ones, she discovered, tend to get quieter. And the loud ones, like Vera, feel inclined to get louder in response, until one day, they go silent too. Dinner for two was now two dinners, going to the bedroom was now to retreat into parallel rooms, and for Vera, waking with the bees raging in her chest, was now ritual.

Still against the kitchen island, her strained gaze holds some branches beyond the thick windowpanes framing suburban Cranston. The shadow of the large oak tree in the front yard splays across the kitchen landscape, providing temporary company. The slower Vera tries to breathe the harder the bees thrash against her ribs as she wonders who called Ronan, then tries to ignore her incessant obsession with his life. The bees nudge her to stand up straight, and she obeys. Then, in an act of rebellion, she sits down on the chair instead, taking chugs of lukewarm tea, translucent drops slipping down her jaw. Flavored water currents through her throat, a momentary distraction.

She watches the scene through the window—a girl in layers of pink who pauses her striding to throw a tantrum, then pauses her tantrum to re-evaluate the situation when her mother doesn't entertain it. Deciding against her earlier whims, the child trods forward to catch up. It feels like watching forgiveness happen faster than she could ever manage. Vera wipes her chin and continues watching the passers-by. It is an afternoon ritual to distract her from the ghost of her marriage overshadowing this house.

The bubbling tomato soup is suddenly the only sound. The radiator is no longer hissing, and the TV has been muted. Ronan is in the living room. Vera is in the kitchen. Her ears are in the living room. The bees think they have found what they're looking for. They pound against Vera's trunk in all different directions trying to get her to move towards him. She shifts her body back to center from the intrusion, and her eyes back to the tree.

To the grass behind the tree. To the sky behind the grass. To the white frame of the windowpane. She keeps her gaze in a straight line, though it tries resisting focus. Her ears in living room pick up the closing of the office door, and Ronan is again two walls away. The air feels stuffy with the smell of tomato soup.

Vera's spine bends for a moment, trying to fence in the heart that aches for more. She straightens, and a deep breath forcefully

escapes her. A bubble of loud teenagers comes into view, and she looks at them passing. A few feet away, two upright still figures, then one of them doubles over.

Bees swarm towards Vera's throat.

Beyond the oak, near the neighbor's fence, a boy and a girl. No, a young man and woman. Vera observes as the man in plaid just stands. Something in the woman's posture catches Vera before she understands it— the bend of her shoulders, the surrender in it. The woman in the red cardigan leans forward at the waist, heaving. One of her hands holds the fence for support while the other one grips her chest as if physically holding her guts in, visibly shaking from the pain. The ache that Vera has resisted feeling— by changing her perspective, reframing it, altering it to see the good— floods into her bloodstream, her hands are pulsating with bees. She can feel their wings.

Like Ronan, in the last conversations they had that resembled anything real, the man in plaid just stands, indifferent, no, exasperated, looking down at her. His hand comes to rest on his temples, then drags down his face. The bees rest for a moment to give way to visceral rage in Vera's heart that propels her to the door, an impulse with which she has not been able to demand more for herself, at least not in recent memory. Her voice travels loudly across the lawn as she says, "Are you okay?" Her voice cuts the air open.

Red unbends and faces Vera. The man faces her too, both of them caught off guard, sunlight flashing off their damp cheeks— and Vera sees it. Both, with remnants of deep laughter on their faces.

The woman clutches her chest, still, and the man's face contorts to a shyness at being caught in vulnerable happiness. She nods vigorously, affirming her okay-ness, the smile in her voice too as she says yes.

Vera is confused at how it stings.

Vera begins to understand. A bee flies out.

Booms and Brooms – We Fight Your Fires

Leo Ortelt

Teusenburg – build right at the foot of the great Teusenberg, with its speckled cow pastures, lonely spruces, and rock crevices draped in morose clouds – has everything a proper town needs. A baker selling poppy buns so delicious that wars are rumoured to have been fought over them. A recently failed revolution against the aristocratic leadership in the hopes of establishing an independent parliament. And a giant, red dragon is currently setting the school building on fire.

"This should have happened a few decades ago, back when I still went there, eh Mädchen?" Hector Broom says to his favourite cart horse, Fleckchen.

The head of the Teusenburg's fire department, 'Booms and Brooms', leans against the fire engine, safely stationed away from any stray sparks on the Gutachsbrücke opposite the school. The rest of his troop, three firefighters stacked up next to each other like organ pipes on the railing of the bridge, are enjoying their premature midday break.

"I count 23," Hector tells Maria Brecht as the last group of children is herded over the river Ernach. Brecht is the headmaster of the school, a tiny, skittish woman with thin brown hair sticking out from her head like mouse whiskers.

"23, yes, yes, that should be all of them," Brecht mutters. She leans closer to Hector conspiratorially. "What a shame that it had to hit us, of all people. And just before election day. We were about to finish the flower wreaths when the dragon bells went off. You don't suppose they can be saved?"

Hector shrugs. “No. Except, of course, the knights break their own record again. They’re getting rather good at this. Last week’s dragon didn’t even get to finish torching the mill before they took his head off.”

They both look to the two knights who are cautiously approaching the dragon, crossbows at the ready. Hector doesn’t care much for dragons, especially since they started terrorising Teusenburg a few months ago. The last time a dragon had come down the mountain far enough to munch on some cows on the upper pastures had been during the time Hector’s grandfather led the fire brigade. But now, they’re getting them almost weekly, with increasingly ruinous consequences.

Even so, Hector has to admit that the specimen before them is rather breathtaking. Her long, thin body glides over the ground in a fascinating interplay of muscles, magic, and pure will, like a strong current in an otherwise calm river, erupting to the sides into eight twirling legs and a set of wings.

Brecht doesn’t seem to share his fascination. She quickly turns her attention back to Hector, impatiently tugging on his right sleeve. “Can’t you just take your troop, quickly hop in to collect the wreaths, and come back? I promised Mayor Schilling they would be finished in time.”

One of the knights shoots the first arrow. It bounces off the dragon’s thick scales and almost hits the second knight in the face.

“No can do,” Hector says, eyes fixed contentedly on the knights who are now being chased around the school grounds by the dragon’s waving tail.

One of the firefighters, Nora, leans over to them. She is the youngest member of the brigade and is blessed with a slightly worrisome asthma condition, keeping her from coming near anything that smokes, which fires tend to do quite a lot. She’s great at handling equipment, though, with her almost two metres in height

and a never-seizing enthusiasm for complex machinery.

Nora recites dutifully: "Article 11 of our codex states: If the dragon is still alive and torching the town when the fire brigade starts to firefight he might torch the fire brigade, hence we wait until the dragon is dead."

They came up with that article last week. Hector has the tentative suspicion that it is the only one any of his personnel have ever memorised.

"So what?" Brecht asks.

"We wait," says another firefighter, Kapitän Berchwald, curtly. "And when the dragon is dead, we extinguish the fire." He is a small man and pale as parchment. Hector blames it on the old pick helmet the Kapitän won't take off.

In the distance, the dragon howls deafeningly as her left wing is pierced by a spear mid-flight. She starts lurching from side to side and barrels into a big church tower down the road from the school. It topples down like a sandcastle, burying the poor beast underneath. The crowd stares in stunned silence. It had taken two centuries and three tragically killed stonemasons to build this church.

The only one who doesn't seem phased is Brecht. "I think your article 11 just became futile," she states dryly.

Hector sighs and examines what is left of the school – a few scorched walls, sticking out feebly between the smoking debris. He highly doubts they will be able to find the flowers.

"Thank you for your patience. We will be doing our duty now!" he tells Brecht and waves his troop over. "Let's have a look then!"

The Kapitän gives the last member of their little crew a hearty shove, waking them up from a drooling nap. Clay, as they call themselves, is lanky and dressed exceedingly improperly, the orange fire brigade shirt barely visible underneath a collection of

badges they never earned. Nora gets to the back of their little procession, taking Fleckchen and the fire engine with her.

The brigade stops a few metres away from the school so Nora can safely prepare the fire engine. Hector leaves Clay and the Kapitän with her and carefully approaches the ember that is still crackling between the bricks and wooden stakes of the ruin, greeting him with the familiar smell of charred memories.

"Hello," he introduces himself quietly. "I'm Hector. And what might you be?"

At first glance, this fire looks like it's already defeated, stripped of any nourishment after having evaporated most flammable objects in the simmering breath of the dragon. But dragon fire is sneaky and cunning. Hector considers taking a few steps closer, just to see if it will react to him. That's when he sees something moving underneath the dust and rubble. For a horrible second, he thinks they forgot a child. But then, a long tail bolts free, covered in soot.

"There's something alive in there!" Hector shouts back.

"A cat?" Clay asks.

Hector has watched them run into a collapsing building because they had heard a meow from the second floor. Before he can stop them, they scurry past him towards the creature, using broken pieces of the walls as stepping stones.

"Clay, get back here, or you will be cleaning Fleckchen's box for the next month!" Hector warns sharply.

Clay stops dead in their tracks, swaying back and forth as they try to stabilise themselves on a small rock.

"That's a fucking baby dragon," they huff. Clay turns to Hector, grinning. "Can we keep him?"

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The name of the baby dragon is Paul. Clay won't budge on that.

When they found Paul, the brigade had been almost unanimously in favour of calling the knights over to take care of him, but Clay, already head over heels in love, begged them to make Paul their firefighter mascot instead. Hector had been sceptical. There's enough fire in Teusenburg, even without a pet whose main form of communication is setting the furniture aflame.

But then, the dragon had turned around, looked at Hector with sleepy coal eyes and stretched his wings with a squeaky yawn, bringing the thing he was nibbling on the whole time into view – a beautiful amulet, cast out of solid gold into the shape of an intricate tree, with little gemstones in the form of hazelnuts embedded into its branches. The mayor's sigil. No one had dared to take it away from the baby, so Hector had finally given in and let Clay take the dragon back to the 'Brooms and Booms' headquarters, where he is currently chewing on Hector's favourite office chair.

"Clay, tell Paul to stop!" Hector commands as the first leg snaps in half with a pitiful scrunch.

"But he's teething," says Clay, muffled by a mouth full of cheese sandwich. As if that will make Hector's heart ache any less at every crack of the poor chair. It is a pretty thing, with flower ornaments along the back and a purple cushion for his cranky back. His husband, Anton, made it for him.

"I know what that is!" shouts the Kapitän from the other side of the office.

"Teething?" Clay asks.

"The amulet!"

As soon as Paul dropped his treasure in favour of Hector's chair, the Kapitän revealed a decade-old obsession with fine jewellery to his astonished colleagues and vanished behind his desk, where he keeps a stack of old books on the history of goldsmithing.

Now, the Kapitän emerges triumphantly from his file dive, waving around a piece of paper covered so densely in small black letters that it looks like someone tried to immortalise a particularly busy swarm of thunderflies.

"What's it say?" Nora asks.

The Kapitän holds up the amulet, clearing his throat nervously.

"The legends say that when the lindworm Fafner was slain by Siegfried, a few of his tears fell on the ground and seeped deep into the heart of the soil, where they hardened to gold. You can recognise Fafner's gold by one thing – its dragon curse. When you hold it into sunlight –"

He tilts his hand with the amulet so the sunrays peeking in through one of the dusty windows graze over it. Immediately, the golden tree turns pitch black, incinerating into an ashy skeleton. The Kapitän moves the amulet back into the shadows, and the gold returns, as shiny as ever.

"– Fafner's spirit awakes, lonely and tormented in his golden grave. So he calls to all the dragons close enough to hear him to come and take him with them."

"But why would someone take this gold into a school?" Clay asks. "Or, for that matter, bring it into a town built on the foot of a mountain that is crawling with dragons?"

"There are records on the current possessor of this gold," the Kapitän mentions hesitantly. "It belongs to a family from Teusenburg."

"Oh," says Clay, looking like the cheese in their tummy turned sour all of a sudden. "It's no accident that the amulet looks just like Schilling's sigil, is it?"

Hector reaches for the amulet and turns to Paul. The dragon stopped tormenting his chair a while ago, judging from the three remaining legs that are still firmly attached to the seat, and is

staring at them intently. Or rather, he is staring at the amulet in Hector's hand.

"This is what you are all here for, isn't it?" Hector asks softly.

Paul knocks a few cups off the kitchen cabinet as he wags his tail.

"You can have it back," Hector promises. "And we will get you back to your family. I'm sure you have a father out there, somewhere."

Hector moves his hand towards the window, letting the sunlight once again darken the metal. He barely has time to marvel at the magic before Paul darts forward, climbs onto his legs, and wraps himself around his arm like a living bracelet, his head nuzzled into his palm against the amulet. The little dragon snores contentedly.

Behind Hector, Nora snorts. "He likes you."

Hector lost his best friend in the riots six months ago. He and Hanna had been marching up to the castle with the rest of Teusenburg's people, like every Monday at three in the afternoon, to demand the establishment of a citizen parliament. She had been complaining about her work while they were walking. The cobblestones that had been delivered were grey, even though she had ordered russet. They had already built half the street in russet; how stupid would it look if they suddenly switched to grey? At that point, someone in front of them started singing, soon joined by the small trumpet band that usually performed in the Adlerstube. Hanna stopped her grumbling and dragged Hector into a dance.

An hour later, she died in Hector's arms.

Three days later, Anton walked into Hector's prison cell to take him home.

A week later, the king announced that Teusenburg was to be

the first town in the realm that got to vote for a mayor. They had elected their local judge, Schilling, a pleasant if not a bit pontifical man.

And after five more days, the first dragon arrived and set a joinery aflame.

Hector can't help but shudder as he walks past the knights guarding the entrance of the castle. He can't see their faces behind the grilles of their helmets, only dark eyes following each of his steps. They all look the same, like the motionless eyes that had watched him as he had knelt on the russet cobblestones, begging Hanna to open her eyes.

He steps into the courtyard, where most of the town has already gathered. An orchestra provides a stimulating background tune. Servants in intricately worked blue uniforms are walking among the guests with grilled pepper skewers and wine, making the townspeople who are flocking to the long tables, which ache under their burden of strange fruits and steaming pots, look like chickens in a peacock pen.

Nora comes up to him, a glass of pear schnapps in her hand, beaming from ear to ear.

"How did everything go?" Hector asks.

"As smooth as fresh butter. Paul's really fond of strawberries, did you know that? I thought dragons only ate meat."

"And chair legs," Hector sighs.

An old man, draped from head to toe in royal red, steps onto the stage in the middle of the courtyard, accentuated by a loud – if slightly off-key – trumpet fanfare.

"Citizens of Teusenburg," he begins with a raspy voice. "As representative of King Heinrich IV of Turnland und die Margariten-

heiden, it is my pleasure to announce the re-election of Mayor Thomas Schilling."

The crowd claps as Mayor Schilling enters the stage. He's a slightly stocky man with a steadily vanishing hairline, evened out by his sinfully expensive velvet suit. Closely behind follow four men and women dressed like plum tomatoes – the royal delegation, sent to oversee the kingdom's first tentative dip into democracy.

"My dear friends," Mayor Schilling begins his acceptance speech. "I am humbled by your trust in me. I will do my best to lead this town, and each and every one of you, into the glorious future we deserve."

As the crowd claps again, Hector makes his way to the front of the gathering. The mayor sees him coming and pulls the corners of his mouth up to an embracing smile, welcoming him on stage.

"In the name of Booms and Brooms, I would like to be the first to congratulate you on your re-election, Mayor Schilling. As someone who has made it his profession, let me just say, you certainly know how to put out a fire."

A few members of the royal delegation giggle politely.

"I think we can all attest to how tirelessly you have worked for Teusenburg," Hector continues, turning towards his people. "First, you had to oversee the reconstruction of the districts that were destroyed in the riots. And now, we're being attacked by dragons almost every week. What a streak of bad luck, but so far you have mastered it all."

The mayor steps up beside him. He moves to put an amicable arm around Hector's shoulder, but he is a few centimetres too small to reach the other side, so he pats his back instead.

"Well, thank you so much for your kind words, Hector. But I can't possibly take all the credit for that. As I am sure you are all

aware, the knights have been an indispensable protection for our beloved Teusenburg. I think we might just be on a good path to find our way back together and forgive each other. And let me tell you, it fills my heart with joy to see that!"

The royal delegation erupts in enraptured applause. A few of the townspeople join in, hesitantly. Most are eyeing the cake buffet behind the stage. Mayor Schilling gives Hector's back a soft shove, his sign to get back down to the people.

Hector smiles. "I wasn't quite finished yet. I didn't just come here with nice words. We got you a gift, too. Something to remind you of the difficult times you have led us through."

The mayor's eyes narrow. He's catching up now. Hector can practically hear the gears in his head starting to turn as he tries to figure out what Hector is doing. He surely must have heard that the amulet wasn't found in the remains of the last fire. And now, a fireman stands before him, refusing to leave the stage.

Mayor Schilling pulls on Hector's arm. "Maybe you can give it to me privately," he suggests. "So I can thank you properly."

Hector frees himself with a firm tug and pulls something out of his pocket, enclosed by his fist. The crowd leans forward.

"I hope the king paid you well," Hector says. "The next time you betray your people, maybe don't leave your family sigil behind on the crime scene."

He opens his fist. The mayor's eyes widen as he recognises the amulet.

"You madman!" he spits out. "Get that away from the sun!" He jerkily reaches out to cover the gold with his own hands, but Hector simply raises his arm. In his hand, the hazel tree withers. From the fruit table in the back, strawberries still smeared over his snout, Paul flutters towards him and wraps himself around Hector's arm, sucking on his thumb with a pleasantly warm snake

tongue.

And somewhere behind the castle, not very far away, a dragon father roars for his child.

That Weird, Arrhythmic Thing

Marie O'Shea

That summer, the country was a tinderbox. Once the first match was lit, there was no turning back; it was like a spell had been cast, and the people were in thrall. Bridget knows this because the stories have been passed down. She knows that on August 9th, 1922, Mossy Sullivan, her great- grand-uncle, set out with the boys from the Second Battalion to burn Drumclerrig Manor. She knows the turn, just past Sean the Keeper's cottage, where they shimmied the estate walls, cutting through oak forest to stand on an outcrop of rock overlooking the house. And this is where the waters muddy. Whilst some claim it was a trick of the light, what was revealed in the moon's silver beam has been elaborated and embellished in many a retelling since.

With its stone chimneys visible from his bedroom window, the manor had been an abiding presence in Mossy's life for as long as he could remember. His mother, god rest her, had worked there as a maid. Aunt Hannah, who later joined the Poor Clares, had taken the position when she left. It was Hannah who put in the word for his sister, Norah Kate, the youngest of the Sullivan girls. Though Norah had been grateful for the recommendation, there was a wariness about her when she returned home that first week. Naturally, Mossy was concerned, and when she confided, cheeks burning, that Lord Neville had a roving eye, he nearly lost the rag.

Poor Norah was driven simple by the questions put to her as they strolled the road. There was no detail, too small or insignificant for his consideration. And it was from this persistent probing that Mossy learned Lord Neville liked to eat kippers for breakfast; that the portraits hanging over his head were of his forebears, and that stashed beneath the great mahogany table, there was a load-

ed pistol. What's more, despite all the warnings he'd been issued, the old goat was defiant, refusing to pack his bags and leave as so many of his compatriots had. That was why Mossy signed up with Danny McCarthy and the three Hanley brothers for the operation on the ninth.

When she closes her eyes, Bridget can hear the snap of branches, feel the weight of the petrol can. She has a vivid imagination. An essay she wrote about Mossy took a prize in the annual newspaper competition. Pen racing across the page, she'd described how the lads had been dousing their rags as the moon rose above the manor, spotlighting the carved stone dragon crouched on its roof. In her rendition, she had them falling to their knees, mouths agape. And that was when things fell apart- convinced his brother, a Capuchin Friar who'd died that past Autumn, was sending him a solemn warning, Danny McCarthy called off the operation. Sure, what could Mossy do? He was only the lookout.

A hundred years later, the same stone dragon looks down at Bridget as she clears tables in the manor's courtyard. Recalling the story about Mossy brings a smile to her face. She has a good feeling about this new job. Even though several of her school friends had applied, she was full sure she was going to get it. What did her granny use to say? 'What's for us, will not pass us.' Contemplating the simple wisdom of her words, she puts down the tea-tray and gazes across the lawn. As luck would have it, a straggle of young people spills out onto the terrace. She watches a gangly lad in cut-off denims wrestling a harness on a wolfhound pup. Ambrose Neville, heir incumbent to the two thousand-acre estate, and a dog lover like herself. Her thoughts drift to their first meeting, three days ago, when he'd ambled into the tea room looking for flour. His Uncle Ned had handed him the bag of Doves organic.

'This is Bridget,' he'd said, gesturing in her direction. 'She's a whizz with the Gaggia.' Their eyes met, Ambrose uttered some-

thing about his coffee addiction, and a stream of bubbles fizzed and popped in her brain.

Snapping her back to the present, the man at table two waves his biro.

'Slice of tart and a latte there when you're ready.'

'Sure thing,' she says, retrieving the loaded tray and scuttling back to the kitchen. Inside its steamy interior, Ned is lashing dressing onto a green leaf salad.

'Where's Charlotte?' she says, making a thing of checking the clock. He shrugs like it's got nothing to do with him. Deliberately, she lets the plates clatter under the tap. If Ned weren't her boss, she'd have said something. Just because Charlotte's a family friend doesn't mean she can show up when she feels like it.

Twenty minutes later, elbow deep in suds, Bridget remembers the coffee for table two. As she's steaming the milk, her thoughts flit to Ambrose. Should she slip him her number or play it cool? There is an abstract quality to her deliberation. In this free-floating space she now occupies, she feels the inevitability of their encounter, a sense that this was meant to be. She searches for the word to describe this cosmic certainty and gives up. Since working in the tea room, she's learned there are gaps in her vocabulary. She'd observed Ned's mystification when she'd mentioned the greenhouse around the back. 'Ah,' he'd said, rubbing his chin, 'You mean the Orangery.'

Glancing across at its weathered ironwork, she sees a wiry crossbreed hurtle past recycling. The flash of brindle makes her stomach plummet. Bolting out the door, she hears a scream from a solid-looking toddler. She watches, helpless, as the creature gulps a crust of bread, then victory loops the courtyard. When, inevitably, it bounds in her direction, she feels the swivel of eyes like pinpricks.

'What the hell, Bridget. Do you know this dog?'

Ned's breath is hot on her neck. It flashes into her head to say no, but instead she grabs its tartan collar and says in a high, tight voice, ' Yes, she's my dog. Oh my god! I'm so sorry. Sit down, girl, SIT DOWN.'

Ned strides off to retrieve the yard broom, picking up upended chairs and issuing apologies as he goes. The toddler continues to thrash and wail in its mother's arms. As Bridget stoops to recover the teddy, she sees two figures approaching hand in hand, and a siren goes off in her head.

Ambrose and Charlotte together, holding hands, the big pup gambolling at their side.

Time does that weird, arrhythmic thing, slowing down, then jump-starting like a faulty heart. Indie lets out a barrel-chested bark, then another. How Bridget holds it together, she doesn't know, but somehow she manages to pull Indie away from the big, cowering pup. A cockerel crows, and randomly, Bridget thinks of Judas. Then it's over. Ambrose kisses Charlotte, and Charlotte trots into work, beaming the smiles she's stolen from Bridget's quivering lips.

Abandoning Ned and Charlotte to the remainder of the lunch-time rush, Bridget retreats to the bike shed to lock up her dog. Alone, in the dim light of its single bulb, she crouches in the corner pulling air into her lungs in great, heaving gulps. Next to her, on the concrete floor, a stain of chain oil has dried into an odd-shaped blob. Gazing at the blob through tear-filled eyes, Bridget sees the face of a red-nosed clown. The sight of its leering, wide-mouthed grin brings a rush of heat to her cheeks. Hilarious to think she had a chance of dating Ambrose, that fate actually had a plan for her. Twenty full minutes pass before she manages to pull herself up off the floor, fashion a bed for Indie out of an old jumper, then hobble back to the kitchen.

Head down, she refuses to meet Ned's eye as he whizzes in and

out with loaded trays. Bad enough, he got to witness the performance on the lawn; she doesn't want his pity. She simply wants to make it through the rest of the day without drawing further attention to herself. She takes a deep breath, focusing her attention on the carrot she's about to peel. Through the arch, she can hear Charlotte's voice. What Charlotte says to the angry man who didn't get his cup of coffee is of no concern to her. She imagines herself drifting up into the clear blue sky, high above them all, then she hears Ambrose ordering a refill, and she plummets like a fallen grouse.

With trembling hands, she cracks ten eggs into a Tupperware jug, oblivious to the little pieces of shell that sink to the bottom. When the lunchtime scene replays in her mind, she shuts it down by counting the rotations of her whisk. She gets to ten when Van Morrison comes on the radio singing 'Crazy Love.' Was it really so crazy to believe that Ambrose was the one? She pauses mid-whip. Maybe it was a bit crazy, allowing herself to get so carried away, imagining the antique lace wedding dress. Unable to help herself, she lets out a small sob, which she turns into a cough.

When the song finishes, the presenter announces it's three o'clock. Realistically, she tells herself, she could be done by 4.30 if she skips her break. With renewed determination, she measures equal amounts of oil and sugar, then tosses them into the mixer. Next, she adds the eggs, flour, cinnamon, carrots, and coconut. Then, as she's greasing the cake tins, she hears a peal of laughter. Closing her eyes, Bridget sees the blobby clown, doubled over, stamping the ground with his oversized shoe.

She gives herself a small shake, turns the cooker dial, and strikes a match. After several attempts, Ned's ancient oven roars to life. Ten minutes later, she slides in the carrot cakes and begins the clean-up. At 3.45, Ned sidles over to her, 'In future, Bridget,' he says, eyes darting to the ceiling, 'best leave the dog at home.'

'Sure thing,' she says, not bothering to explain that she didn't

bring the dog to work, that Indie, a rescue dog, is prone to straying. Her stomach gives a long, low rumble which Ned affects not to hear. When was the last time she ate? It must have been the piece of toast she had for breakfast. A beat passes before she realises her boss is looking at her expectantly.

'Sorry,' she says. 'What was that?'

'Just checking you're OK to shut up shop. Charlotte's had to dash.'

Bridget nods her head, expressionless. When the timer beeps, she checks the oven. A quick poke with the skewer reveals the carrot cake is still sticky, so she pushes it back in. The worktop is smeared with grease, which she sprays with vinegar. She gives the floor a cursory sweep, clears the counter, and empties the bins. Before she leaves, she turns on the dishwasher, double-checks that she's locked the door, and stops by the shed to retrieve her dog.

By the time she's walked the two-mile trek home, Bridget's feet are as pinched and sore as her heart. Kicking off her sandals, she knocks against a picture hanging on the porch wall. Surrounded by a group of schoolchildren, her great-grand-uncle, Fr. Mossy, looks out from his missionary post in Nigeria. It was Norah Kate who hung the picture. Bridget never knew her great-grand aunt, but the stories have been passed down. She knows that taped to the back of the frame, there's a lock of white blond hair from the baby she bore for Lord Neville. What became of the child, they never found out, but there was talk he'd joined the travelling circus. When she thinks about it, it makes her sad, but as someone once said, the past is a foreign country. There's nothing she, or anyone else, can do to change it.

Later that evening, oblivious to the slow cremation of her own carrot cake, Bridget sits down with her mother to watch the Great British Bake Off. And as she shakes out her long dark hair, the cloth she hung on the oven door begins to smoulder, then a flour

bag catches alight, igniting a pot of plastic spoons and melding them into a blackened mass. By the time the credits roll, the flames have started up a merry dance. One by one, the windows shatter, hitting the ground like crashing cymbals. Then, as the cymbals fade, the big gas bottle explodes with a thunderous roar. Illuminated by a burst of fireworks, the Nevilles bail out of their ancestral home, carrying what few portraits they can retrieve from the dining room walls. From its rooftop perch, the stone dragon watches them with solemn disregard. And somewhere high above the billowing smoke, lips pulled into an obscene grin, the blobby clown turns a perfect somersault.

Hoarded

Ruby Poland

I knew it was in there. I felt ten, solid, even paces pull me closer to the cupboard. The distressed, duck-egg blue, artificially aged wood, so smooth under the soft pads of my fingertips, I lingered on the cusp of courage.

She would have to wake up.

The cupboard was one of the few furnishings in this empty, unused room of the house, alongside a plush, zebra-print rug and a sweet beveled mirror opposite the window. I unlatched the golden clasp joining the two doors. The pile was anxiously still before me. From a mountain of every colour man had created, the smell of wooden drawer dust invaded my shaking breath, and alongside it, the smell of a mandarin moisturizer that reminded me of simpler times, of joy. All heaped to the capacity of the cupboard, hidden and demeaningly preserved. Atop the conglomeration, three little juggling balls in a small net bag began to stir, and one by one rolled steadily from an opening of the bag onto the carpet in three little thuds.

I took a few steps back into the centre of the room, where the cracks in the curtain cast rays of sunlight, and ever so slightly warmed my feet. Piece by piece, the jumble rolled onto the floor around me in an avalanche. Items of various shapes, sizes, colours, and purposes fabricated before my eyes in rapid succession, each one carrying with them a distinct time and memory. Various CD collections bundled together with elastic bands from when I was convinced I would only listen to CDs from now on. A mesh bag of all the watches I needed to fix, frozen in time at the exact point I had stopped wearing them, forever. A magic 8-ball stuck on "Ask

again later". A small cloth bunny whose shape burned into my eyes like a blinding light. Broken-heartedly, my eyes wandered over these belongings of mine through bulbous tears yet to spill. Dried-up paints that might work if I checked. Pencils of varying lengths and brands. Toys I used to love, but now I feel that they are dirty to touch. Beads, bracelets, crystals, and cards. Empty notebooks, unused stickers, unmelted candlesticks, and letters from old friends.

Before I even had time to process any of this, one fishnetted leg with a satin red wedge kicked its way out from under the flowing rubble, and then another from the other side of the jumble. She wore black denim booty shorts with a brown cowboy belt I borrowed from a man I dated two winters ago, and as she dusted herself of the ribbons, blue-tacks, pipe cleaners, and other various bottom-of-the-pile rubbish, I noticed at least three layers of stick-on nails cemented on her fingers as they ruffled and freshened the fabric of her brown fur coat. Her face was momentarily covered by hair made of acrylic wool, the gradient kind, from pink to orange to turquoise to pink and around again. I noticed her neon lips first, bulging around a set of chattering teeth with the winding key pierced through the skin of her cheek. Then, her purple nose was made of a metallic putty, which she deftly corrected back to shape with her thumb. Her ears elongated and elvish, her neck, doll-like and detachable from her head. Lastly, her eyes fluttered open to reveal lubricated, rainbow bouncy balls peeking from behind the folds of her eyelids.

I fell to my knees in disgrace. How could I have let it get this bad? It had been years since I'd entered this little grey-walled room. I pulled the sleeves of my shapeless, black dress back down to my wrists, seeking warmth, seeking darkness. She lunged forward from the cupboard, the carpet now nearly totally covered in randomised clutter, and danced and balanced her way around me in circles, like a puppet on strings, stretching out like a captive

animal set wild for one, glorious moment. I was so ashamed.

I kept my head down. At my knees, an old camera, countless half-used nail polishes in ridiculous colours, rolled up paintings I didn't even want to see anymore. Essential oils, stupid hats, comedy glasses, scratched badges torn from old backpacks. Metal water bottles that hadn't been cleaned or sealed since the last use. Boxes of crayons. Gifts I had yet to use. Stuff I told myself I would use. This woman is an embodiment of every half-baked idea I'd ever had. I scowled at the disgusting landscape I had created, all these shapes and colours, and all I could see was wasted money, and all of it wasted on me. I had picked from every berry bush in life and never ate from the basket. I had promised to loop back round but only ever walked straight. I had indulged in passion without devotion, and taken but never given. And now, she was out of my control. An unorganised collection of things I'd never figured out, emotions I never worked through, memories I resented but gripped onto like the only thing tethering me to reality, to the truth of who I am. I had spent my life breathing in but never out, and now, no one could ever see her, see what I'd done, see what I was. So much of everything all at once, but nothing in particular. How could I be everything and nothing? She danced amateurishly, sang unrehearsed, and moved limitedly. She had to be locked away.

I turned my back on the dancing monster and began digging through the wasteland of novelties scattered along the floor. I found clothes I'd worn only once, the smell of perspiration still present within the fabric. I found paintings, ghosts of ideas torn through blank pages, the disappointing and unsatisfying appearance of 2B pencil on canvas. I found a stack of classical novels, each one dog-eared, with less than fifty pages from the beginning. I found notebooks with the first few pages filled with good-intentioned language learning – Spanish, Japanese, and Greek. I had tasted newness and became addicted to the flavour. I had fallen

in love, idiotically, every time, with the idea that something else, something different, would finally be the thing to change me. I had never dug deep, but tilled the soil as far as the eye could see. I remember every rotting memory of foolishly standing in a shop window, imagining my beautiful new life with silver-studded hoop earrings, with a fat leather handbag, with striped kitchen towels. Would people finally see who I am if they smelled Mango Pineapple Sunset Dreams wafting in the air as I walked past? Would blue eyeliner, a pom-pom keyring, or a strawberry incense burner be enough to convince everyone around me that I was interesting? Wouldn't everyone get tired of seeing me bring the same lunch bag to work every day?

But time had sucked the novelty out of every last item, like syrup from a slushie. The only joy they could give me now was to reminisce on the idea of what could have been. If I had begun tap dancing lessons after all, if I had given hula hooping or the harmonica a real shot. The excitement of a life I didn't have, trophies on a shelf, friends clinking glasses at the dinner table. Why wouldn't I throw them away? I had nothing else.

Sandwiched between two Bob Ross VHS tapes was the sweet little lace-bound book I had come up here to find. A hand-annotated poetry collection belonging to my old friend Kate, who was downstairs with a cold cup of tea, waiting for me to fish it out. She had written in the margins with an orange pen, matching the cover. Her name is in cursive lettering on the first page. It had lost the lively look of a loved book, flattened completely shut in its exile, not even the breath of a single unfolded dog-ear springing the pages open. I had borrowed it but never read it.

I kicked all the remaining junk back into the cupboard and pushed the doll woman in on top of it all, jamming everything back in in defiance of physics and volume. Her eyes softly shut, and I got one last glance at the bouncy balls rolling backwards into her skull as I latched up the doors again.

Debris from my excavation littered the room. I caught a glimpse of a frail woman in the little beveled mirror, with real eyes and real teeth, holding a beautifully loved book in her hands, the epitome of devotion. I smashed the back of my fist into the mirror and made a small crack in the glass. Book thrown to the floor, I beat the shit out of the mirror with both hands, neither one particularly stronger, until I was too tired to keep going, which didn't take particularly long, and until the mirror was fragmented beyond use.

I would have to buy a new one.

Beast Bouquet

Nomi Smith

Ansin's callused hands trembled uncharacteristically, as he stared at the smudge of chocolate that was brushed across his mother's face in the photograph. He looked down at his daughter and her neatly combed hair, chocolate all around her mouth, while she was wiping her hands on her dress, her face empty.

'I... didn't do it, Daddy,' Sydney said.

And just as he thought he might sob, he began to laugh.

Ansin swallowed his tea heartily and sighed until the taste of rose enveloped him in the smell of that little potpourri filled house he grew up in—the house where his mother had painted the living room a flat mauve color.

He was calm now.

His mother never had many photos taken, and his father had cut her face out of the only one with all of them together. Grownups never think about how their actions will cause history to change so severely, how easily they become the ancestors. Now, his mother was only living in beats of memory, and faceless: an unraveled wool sweater he huffed against his face every night, assuming it was hers, until his brother told him it was made in China and not by her motherly love.

He sputtered into his tea. Upon trying to find her face in his memory, he thought of the day his older brother and himself had repainted her pink walls with that fowl mud from the back garden. Ansin wasn't sure which of them had the bright idea, but he remembered the great merriment that was had while the trans-

gression was fulfilled.

As soon as his mother came home, she was struck still, staring at the walls. He remembered when she started sobbing—the way her empty face had twisted. Now his mother's cries sounded like his wife, Jesslyn, swirling her spoon around the rim of her own mug in the room beside him, and he was snapped back into the present.

Jesslyn gazed out the window as she dried her mug with a fresh tea towel, watching the glare in the chimes that rang in the Breeze. There was something so satisfying about a clean towel, though she liked to hold out as long as possible before having to launder them. This particular one was well-worn, but it smelled of detergent and carried no strange orange stains of inappropriate use. It seemed she was always running out of paper roll, though she couldn't fathom what the husband, Ansin, could be using them on, since mysterious spills still lingered on her counters, and all her towels wound up left crumpled up and smelling of old food.

She stopped staring at the chimes when there was a discordance in the melody and let her eyes wander up the frozen hill instead.

'What's that beast out there climbing over the hill?' she muttered, half to herself.

Ansin sighed and put down his pipe. He first looked out at the cattle—Bessie was trying to mount Daisey again—then continued to scan up toward the woods to see a black mass emerging against the white blade of the sun. As the beast came more into view, it was just as bizarre to him—what looked to be Rick's boy, Charlie, with giant antlers.

'It's an angel! An angel!' hollered Sydney, hopping up beside him on the couch and jumping up and down.

Ansin had trouble seeing his wife as a mother, though he supposed she was one. To him, she was only the woman he loved. He wondered how his father must have seen his own mother.

When cleaning out an old cedar trunk in the attic after his father's funeral, he found that photo of his mother as a teenager gently tucked in a handkerchief. She looked like a baby. He recognized the lace as crotched by his grandma's hands, and he recognized the man beside his mother as his maternal grandfather, with his hand posed on her shoulder. He gently touched her face with his middle finger, then traced a line to his grandfather's hand. He recognized those dirty fingernails. Father and daughter were smiling and holding paintbrushes and on the floor was a can of cheap flat pink paint. He never knew those walls were bright pink once.

'Jess! Look, look! Come look at this!' he had called, much younger than he was now.

'What's wrong?' she asked, scurrying to him from the vinyl she was organizing on the other end of the attic. 'What is it? Oh, wow. Is that...?' She took the photo and examined it.

'She would have been pregnant with Ed when this was taken,' he had said.

'I hope ours is a girl,' Jesslyn said, placing the photo back in his hands. 'And I hope she looks like her. God she's beautiful.'

'If you let me stay here a night you can have this buck,' said Charlie, slopping the poor creature on the ground in front of Ansin and holding up his head by the antlers. 'It's a six pointer.'

'Mn,' said Ansin. He didn't care to say now, but the buck wasn't typical: a big prize to some. One of his tines on the right was projecting down, and it wasn't so simple as calling it a six-pointer, but Ansin didn't have a head for that kind of thing. He

just worried if it was a fair hunt as Rick had a little garden where he'd lure them in, and Charlie could've very well shot the creature there.

He could hear his mother's voice ringing in his head: 'Oh, couldn't they've let the poor thing live a season longer—just a season longer. I'd say he was the king a somethin'. Not just some beast for your wall.'

His mother, Mary-Rose (of course), was a fantastic hunter—would sit and wait in a clearing for hours to meet the beast, just to watch him, just to take photos. This 'waste of time' was excruciating to his father. Now, squirrels, according to her, were fair game. She had a knack for bow-hunting, would shoot 'em with a blunt tip right up into the trees. This especially drove his father crazy—the man could barely find a squirrel, let alone stun one.

Sydney slung mud as she, herself, ran outside to join the party, letting the screen-door slam behind her. She felt that the two men should be thrilled at her presence. Her mother, Jesslyn, always called her their little entertainer. 'Woah! That's huge!' she screeched.

Charlie looked her over, from her wiggling bare feet to her neat blonde ponytail. It seemed odd that she had already changed so much to look like a person. Last time he saw her, she was just a sack of flour with legs.

'Back up,' said Ansin, 'you don't need to see this.'

Just then, Sydney was drawn to the blood on Charlie's jacket, then to the buck's bottomless black eyes. She stumbled back slightly. The air smelled of ice, of woodsmoke, of iron.

'Jess!' called Ansin.

'Yehesss?' Jesslyn sang, coming out quickly from the door and looking among them as if she hadn't been watching the whole

endeavor from the window.

'Will you take Rick's boy in and show him where to wash his clothes?'

She smiled from the husband to the boy and then to the deer. She walked up to them and stroked the head of the creature gently. 'I haven't had venison in a while. This is glorious.'

'Glorious,' repeated Sydney with a grin, shrugging off her bit of discomfort.

Sydney stared into the tub full of bloody water holding her towel and rubber duck. The faucet was still dripping, echoing strangely in the small room. Where the water landed created a thinness in the red, like clear milk being poured into coffee, offering some solace that there was nothing slimy hiding on the copper beneath the tub of turbid water. The girl felt unsure, very unsure in the stomach.

'The pipes,' began her mother behind her, "will freeze if we don't keep the water running.'

Jesslyn scooted Sydney over by the shoulders, then leaned over the tub to turn the water from cold to hot, letting the faucet run hard and steamy. Under the stream, she took a bar of Irish Spring and rubbed it between her palms until there was a white film over everything.

'Just wait for the water to turn clear and you should be good,' she said, shaking off her hands. She stopped briefly on the way out to grab Sydney's hand and look at her fingernails which had become little black crescents from playing in the garden. She didn't say anything else though, and left Sydney there with the duck.

Sydney stared at the newly pink water, then at her hand where her mother had touched her. She just stared.

Charlie hung his newly dredged clothes out on the line, wearing Ansin's flannel pajamas. The frost was bound to leave his clothes stiff, but it was better than nothing.

Bessie eyed him curiously before exhaling a deep 'Maauuuhrrr,' which caused him to still.

Charlie was aware all at once of his smallness on the crawling white landscape, about how the world existed where his back was turned, and beneath his feet, and his absolute freedom to move through it. He projected himself across it, retracing his journey from this morning, lugging the buck through a world that barely noticed him outside a few remaining little red birds.

He laughed a bit after a time, as Bessie just watched him.

Making her grocery list, Jesslyn thought back to last spring.

A big fat catfish sloshed out of the bucket, and following it, a string of eggs that had been gutted.

'Dammit. This one was pregnant,' said Jesslyn, turning to Ansin.

'Oh,' said Ansin, pushing the bucket away with his foot. 'Well, I didn't know.'

Sydney gasped.

'It's alright. It's part of life—' began Jesslyn.

'Does that mean there's more meat?' Sydney asked suddenly.

'What?' someone asked.

'No,' someone answered.

Sydney seemed to turn inward for a moment, looking at

her hands. Maybe that's when she started to think of herself as a bit of a monster too. That should be fine.

Before they left the house, Sydney had thrown an orange peel into the woodstove. The fragrance travelled with them down the country road into town, lending them a feeling like playing outside after school.

They drove past a plastic nativity decorating an unsealed wooden shelf stuck in the side of a hill close to Ansin's childhood house. The neighbor's new silo took on the color of the hyacinth sky, and wet hay that fell from someone's trailer slopped on the side of the road, reminding Ansin of the pine-straw bow target that was consumed back into the earth when he was a kid, eventually.

After turning onto the new highway, a tractor drove along the edge, so not to be a burden on the fast to anger drivers. Jesslyn thought of when the world was slow, and that whenever there were cows her mom would stop the truck and say, 'look cows.' Now they were moving so quickly. She remembered the barn in the distance, before it lost its roof, and the field full of wildflowers before hemp was legal again. For a moment she saw herself on the hill, younger—too young—hair twisting into the wind, and Ansin coming up to meet her, holding a little brown rabbit by the ears. 'Nice bouquet,' she thought to say, but they were too young. They hadn't figured out where the edges were yet.

'Why do we keep getting stopped by this same train? I swear it's the same graffiti as last time,' Ansin said.

'Maybe it's a gang. I've heard they do that kind of thing,' said Jesslyn, admittedly pleased to be slowed down.

'A train gang?' Ansin asked, grumbling. He stuck his hand in the bag of tobacco, put a wad on top of his pipe, and quickly

stuffed it with the back of his lighter. He sent the flame crackling down the bowl, inhaling deeply. 'What happened to your dad, kid?' he asked suddenly, exhaling a large mass of smoke.

'What?' asked Charlie with a croak.

Sydney coughed into the bag of onions and potatoes in her lap.

'Will you roll the window down please?' asked Jesslyn, pulling her shirt over her nose.

As Ansin rolled down the window, the bite of the cold swallowed the heaviness of the smoke like a vacuum. It was silent but for the wind for a moment.

'That's...what I thought,' said Ansin.

Sydney didn't know what any of it meant.

And when they made it back home, the clouds looked like tire marks in the snow.

A log fell over in the fire with a pop, at the mercy of Sydney prodding it with a stick.

'Stop that. Playing with fire'll make you pee the bed,' said her mother, rotating a tin-wrapped potato in the coals.

Ansin turned toward his wife slightly. 'I always heard it gives you good dreams, keeps you warm.' He nodded at himself, plucking at his guitar.

'Tends to happen when you pee the bed,' said Jesslyn.

Ansin looking at her, responding by changing the tone of his plucking.

'I know what I'm doing, Momma," said Sydney.

Charlie's hot dog fell into the fire off his stick.

No one made any movements but Sydney, who jumped on his shoulders. 'Piggyback!'

'Get off him,' said Ansin simply.

'No,' said Charlie standing up. 'It's fine. Let's just see if she can hold on.'

He stood up and Sydney wrapped her arms around his neck as he began to spin around, clinging to his hood as her legs flew in circles.

She laughed wildly.

They all laughed. Even the smudge. Even the venison smoking over the fire.

The Grim Shepherd.

Jack Tobin

Death takes up next to no time in a person's life; they go about for decades, and at the most, it might take a few seconds for all the lights to turn off. Despite this, it is all I hear about as I walk the mortal world.

"Yeah, I heard she was struggling to afford the funeral." I crane my skeletal neck, the vertebrae clicking as I turn to the voice. A younger man who did as younger men do and spent his vitality on the most recent trends in hedonism: sugar and isolation. I have no doubt he will meet me soon, but today he is tired, not dead. I stood up from my seat, carefully avoiding the other passengers, for a brush with death is a most definitive end. I cast my hollow eyes upon the driver, a man still young but older than first. If eyes are windows to the soul, he has his windows tinted, barely a gloss upon the organs so typically expressive. Age is not what dictates death, no more than hair colour or good fortunes in any case. Age is, however, a good measurement of sorrow; the young die, and the world stands still; the old die, and they are found half-rotted by people they never knew. When I step through the door of the bus, I am met by a cold breeze. I know it to be cold, but my dry bones do not feel it. People have locked themselves in their cars to avoid trudging through the minuscule layer of frost glazing the asphalt. The city is strangely lifeless for a place so populous, the wildlife limited to the architects of the environment, scavengers leaching like parasites on the belly of this grand project and whatever species deemed appealing enough to be granted privileged entry to the Tower of Babel. As I walk the streets, I am unseen, for despite how much I am discussed, no one wishes to see me. I take a shortcut to my destination, cutting through an alley in which I

had expected to see no one, but I see one, beneath the awning of a building. A sign above them used to say something, but now it is a jagged Rorschach. They were old, not in age, but in spirit. Their pocked skin melted from the bone, and their eyes stared right at me like I was really there.

"Change?" It was a fair question for a person in that position, even if they sounded like they were elsewhere, speaking from the back of their throat with a gravelly gargle. I duck down with the ashen burlap of my cloak pooling at my feet and drop a long-aged golden obol into their lap. My hollow ribs can form no response beyond the noise of bone grinding on bone as I once more rise and continue on my way. It's remarkable how far from death that soul is.

I come upon a crowd too tightly packed to pass and thus wait; they scream about someone calling someone or doing something. I know the directionlessness; the panic is what has killed the man. At this very moment, his heart is flexing around a clump of coagulated blood, cutting off flow to the organ which produces his consciousness, for the moments he has left, he will be looking up at the sky, shivering and drooling. That man knows first aid, he's a nurse, and he knows exactly what would save him, but he can't save himself. He can say nothing as the people around him panic and flounder.

"Give him some space!" the voice comes from an older woman, near death herself. She has an aneurysm in her brain, but it will not burst for another month. The scent of nicotine clings to her and mangles her voice into a gravelly whisper. She thought to call an ambulance, but as a mob, they were too slow. The space she has cleared for him lets me safely approach, careful not to touch the gawkers who stand at whatever distance does not upset their moral compasses. I lean over with the support of my crook, the buloke wood older than the species it was carved from, and I brush my jagged digits across his eyes; they close, and my hand pulls his

soul free from the meat as it dies. He would have died no matter what I had done; this only saves him waiting for the rot to clear a path out of his body before he can even begin looking toward the beyond. The soul is a representation of someone's sense of self more than anything else; it is composed entirely of ego: no outside influence. The dead man's soul was somewhat translucent, like congealed mist leaning toward a twilight-blue hue. This soul did not go quietly, drifting in the empty air until it passed through the crowd, sending out a shiver in his wake, a cold that went deeper than a lack of heat. I take the long way around to catch the phantom before it can drift further afield, like clawing at cobwebs that stretch and snap but largely hold the shape of the phantom. He sees himself as bloated, fat in the jowls, and dead in the eyes. It is an inaccurate assessment, but it is what he believes, so it is the form he contorts his soul. I snap my finger with a sharp click of petrified bone, causing the spirit to flinch as it rouses. He chooses subconsciously to be subject to gravity and drowsiness. He fell to the floor, likely imagining some level of pain from the drop. The man screams at me as though I am uniquely horrifying when my form is, in fact, strangely humanoid.

"Jesus Christ!" the man beckons a god he does not believe in as he tries to strike me in the empty pit between my empty sockets. His hand passes through me as mist is want to do, seeping around the cracks and sockets in my body like an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. "What are you doing to me!" I parse out his words through the more incoherent screams. Without the means to make noises as he does, I am forced to wait for a reasonable question, one not so ignorant of the matter at hand, I hope. The man stares at his misty hands with the wide eyes of a stalked deer, fear entirely unfounded as death is, for most, a one-time affair. He looks up at me. He can stand, but he appears too weak-willed to realise this fact. "Who are you?" he stutters as though I might take offence. I can see some recognition in his eyes; mortal souls can be so prone to fearful arrogance, unshakeable but

oxymoronically enforcing an idea of weakness upon themselves. I turn to his corpse and gesture in response.

The dead man sprints to his corpse, slipping through gaps in the wall of gawking meat that surrounds him, and pretends to care for the purpose of sating curiosity. He seems understanding now, yet he still lingers. He spent a while staring into his own glassy eyes as a body without life thrashes beneath him with whatever electric charge remains. Someone sits over him performing chest compressions, but they are too shallow; the large man doing them is afraid to break something in the corpse, or perhaps he worries the veins bulging at every inch may finally burst as drug-addled geysers. The procedure is doing nothing but traumatising the dead and living alike. As the man watches, I slink back through the mob to stand over him.

"You're..." he looks to me, but the words he seeks are not to be found in the black pits of my skull any more than they are in the spittle drooling from his physical form. "death?" He asks. I nod as it is close enough to the truth to help him grasp what is happening. "Oh, God," he holds his head in his hands, but he can see right through the impromptu blindfold. He repeats the phrase as a hushed whisper, a mantra with no power behind it. I don't know if I will ever be desensitised to the horror in their eyes. When I thought I had grown callous, humanity came to be so much more complex in their fear, and I was reduced back to the silent mourner I have always been. All I can hope is that the place I send them is pleasant. "What happened?" His voice is clearer; he doesn't think ghosts can cry, so he doesn't do so himself. I stare at him. Not only is there no way for me to tell him, but he already knows. He fell silent, but considering he is still so confused, I imagine he is just composing a more revelatory query. "What am I supposed to do? Why am I still here?" He manages to ask as he tears his gaze from the corpse. I point at the spirit with a single gnarled digit. "Me? I'm not trying to be here!" he snaps at

me, protective over something I can't place. It is with remarkable ease that the human ego can contort itself into the most torturous shapes without realising it alone holds the strings. How I wish I could berate every soul I meet, tell them of their stupidity and hubris to think themselves anything but animals. Only a few hours ago, I was pulling the souls of pigeons out of their skin, and they easily went to the beyond. Humans never go quietly; they prove allergic to simplicity, and the dead man is one of many who sit by their corpse, shocked by mortality they would have at any living moment acknowledged as inevitable. A woman takes over chest compressions, perhaps not as strong as the steroid-infused alternative, but she puts in enough force to make an impact. On her fifth pump, one of the dead man's ribs breaks with a wet snap, only to continue with a grinding noise as it is jostled, the bone scratching against itself. Not a full break, although a living man would be howling by now. The woman has a genetic predisposition to brain cancer no one has told her about; she will find out soon enough, and then the light will leave her eyes. Her allies are abandoning her to die alone to protect themselves from the dread I bring to those I linger upon, waiting for the moment they pass to efficiently send them off. "Can I- do I still have a chance?" Humans are nothing but questions, even as the answers are before them. I slowly shake my head with the wind passing through my bones, imitating a shrill sigh, his breaths, while unnecessary, betray his fearful panic. "Come on! There must be something! What can I do?" I have no more power to breathe life than he, yet something of my position, my role in nature, deceives the species which sees itself as the great detective, prying open the world with rigorous and righteous logic. To be more than fair, they have done more than all predecessors on that front. "Do you want me to repent? Whatever I've done, I can make it right, I can change for Christ's sake." He falls to his phantasmal knees, spilling out in a pool of mist like a ballroom gown made of the stariest night sky.

"I..." they begin, but think better of it. We are left in silence,

which I can hardly lament, as I cannot engage the man; he may simply be tired of conversing with the hollow psychopomp. The dead man has shut down even more than before, locked inside his own head in a battle over whether or not he deserves this, on what is coming for him and similar questions of an existential nature. I do not probe as I have seen enough to understand I must simply let him metabolise all his Thanatotic thoughts. The street is as quiet as the human dens can be with the screeching of their foul machines, made to blare and cough as they burn through the streets, adding more to my tally than most intentionally deadly devices ever could. The weather has turned to rain and chews now at what little snow and frost had landed, even those hidden beneath shelter find the wind saturating them in a frigid wave of liquid ice. He begins to understand, looking into what must be to him an empty vessel, my hollow sockets staring back at him with nothing but pitch-black. It is at this point that humans tend to go, but this one is proving stubborn. His spectral form thins until he is but an impression in the air, but he remains. The wailing of a siren joins the collective sputter of city life, drawing my attention away from the dead man. It is an ambulance, but my attention does not linger on the steel wagon for long as I feel the air beneath me electrified with a short pulse. Conductive pads have been taped to the corpse's chest and supply him with sudden shocks. My vision blurs, and I cannot see how the man died, or, for that matter, how he is to die. He looks at me as I watch his body twitch and draw in breath so weakly it could be the innate reflex of a living creature or the wind cycling through his slack jaw. Humans must have some infectious quality, as I am curious. I point at the phantom and mimic speech, my jaw sliding up and down with all the grace of a megalithic block dragged downhill. In the place of a voice, I have an agonised grinding of fossilised bone scratching against itself like metal nails on a chalkboard. "I can't hear you..." He stated the obvious, so I repeated my charade despite the indignity. "Oh, me. I'm Joseph?" My patience and curiosity finally kill each other, and

I am left with frustration.

"Why?" I wheeze through the open gaps in my skull, the noise having no natural origin, curiosity made manifest.

"Why? I think they're trying to resuscitate me. I assume a body needs a soul, though." he watches me now. I am not used to the experience. I point at his corpse as its eyes flicker open, and it is pulled into the wailing, metal construct of an ambulance. He does not seem to understand, but time actually matters for this explanation, so I take him by the soul and dunk him into his own body on the passing stretcher like Achilles in the river Styx. His pulse returns with the final push of a stubborn soul. It is no longer any of my business how the dead man... Joseph chooses to live. I move on and feel the faintest emotion I cannot describe, something like confusion, but it is, in a way, hopeful. On the other side of the city, a young man has hugged a telephone pole with the aid of his car. I'll meet him at the hospital to save me the trip. He'll go through the same thing as Joseph, but he is not going to get back inside his mangled corpse; nonetheless, I am excited to hear him. I did not know the creatures could name themselves. I fear they near my own sentience a bit more with each generation, yet I have always been an optimist amongst my peers. A muddy rat flees from a sewer grate and impacts against my heel, dying on the spot for nothing, its pulse robbed without warning or rationale. I see some vestige of my own reflection in the carrion's soulless eyes. I will die for I have lived. When all the breaths are silent, when stars are dark, and oceans dry in every corner of the cosmos, and the thing that I am, the threads of myself woven into reality's tapestry will be burnt as the final loss of the great thing that was life. It is at that sorry end that I will see where I have sent all before me. I feel it again, curious, excited, saddened, and afraid.

Cityside

Harry Walshe

"You're new," she said, drawing me up and down with her eyes.

"Uh-huh," I replied.

"New today?"

"Just walked in the door."

She sucked something in her mouth, some kind of sweet maybe, and her cheeks sloped inwards like the arches of a cathedral. "I hope you're not just one of those guys."

"Which guys are those?"

"You know, those types that come in here looking to laugh at people, looking for a quick joke. I can't stand those pricks."

"Well," I said, spreading my arms. "That's not me."

"Alright. Why'd you come so?"

I shrugged. "I saw a big, blue neon whale above the door. It intrigued me."

"You haven't heard those things they say about us?"

"I have. I'm choosing to forget them."

She smiled and crunched down on the sweet in her mouth. I smiled back.

"Alright now guys, time to settle down." It was the man in the woolly jumper, with the glasses and the peninsular hairline. He'd greeted me at the door. The flyer I held folded lightly in one hand had come from him. For newcomers, apparently. I didn't really need it. I knew everything it said already. Most people did.

I let her go first, drifting away from me toward a seat at the table. I saw her greet friends. I chose my own seat not too far away.

"Right", said Woolly-Jumper. "Let's begin. First things first, we have a new face here today. Apologies I didn't catch the name?" He gestured toward me.

I smiled, graciously, held up a hand in greeting. "Fugard".

"Fugard?" he affected a curious frown. "That's French, right?"

"My father is Canadian".

"Ah, very good. Everyone, be sure to say hello to Mr Fugard."

I nodded to the smiling faces turned toward me at the table. She was one of them. She mouthed *Fugard*, and smiled. I shrugged.

"Ok then, if everyone could turn their eyes to the screen," continued Woolly-Jumper. "There are some new images circulating. I got them this morning, and I think we should all have a look."

He fiddled with a chunky computer in front of him, and in a few moments the projector hanging above the table was flickering like cold sunlight on the plain concrete wall before us. Grainy images slowly faded into higher definition until we were all gazing at the wash of blue.

It was the sea. I could tell by the little white specks flashing in and out of existence. White horses, they were called. I think. I hadn't ever been to the sea, but I'd read plenty of books about people who had.

Here it was now, on the wall of a basement in Cityside. Just like the real thing. Or not.

"I've slowed down the video so we can see better. Just look kinda toward the right hand side, you'll notice a significant darkening of the water. Just—right, here." He paused the video. "You see, a large shadow, just under the surface. Now, to me this seems like a very possible sighting, but we all know I'm an optimist so I'd like

to hear what everyone else thinks."

"Definitely not," croaked an old guy across the table from me. "Shape's all wrong. Too wide."

"The water distorts these things, Ben," replied a middle-aged woman closer to Woolly-Jumper. "I think it's promising."

So began a lively discussion on the merits and failings of this smudge of darker blue in the wider, lighter sea of blue. The image was made closer, refined, brought out further, its speed was analysed, potential course predicted. They even made it 3D for some reason. That didn't help but I had to admit I was impressed with the tech. Woolly-Jumper was pretty savvy with it. Apparently well practiced.

I stayed silent, mostly because I didn't really know what they were talking about, and also because I was waiting for her to speak first. To make the first move. Eventually she did.

"Could it be a shadow?" she asked, during a lull in the conversation. "From above?"

"The shadow of what?" Woolly-Jumper asked. "The helicopter that took the picture isn't in the correct position."

"It could be a cloud", she said.

"Maybe, but it must have been a pretty big one, and we can't be sure it was a sunny enough day to cast shadows like that. Who's to say that it wasn't overcast?"

"The sun is glinting on the water," I said, entering the fray. I pointed to a spot where I could see it. "There, that sheen, you can see it."

"He's right," came another croak from the old man.

"Possibly, possibly," said Woolly-Jumper, his face scrunched up, the blue light of the computer making his glasses opaque.

"How do you explain the disappearance, then?" This voice was

from a young punk-looking kid down a few seats from me on the right. “I mean if it was a cloud it wouldn’t just go away at the end like that would it?”

As if on cue, the darkness in the video faded away.

Some looked at me for an answer, I looked at her. She shook her head.

There was nothing more to the meeting, and it ended soon after. I tried to look for her, but in the sudden rush to clear away the table and chairs she disappeared.

This didn’t mean she’d forgotten about me. I was sure about that as I pulled my coat back on. She’d ignored me on purpose, I thought. Maybe as a challenge, maybe just for fun. A deliberate choice anyway. I grinned to myself thinking about it.

I attended another meeting a week later, in the same place, and again grainy images were discussed. She was there, although I didn’t speak to her because she came in late and only met my eyes for a brief moment before she took her seat.

In time, the meetings became a totemic part of my week. I was still working, of course, predicting the future with psychology tests and Purpose-Machines, but I grew distracted. I began to see her face in those of my client’s, began to rush appointments and stumble through mixed up words.

It wasn’t that I was in love with her—although such feelings were possible—it was rather that she stimulated me, and it gave me a thrill to be near her.

The setting hardly mattered. It was a grim journey to that part of Cityside. Through long and curving streets darkened and made damp by the overhanging motorways above. I usually walked it, with my collar turned up and my eyes cast to the floor. This time of year didn’t particularly help. On a good day it was sunny and crisp and my nose felt like it could fall off, and on the worst days

the rain turned to ice and my soul seemed to freeze under its relentless barrage.

Still, I did it gladly, just so I could see that glowing blue neon light. It was as comforting to me now as a sunrise, which was just as well because they were saying on the news that anyone living under ten stories might never see that sight again.

I found an opportunity to talk to her at most meetings, before the whale stuff began, but it was never more than five or seven minutes. Never enough.

Maybe a month and a half passed, and my view of the group began to change. When I was small I'd liked to watch for birds in the trees at a park near my parent's house, and even if I never saw any, I kept watching in the hope that I might. I couldn't see how these people were different.

Of course I'd seen the news bulletins, but I figured those were extremists. A separate branch.

But even despite my new perspective I was no closer to having the meaningful kind of conversation with this girl that I wanted to. Small talk became very small when it was all you got.

I'd always wait outside the door for a while before going in, and smoke if I had cigarettes that day. I never wanted to be the first one in, or the second or third. I preferred to be one of the last. That gave me a better chance of catching her on the way in.

One day, the Tuesday evening meeting I think it was, I found her waiting in my spot. Waiting for me.

"What are you doing out here" I asked, when I saw her.

"Oh nothing", she said, narrowing her eyes and smiling. "Just enjoying the fresh air". The air wasn't, of course, fresh. Just dry, and biting "Why do you keep coming to these meetings?" she continued, a plume of white breath following every word.

I thought for a moment, then shrugged. “It’s something different, I suppose, from the rest of life.”

“Sure,” she said. “But you’re not really interested though, are you? You’re not really —I don’t know—earnest when you talk, in there. You could be talking about anything, about the weather. Not something that matters.”

I was a little taken aback at the accusation. “I hardly think I’m uninterested,” I said. “I contribute, don’t I?”

“I know you do. But like I said, I don’t hear real concern in your voice.”

I laughed, nonplussed. “It’s whales, how invested can I be? Or *maybe* it’s whales. Could just—”

“They’re extinct. Did you know that?”

I paused, a response caught in my throat. “Every last one?”

“All of them. All gone away,” she came closer to me. “That’s why we’re looking so hard. We’re trying to find them again.”

“Wait. Hold on a second,” I said, “There’s *none* left? How the fuck did that happen?”

She chuckled. “No one noticed they were going. And then they were just gone. Come on, the meeting’s probably starting soon.”

She brushed past me, close enough that I caught her perfume, lingering in the air behind her.

I went into that meeting a little more grave. I considered those hazy blue pixels a little more closely. The idea that these people might find a whale suddenly seemed much more important to me.

Maybe I was just trying to live up to this standard she apparently had for me, but there was something else there too, because that feeling lingered, it bled into the next day. Then the next.

I found myself spending even less time than I had before on

all those previous commitments which had previously been so important. I did the bare minimum to reach my weekly quota at work, preferring instead to spend hours in the city library —a dilapidated and abandoned but nonetheless colossal structure in the hazy area between the Cityside and Uptown. I read histories on the whale until my eyes ached, I traced maps of seas marked with migration patterns, I gazed at drawings of the great beasts, and all the while I was thinking of her too.

It was hard to determine what exactly was the root of my sudden hyper-focus. I did feel real investment in the whales, but on the other hand I knew that if she dropped them and the meetings, then I probably would too.

So, it was an interesting time.

Eventually the thought of the blue whale became synonymous with the thought of this girl. The desire to see some real evidence of them was one and the same as the desire to see the smile it would bring to her face. It was a very strong desire, and it took me right to the edge.

"So, do you want in?" she asked me for the fifth time.

"Before I answer," I replied, "remind me how this helps the whales."

"Obviously not directly, dipshit," she said. "It's called *raising awareness*."

"Raising awareness usually means peaceful protest. No?"

"Placards and banners don't work anymore. You can't even see them in the smog sometimes. And you can't block off roads used by 'droids. They just keep driving over you until you're scraped off the cement by the cleaners in the morning. You gotta blow up something to get attention now."

"Right", I said. It made sense, so long as you twisted the logic into a knot.

I briefly wondered if this was a kind of exam. Her test of my dedication to the cause.

"Ok, I'm in. For the whales."

"For the whales," she echoed, the corner of her mouth curving into a small smile.

The whole thing was to take place on City Hall Street. We couldn't get near the building itself, for obvious reasons, but there was some mid-level administrative guy whose chauffeur parked the car out on the public road for some reason. He came out every day at the same time, and that's when we'd kill him, the driver, and any other poor cunt who was near enough. Simple explosives fixed under the car, the kind that sold for peanuts in the depths of Cityside.

Then we'd lob speakers in the air to float and proclaim our message—given on behalf of the blue whales—and then we'd split, into the alleys and up the airlifts, and no one would find us

The first part was alright. I had nothing to do. She didn't either. It was two, more senior, guys who planted the bomb. One of them, surprisingly enough, was Woolly-Jumper.

We waited while they moved in. Her, and I, and a few others. We were draped in cheap, blue-dyed, baggy clothes, like the kind the burnouts who live by the river would wear.

A moment passed in which, crouching there in a dim alley, with two heavy speakers in my hand and a homemade blue whale mask over my face, I nearly left because of the absurdity of it all. The muscles in my thighs were all tensed and ready to lift me up and away, only her hand grazed my knee, and I was stuck in place.

The bomb went off.

We charged out, delivered our packages, and then charged away again, all while bleary-eyed citizens reeled and stumbled away from the pluming fireball.

We lost the others and took an empty airlift straight up and across the platforms to Midway Station, suspended like a fat storm cloud above Cityside.

It was silent in that box of dirty glass, gliding—not without friction—along a central steel beam humming with energy and between periodical steel squares which gave us a little boost each time we passed through. I could feel her watching me. I watched the city glide by like a dirty ocean below us.

The next day they found something.

Because I only attended the publicly scheduled meetings, I was late to the party, and when I arrived the excited buzz that had grown over the three days since the discovery swept me up like a wave. I sat in my chair, sweaty-palmed, almost quavering with anticipation. My whole existence felt balanced on a point.

Absurd, I know, but that's just how it felt

Woolly-Jumper set the projector up, and someone else flicked off the lights.

The picture was dark as sin. Not the ocean surface, like I'd expected. The only illumination came weakly from whatever was recording the video. Just a few feet of light, in which little specks of things floated. Beyond that was vast blackness.

I sat forward, forgetting to breathe.

Then it came, a sound out of dreams. Beautiful and dreadful all at once. Harmonic and discordant and a thousand other things besides. It took hold of my mind and swept all else away. I was terrified by it, but if it had stopped, I would have wept.

Strange clicks, and whines and long melancholic wails came dancing out of that dark picture.

Distantly, I became aware of someone beside me. I knew it was her.

"Listen to it," she whispered into my ear. Her hand came sliding over my thigh, the other running through the hair on the back of my head.

Then, in the final few seconds of the footage, just for a moment as the song continued, in the blackness, something huge moved. Collective gasps ensued. Her nails dug into my leg.

It ended and the room erupted in cheers. I tried to lend my voice to it, because I felt ecstasy, but my throat was too dry. I could only stare at the projection, now static, hoping it would resume.

She'd left my side when it ended, but I found her outside on the street, in the gloom of evening. Somewhere distant, across innumerable streets and over countless rooftops, the siren of a police unit, or an ambulance, screamed. It seemed a pale imitation of what I'd just heard down in the basement.

"You realise now," she said, moving away from the wall to stand close to me, "what it is we're looking for?"

I didn't reply.

"You felt it, in there. When you heard them singing. I know you did, I could see it on your face. Something way down inside you that's been buried."

I knew what she was talking about. I had felt something, below my heart and my lungs. It lingered still.

"You feel it now too," she took my hand in hers.

Yes, I could. It lanced up across my chest, down my arms, and came the other way too, back into me, from her, where our skin touched. Then she kissed me, and I felt it even more.

She drew away an inch. "They're not just animals, you understand? They're gods. They're the Earth itself".

"We buried it," I said.

"We buried *her*. And we buried them too. For bright lights and

cheap shit." She scuffed the ground with her shoe. I heard a car backfire somewhere near.

All the while she gazed at me. She took my hand and held it against her breast, over her heart.

"What you feel, that's it."

"I know."

"*That's it.*"

"It is."

"We have to get it back. Before it's gone." She squeezed my hand under hers.

"We have to."

This time I kissed her.

NON-FICTION

Journey to the Blue Eye of the Accursed Mountains

Tomás Flynn

Albania has many cities, most of which are very old and very beautiful. Only one sits at the foot of the Accursed Mountains. Built on the shore of Shkodra Lake, near the border of what is now called Montenegro, this city is called Shkodër, and has been occupied since before the birth of Christ. It is perpetually renewed, perched halfway between the flow of water people inland and the slide of mountain people down to the plains below. This city has seen the rise and fall of empires, seen ideologies and rulers disappear without a trace. These days it is a living contradiction; a Muslim city filled with bars, a once communist city now home to Burger King. To visit Shkodër now is to find a city filled with cracked streets and kind people, cheap beer and cheaper rakija, and a horde of tourists seeking the one road North. This road leads to the so-called "Albanian Alps", an adopted name. The other name for these mountains is much older, coming from those who have always lived amongst these valleys and peaks. In Serbian these mountains are called the 'Prokletije'. In Albanian they are known as the 'Bjeshkët e Nemuna'. Both names mean the same thing: the Accursed Mountains. This is the story of how you get to Shkodër, how you find someone to take you North, up the winding mountain passes and deep into the snowswept karsts, until at last you reach Theth, and the Blue Eye.

First step is getting to Albania. This can be done by plane, boat or car. Flying is easiest, but crossing east from Europe by boat is a worthwhile journey, one that leaves you standing in the great port city of Vlorë. Here you can walk the promenade at night, surrounded by life, and hear Italian waves crashing against Balkan shores. The main airport in Albania is in Tirana, the capital in

the south. The descent into Albania from above is otherworldly, dropping down over crack top mountains, lone half built huts overlooking the great metropolis below, half medieval town and half blur of skyscraper crane steel and construction. The landscape repeats itself in green riverbeds and fields, landscape ridged as far as the eye can see, all stretching down to lapping Adriatic shores and white soft sands. When the plane comes to its bumbling stop on the tarmac, step onto the ground and breathe in. You will feel an immediate and powerful warmth, no matter the season or weather. Tirana Airport is huge, bright, clean, a declaration of forward intent. Step outside the terminal and this declaration starts to fade. There is no public transport here, not in the way you know it. No metro connects the airport and the city, no direct train or scheduled bus. There are two options, taxi or van. The taximen are friendly, smoking together and letting the sun pass overhead. They will haggle with you, but it is not them you need. To get to your destination you must clutch your talisman, a blurry photo of a stranger's phone, with a vague idea of some combination of name and driver. Luckily for you this driver will identify himself: at the back wall of the squealing tarmac, nestled into a row of mismatched and rusting white vans, a man sits smoking. He has a sign with huge red letters leaning against his knee: Shkodër. He is very friendly, and when you ask what time the bus leaves all he will do is laugh. You must simply sling your bag into the van and wait. Take a wander over to the nearby vending machine. It is stocked entirely with cigarette packets, a quarter of the price that you are used to. Why not indulge?

After some amount of time the man will nod and tell you it is time to go. This is the first step on the long journey north. To your left will pass more grass fields, a man on a stool hand milking a cow, rusted old tractors reflecting the slow-setting sun. To your right will pass immense black G-Wagons, half-built concrete hotels, abandoned roadside cafes. The driver will ask if you mind him smoking while he drives. Say you don't. He is the only one

who will ask. You will arrive in Shkodër in the last of the daylight, the streets warm and alive with people, the white stone of the huge mosque softly glowing as night falls. You will be offered rakija. It is locally made alcohol, of indeterminate origin and strength, stored in a petrol can and dispensed into plastic bottles. Say yes. It will be delicious. You will forget your own name, along with those of everyone else.

To get from the city into the Accursed Mountains is easy enough. There is a bus every morning, although as you will have learned by now both of these terms are relative. If you stand by the roadside at eight in the morning, shivering with the cold of a rakija hangover, eventually an insane orange vehicle will appear, packed to the brim with a mix of locals and tourists all clinging to whatever upholstery they can. Pay the driver cash, and don't worry about the destination. You are going all the way, to the very end of the road. The crazed rocking of the vehicle on the half-paved roads, the stink of cigarette smoke and the local music blaring from a speaker wedged into the door will lull you into a half-sleep. This semi-doze is necessary for survival as you leave the plains, climbing hairpin by hairpin out of the valley and into the high clean air of the peaks. The roads up here are narrow, half made of gravel and ice water with immense drops to farmland below. At around nine the driver will pull over to a cafe. Dismount blearily, and find inside the owner and your driver having a breakfast drink. You may choose to join them or not. If not, you can watch the impressive variety of animals penned inside another man's truck lumber heavily around each other, steaming and groaning in the chill morning frost. The road peaks once, briefly, suddenly arriving at the only flat bit of mountain top, giving view of blue-black slopes and white caps fading into the far distance. The van will turn nose downward and dive into the valley, driver singing merrily away.

Your accommodation will appear improbably, a few chalets

perched halfway up a sheer drop, both resembling and populated by goats. This is Theth. The breakfast is good, the rooms are pleasant, and when the sun drops behind the shoulder of the valley the peaks opposite glow briefly orangegold, grey desolate stone becoming molten for a few seconds. To get to the Blue Eye will be a little more complex than the journey so far. In brief: stand in the little car park anxiously checking Google Maps to see if you can make the hike. Rediscover, again, that Google Maps does not work here. Look so confused that the ever-present Dutch couple take pity on you and offer you a lift (the Dutch shall inherit the earth, in all of their campervan and bicycle glory). En route navigate an honest-to-god landslide blocking the road (the Dutch just drive over it), battling nausea from this near-death experience until you reach the base of a river, nestled between immense gloom of mountaintops, with the clearest water you have ever seen, a blue-green glass flowing from Eye to sea. Begin to understand what you are seeking. Cross rickety fairytale wood bridges, held together with wire and hope, then follow your intrepid leaders up the thin trail. Try to forget the pictures they showed you of their children as they leap from rock to rock. Follow for two hours up and over, white gravel slipping into vast chasms below, until at last you turn a final corner and see it; the Blue Eye of the Accursed Mountains. Formed, eons old, by meltwater pounding down the karsts and gouging a hole deeper and deeper into the rock below, here the bluegreen water deepens to an almost cruel blue, painfully cold even in mid-May heat. The freefall water thundering into the pool throws up spray, glinting in weak sunlight, booming through the valley. The rock here is carved with the scars of centuries, limestone corroded away by icecold water and carried a hundred miles to the warm sea below. Reflect on your journey to this point, leaving the heaving city in the south to follow the long road north, to Shkodër, then further, up, up, out of civilisation, navigating people and place to at last plunge your aching feet into water recycled a thousand thousand times, water older than humanity,

water older than you can imagine. Stand refreshed at the heart of the Accursed Mountains, and know their name. When you finally make it home, Google this place. TripAdvisor calls the journey "great for ages 5-75".

How It Started

Danielle Sgambati

After months of severe weight loss, unquenchable thirst, and fainting spells, my mom was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at the age of 13. She found out after suffering horrifying symptoms and days of her tongue falling apart in her mouth. Her parents had taken her to the doctor, and they had told her she had severe damage to her kidneys because of how late they were to diagnose her. I think she still blames her mother for never noticing how sick she actually was.

14 years later was September 15, 2000. My mom had been pregnant for only a short while. The doctor told her it was incredibly risky and that more likely than not, she would die trying to have a child or lose the fetus during labor. She chose, against everyone's wishes, to stick with it. To carry the very thing that was killing her (it sounds very dramatic, but it was true). She carried that ticking time bomb around with her for 6 months by then.

That day in September, my father came home from work to find my mother screaming in agony on the ground. Her bloated body lay on the carpet in the unrelenting humid heat of the Florida air. My father quickly put her into the car and sped to the nearest hospital. Accelerating, terrified to watch his pregnant girlfriend slowly die, my father caught the attention of nearby police officers by going well over the Florida state speed limit. The cop attempted to pull my frantic father over to no avail; this quickly turned into a car chase. My dad gestured out the window for the police to go to the other side of the car, hoping the officer would notice his pregnant, half-dead girlfriend's dire state. Luckily, when the officer noticed my dying mother, the car chase turned into a police escort to the hospital. When they arrived, the doctors informed them that it

was now or never. My mother had lost her vision, her kidneys shut down, and both of us were dying.

My mother was only six months pregnant, meaning I was three months premature. This in itself wouldn't have been an issue if the mother herself were healthy. A three-month premie in the early 2000s had about an 80% survival rate. Yet a three-month premie weighing in at about 1 pound, with a hole in her heart and in the back of her throat, with severely underdeveloped lungs, all while being birthed by a dying diabetic mother, well, the chances weren't great. In fact, I died.

We kinda both did.

So there we lay, once conjoined in the same body, surgically ripped apart into two separate operating rooms. Would we ever meet? Would the body that fought to keep me alive be sacrificed for nothing? Teams of surgeons and doctors worked to keep our hearts pumping, fighting to save our organs, our family on the other side sitting in uncomfortable plastic waiting room chairs, desperate to know the outcome. My father paced back and forth underneath the fluorescent lights as the hours ticked by without a word of an update on either of our conditions.

My heart had stopped several times, and twice I was medically, for lack of a better word, dead.

My mother's heart stopped as well, also making her technically dead.

My father needed a distraction; he couldn't bear the thought of not only losing the woman he loved or the child he had never met, but he couldn't cope with the feeling of helplessness that flooded him. He stared out the window into the parking lot of the Florida hospital. The swaying of the palm trees seemed to mock him in their carelessness.

"I'm gonna steal a fucking coconut." He stood up, pushed his chair back with a metallic screech, and marched out the front of

the hospital doors.

His father, alarmed, chased after him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screamed after his son, now sprinting towards a palm tree.

"I WANT. THAT. COCONUT." my father yelled, confident as ever.

He began to grasp onto the edge of the tree, using nearby ledges to hoist himself up.

"Raymond, please, get down from the tree, and we can just take a walk," his father pleaded with him, getting closer, reaching his arms out to help him down. Raymond climbed higher and higher into the tree, using the hospital's fence as a guide.

"I am going to get this coconut." His foot got to the top of the fence, and he reached his arm out, now just inches away from the nearest coconut.

"Raymond, please just get down," his father begged, "this is ridiculous."

Raymond ignored him and continued to slowly reach. His hand grazed the end of the branch, and as he pulled it slowly toward him, he thought, 'I've got it; I'm going to bring this back for them.' The fibers of the coconut grazed the pads of his fingertips; he almost had a grip on it until his foot slipped from the metal chain link fence that once held him. He plummeted down, and his face hit the cement of the hospital parking lot.

So who do we have here? My mother, whose kidneys were failing, and was now blinded for the foreseeable future. My father, whose jaw was shattered and nose crushed by the unforgiving tar. And me, a hole in my heart and throat, underdeveloped lungs, and just shy of a pound in weight.

What a first day on Earth.