

a separate section for prose

## HINTERLANDS

### Twenty five Short Stories

By Sam Burnside

**Notes:**

Dear Stella (and Sam),

*Will They Have Skylarks There?*

Congrats, Sam, on your very sensitive -- and, in its dénouement, quite shocking -- short story. I hadn't gone very far down the first column before I realised, from the mention of the statue of the kneeling girl, that it was referring to the awful atrocity in Claudy. And then, in the next two columns, this was confirmed by your very effective use of lines from James Simmons' stunning 'Ballad of Claudy' (which I first heard him recite on a radio documentary on RTE sometime around 1975). The contrast between the beauty of nature -- the hedges, trees, 'fields ... rising in blossomy blurs', blackbird and skylarks singing, etc. -- and the horror that was Claudy on that July day in 1972 and the other horror about to happen is really, really powerful. It is a story that will stay in the mind long after its first reading. So, once again, well done!

Noel (and Teresa)

Dr. Nollaig Ó Muráile, NUI Galway

**Notes:** Four of these stories first appeared in the Derry Journal during the month of August 2018, illustrated by Joe Campbell

Others were read at the inaugural Literature Festival at Culmore in March 2021. This is to mark and celebrate the creation and opening of a community hub in the newly renovated Victoria Hall.

**Stories from the Hinterland, was** introduced by award winning writer, **Anne Devlin**, with Anita Robinson, Joe Mahon Michael Poynor and Helen Mark giving the readings.

The programme also included **Beyond Covid-19**, (Photographs and Poems) by **Sam Burnside**, in an exhibition launched by **Joe Mahon**, presenter and

producer of *Lesser Spotted Ulster* and *Ulster Giants*. The exhibition photographs are housed in the PRNI 2020archive

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## THE HORSE'S BIT

He had been in London a good few years, doing well until the recession hit. He tried to stick it out but, like others, he hit the slippery slope, or *was pushed*, as he himself was fond of saying, grinning, chin on hand, about to down another pint.

Eventually, he returned home, carrying a Harrod's bag and not much more.

*Strabane, the city of opportunity!* He was in the habit of quoting this to the few people he still knew, grinning, head on hand, quaffing yet another pint. *Where*, he wondered, *has the family gone?* They appeared to have slipped away, silently in the darkness and that lay silently between now and then. The town was empty of them. Except for a sister, married to a solicitor and doing well, living across the border, in a big, frosty house on the outskirts of Lifford.

His memory was a bit off, odd, somehow skittish, he knew that, it played tricks on him. For example, a couple of times he forgot where his B and B was. He wandered around searching for it. Even though it was in the street next to the road he had been brought up on. The road that led across the border to his grandfather's farm. How many times, he wondered, had he cycled out this road, always on a summer's day, always with the sun shining. Always to climb trees or help with the hay. *Happy days*, he thought, remembering, blinking. *Home? Here, of course! The town of opportunity. London was great, but...* The television droned on and on. *Will ye have another?* The television droned on and on. The offers stopped. He moved from bar to bar, alone. Sitting there, at mid-day, in dark, silent bars he had time to think, ponder, reflect. He had time to get confused. Time to tell himself lies. Time to forget. He took to the streets. Time to try another, stronger, fix. He discovers people willing and able to accommodate his desires. He found an answer. Then he found the perfect home, a canvas cover under an iron bridge.

\*

Lying there, looking at the stars overhead, he remembered the time he went with his father and grandfather to a ploughing match. There were tractors everywhere, red and blue and green and many that seemed not to have colour at all. *Happy days!*

The noise from the massed engines was powerful. As they made their way through the crowds the two men held his hands, one on either side, occasionally swinging him up and off and his feet for they seemed, even though they were adults, to be unusually excited by the occasion.

The single thing he had not remembered he realised, sitting now on a wet ditch, smelling the smell of grass, was the horses. How could he have forgotten the horses? He had seen his grandfather ploughing with a pair when he was barely more than a baby. But now it all came back to him. The ploughing match. He remembered seeing young men floating as it were off the handles of the ploughs, their toes barely touching the earth, then pirouetting, using their weight to guide the plough, their hands to guide the horses. Their tongues firmly gripped between teeth.

\*

He is lying in a tent under a bridge when he opens his eyes. Turnover. Get to his knees. His forearms are on the ground. His mouth is so, so dry. He lifts his head. The tent canvas is translucent, yet somehow heavy and wet and dark. The covering appears to swim in its own wetness, billowing slowly, dripping a feeling of hopelessness. Imprisonment.

He half crawls, half sprawls out into light. The metal bridge casts a long shadow. A pair of sodden knickers and an obviously used condom are lying on the grass immediately outside his shelter, together with beer cans and plastic bottles. He turns away. Suddenly frantic, he searches. His plastic bag is gone, all the gear with it! A voice in his head screams.

His bottle of water, he is sure he had water, is gone. His tongue is swollen, it sticks to the roof of his mouth. Frantically, he struggles to maintain his balance; the pull has come, he must be off, the voice in his head yells louder and louder.

\*

He walks, stumbling. His jaw feels painful. He tries to pull his head away, away from the source of the pain, but the pain remains, it strengthens the more he struggles. He recalls the horse, he recalls the head harness. He can see a hand wrestling the leather straps over the ears, he can feel the force of the metal bit being shoved into the horse's mouth, the shake of the head, then the acceptance

In the dark cave that is his mind he hears another voice, this time it is his father's calling from a long way off, *He is wrestling the bit!* And his grandfather's voice replying, *Yes! But he won't beat it; none of us beats the bit!* Such voices are a comfort.

He wants to remain a little longer, in this state, between dreaming and wakening. *Am I he wonders, dreaming the dream?* Unexpectedly, a cat enters his mind. He sees it so clearly it becomes solid and he reaches out to touch it. Its fur is both smooth and rough to his touch. He cannot place where in his life this cat fits. It wraps itself about his ankles, causing him to tumble; now, it sits on his lap; purring, it takes food from his fingers. The cat leaves as suddenly as it came. He is alone.

\*

It was a young fellow from the town who found him, no more than thirteen or fourteen years old he was, on his way to do a bit of early-morning fishing, as he told the police later. A lad on that verge that is the land between boyhood innocence and the assumed toughness of manhood. He halted, seeing a boot on the grass, sticking out from the shadow cast by the bridge, the rest lying in a gloom. He approaches, then dropping his rod and bending, peers into the dimness. He had not before seen a dead body, but he knows instantly that this is death. His first instinct is to turn and run but he resists, for to flee would be unmanly. He drops to one knee. The man's

face is upturned, his skin pulled tightly and smoothly across the head's bony underpinning; the teeth protruding slightly – giving the face, its thin skin taut, the boy can see, providing it with the semblance of a faint smile painted on translucent parchment.

The boy gazes for a long moment. *This is an earth angel*, he thinks, *the face is so beautiful*. He has no idea where the term has come from, the concept being foreign to him, yet he knows what lies there before him is, was, an earth angel. He kneels there beside the body, he and it, together in time, here beneath this metal bridge, while all about the fields and houses and gardens wait in silence.



## SNOWDROPS

The three great swathes of snowdrops that appeared every year in the wide verges on both sides of the laneway and on the embankment that rose up beside what had been once a stone barn meant little to those infrequent visitors or casual callers who momentarily took joy from their presence.

For a few years now, a group of photographers from the local camera club made it a pilgrimage to take photographs, littering the lane with their tripods and camera bags, kneeling or even, in one case, bringing a ladder to gain height and a better perspective.

Each year, they arrived on a certain day and at an agreed time and by appointment made of courtesy by one of their number, and always afterwards there was carried out to them pots of tea and plates of buttered scones and saucers of jam. Custom dictated that it never rained when these visits took place and after their taking of many photographs they stood about in the yard gossiping before departing in their various motor cars.

These people from the town knew little about the farm-house or those who lived, or of those who had lived, there. Similarly, she in the house was not familiar with the alien world of digital cameras or of light meters.

The solid, square, black-stone house had been built in the mid nineteenth century and had changed little since that time. The family who built it lived there then and continued to live there, farming the land until the last son died. As families do, this one grew and diminished. Sons and daughters were born; a few died at birth, some

lived, some got married, some died, a few emigrated and were forgotten. The time came when only the one man of the name remained.

As soon as the photographers had gone she carried mugs and plates inside and shut the heavy black door, its cast iron knocker barely stirring as it shut with a thud, shifting the air in the hallway. Before entering, she looked back across the Yard and down over the fields to the Foyle. Far off to the west she could see Errigal, snow-capped, it was. He had always a word to say about the mountain. *Errigal's looking sharp the day*, he'd say as they passed, in the yard or on the doorstep as she carried in a few eggs in her apron. That or, *Errigal's not to be seen. Rain is on the way*. He was a man of few words, as reticent as she was herself. *It is*, she would reply, or *Aye, the rain's not far off*.

She had come to this house many years before, as a girl of fifteen. *Hiring* her parents called it when it was arranged but late her placement was, for the old practice had all but withered away by this stage; she was here for a year but had never left, he saying there being no reason to go and her father and mother happy to leave things as they were.

When she came, the house was home to two, a brother and sister, the sister being the older by some twelve years. She died a few years after and then there was only the one to look after, himself and the house and the hens. That and the shopping once a week. The place held no comfort, none at all, except what she could make by her own effort.

The year she first noticed the scattering of snowdrops was the same year the child was born, dead at birth. She had told no one and he barely knew. She wrapped the body up in a clean blanket and carried it out to where the ground rose beneath trees. He went on ahead and dug the hole and she placed the bundle inside. No words

were spoken. Later she came back and found and placed a flat stone on the bared earth. She scratched a 'B' for baby on the stone and turned away. The ground was a shimmer of white, white against green.

She went to bed after that and stayed there nursing her pain for two days. On the third morning she got up and carried on as usual. The burial was never spoken of by either the man or the woman. She looked often at the snowdrops, and that winter dug up clumps here and there, splitting and replanting them in bare spots, as instructed by an old man who worked about the place. Naturalised now, even today their dancing lifts her heart, their heads hanging shyly as her own had then.

He had taken ill quite suddenly but refused to see a doctor until the pain forced a change of mind. *Cancer*, the doctor said. Two weeks after this sentence of death and from his bed he told her to call James Mullan, the family solicitor. The man came immediately, and she showed him and his associate into the bedroom. There she left them for their business was none of her business, she knew.

The next day he caught her hand as she tended to his bed clothes. *You were good to me*, he said, *you held me in your arms*. In all the years together in the house, this was the first endearment he had spoken to her. Two days later he died.

After the funeral James Mullan called to the house, this time with an envelope in his hand. He asked her to be seated and then taking out a sheet of paper read aloud what was written. William Hill had left her the house and its contents and what remained of the farm, many acres having been sold off over the years. He left her what money there was in the bank, for, he explained, there was no one else.

She barely took it in, not having expected or desired such a thing. She thanked the solicitor and after he had gone away she sat for a long time on a bench in the yard.

She looks at the place on the rising slope, the spot where the flat stone remains after all these years undisturbed, hidden among the long grass. She looks across the valley to Errigal. She hears his voice, the familiar timbre distant and lifting on the breeze, *Errigal's looking sharp the day*, and remembers with affection his last few words, *you were good to me; you held me in your arms*.

## THE FLOOD COMETH

He was a tall man, tall and shallow chested but with a tall man's stoop that made him appear shorter than he was. Like a willow, swaying in the wind on a winter morning, someone once remarked of him. What most strangers first noticed about him was the bush of wiry black hair that stuck out all around his head, shaped as it was like a round chimney sweeper's brush. When he moved he rolled forward on the soles of his feet, the way a boxer might, heels barely touching the ground; he seemed to skitter around, not taking the straight way between any two points, but like a crab erratically inching from left to right, never in an east-west or north-south direction, but in a manner that suggested his sense of direction, if any, was at best ill-informed: which it was not.

There was a feyness about him, with all that was there somehow disjointed yet placed for a purpose and as if by some sleight of hand.

He was a painter, by trade. "Rogan and Son, Decorators" the sign on the side of his rickety old van said, but who or where the son was nobody knew. Perhaps he was the son. Or the father. Nobody could say; nobody bothered to find out. Equally, his role as a decorator was in doubt and not for years, if ever, had anyone approached him to ply his trade; where his money came from was the subject of occasional and impromptu discussion in the public houses of the town, but by and large nobody much cared. As quietly as he had come to the town, so he quietly lived in it; one day he was not there, then he was.

One who thought he knew him said he had a cousin who lived in Inishowen, on the banks of the Foyle, a man who owned a boat he believed. There was a period – it

lasted on and off for perhaps a dozen years – when Rogan occasionally slipped across the border, quietly and under cover of darkness and returned in the same manner, always by a different route.

He had a way about him that suggesting usefulness. He'd appear by a man or a woman's side and without offering or being asked he'd somehow 'fit the bill' and before anyone knew it the job would be done. By this means for someone so scantily known he quickly acquired a lot of clients. He was a man who was master of the principal of outsourcing; this was what he did; he invited others into farming out their wants, seduced them into turning their backs on their responsibilities to the common good, he sub-contracted their desires to growing his own profit, allowing him to smother their consciences under a convenient blanket of ignorance.

His hair he did not like, it said wildness, it shouted nihilism, but more than that, it made him stand out in a crowd, something he did not want, so he treated its identifying characteristic with caution for there was little he could do to tame it, being superstitious and believing his good luck (for this he believed he had) would fade away if he interfered with his hair.

When out in the van he wore an old felt hat that disguised his mop; when out in the town he went bareheaded, as if he did not care. At other times, when driving his little blue car, he wore a tight tweed cap, his hair captured within, his tie and jacket oddly neat and calming.

Rogan's van might be seen of a dark evening inching its way up high-hedged lanes and down narrow roads. A few times it was stopped by suspicious police or bored customs men, but nothing was ever found. Just a jumble of old rags in the back together with dried-out paint brushes in a wooden box. His other vehicle he kept in an old shed behind the house.

He'd park, jump out and fetch a parcel made of newspaper and string from under a tarpaulin in the back. He'd never be seen at the front door of any of the restaurants or pubs he visited. Setting his sights on a back door or a side entrance he would veer and sidle towards it, drawing progressively closer until, as if by magic, he would disappear inside.

Following his visits in and around the townlands of Derry and Donegal in his tidy and anonymous little blue saloon car, wearing his tight black rain coat and cap and smilingly handing over the package of fish or tobacco, or in the city, handwritten signs would appear, indicating the fresh salmon that might soon be available.

In select homes where polished door handles gleamed against the dark mahogany frames the lids of fridge freezers would be lifted and a fillet or two, or sometimes even a whole fish, carefully laid by against the day when the priest or minister might call to celebrate with the new bride and groom or to grace the table for some old relation's funeral feast.

He would never be seen near the boat nor indeed never much associated with his cousin, in public at least. His purpose, as far as he thought of a purpose, was to be happy, to carry on moving others towards happiness that a firm-fleshed piece of fish, or cheap tobacco or illicit petrol might represent.

For a time, he handled the proceeds of other people's secret lives, carrying fat little packages of cash from one hand to another. In this work he was trusted, also, well-versed in how to keep to the shadows, dodging from one to another.

His other intention in life was to avoid danger, to be unseen even when in full sight of danger, to avoid, to step around any potential trap or pitfall. He was strangely insensate to any notion of his own attachment to responsibility.

The last night of all was a night of a full moon, heavy-aired after much rain that day, but the radio had forecast more rain and had warned of expected flooding. Clouds flew fast and loose across the sky; like clothes on a line, they rose and fell, obliterating the moon and tossing shadows across the landscape.

A mile behind him the oil tanker sped along, the two men in its cabin leaning forward, tense, peering out, watching for unwelcome activity ahead, the passenger holding his telephone out at eye level in case a warning call should come. Half a mile ahead, Rogan kept his eye fixed on the road, ready to signal if any customs or official car or road block might appear. He had the ability to keep one eye on the road ahead, looking for a red light that might indicate police activity, while with the other scanning the dark horizon ahead, seeking any sign of light against the sky, any glow or flicker that might suggest a distant checkpoint. His phone lay within reach on the passenger seat, ready for action, if required. He whistled softly through his teeth, fingers drumming lightly on the steering wheel. He had reconnoitred the road half an hour earlier and all had been clear, but you never knew. His job was to warn others, his aim not be implicated in the warning. It had nothing to do with him, that was his motto, a phrase he kept repeating to himself, like a protective mantra whose existence he did not care to share with anyone else.

He came around the corner just before the bridge and was on it before he knew what the dark place in the roadway meant. The storm! The river! The bridge must have collapsed! He braked violently, the van slewing wildly, jig jaggedly crossing the road and stopping just on the verge of the black vacancy, its nose pressed against the remains of the bridge's stone wall. The engine cut out and through the silence he could hear the thunderous roar of water. For what seemed an eternity he sat there, then he wrenched desperately at the door handle. It did not move. Before he could



try the handle again the tanker came charging around the corner, its lights blinding him in the van's mirror, like a great dragon bearing down on the van and on him it descended.

The next morning, by first light, a fireman saw the familiar words "and son" painted on a slice of green metal that stuck out from under the oil tanker's wheel and it was then they guessed who this was. Later, when they got the body cut out of the car and laid him on the grass verge his head with its wildness of hair was the only part of him to remain untouched.

Someone had placed his old hat on the grass beside his remains. The men there had arranged his body together with its broken limbs as best they could, out of respect for the newly dead.

While passing close to where the body lay at rest a fireman noticed the black sphere of wiry hair, how for a moment as the sun and clouds and shadows danced. He thought he saw a circle of light form and fade away and was about to say something to those beside him but did not, fearing he might appear foolish. Later he told his wife, using the word halo, but she displayed no interest, yet the memory of that fleeting radiance came back to him often.

Passers-by who had paused on their journey to stare remarked how bent his body was. In conversation they noted coolly how it was twisted and circuitous – one adding, as dishevelled, as would be a thorn hedge an indifferent storm might had blown over and wrecked.

**BORDERLANDS**

They caught the early morning Enterprise from Belfast's Lanyon Place to Dublin's Connelly, but only by the skin of their teeth. They used their travel cards to buy tickets ahead of time then, at the last minute and largely owing to Joe's insistence, they decided to upgrade to first class. *Sure, we might as well*, Joe said, *it's our first time, after all*. Billy nodded. It was due to the delay thus caused that they had to run to make it before the carriage doors closed.

To add to their confusion, while everybody else got on the train willy-nilly they had to halt to undergo scrutiny by a uniformed guard who wielded a clipboard and who examined their papers before pointing them to their places on board.

They arrived at the taxi stand outside the station and dithered a bit before approaching a group of drivers. Who were standing nearby, gossiping. One detached himself,

*Where to? He looked from Joe to Billy. Are you sharing?* he asked.

*The Shankill*, Billy said.

*The Falls*, Joe said.

*Right you are boys, you'll want separate cars then*, the man said, jangling his keys and beckoning to another driver.

Billy fixed his checked cap firmly in place and stuck out his hand. Joe took it saying, *I will call you –we'll do it again*, then, two car doors slamming shut, they went their separate ways.

Joe went on ahead and got seats with a table while Billy gathered up an armful of complimentary newspapers. *They're free!* he explained as he piled Newsletter and Irish New and Irish Times and Independent on the table.

They were workmates of long standing, and only recently retired. Joe had gone first, about four months previously, with Billy following only a couple of weeks since and they had agreed to meet up and do what others did and take advantage of their free time use the free transport available.

*Island wide, Joe said, and free! I know a couple of women who travel to Galway for their lunch and then back again, all on the one day.*

*Free! Free, my foot!* Billy had said. *We have paid for it!* Through out taxes, he added, just in case there should be any doubt.

The train glided smoothly forward, and they settled down, glancing at the newspapers, staring out of the window, enjoying the unheard-of luxurious comfort of first-class seats.

*Everything is so spacious,* Joe noted.

A young woman passed down the carriage, smiling and dropping off breakfast menus as she went. They pursued the menu: Joe glanced at Billy, questioningly: *I only had a bit of toast this morning. Should we?* He suggested, raising the card enticingly.

*Aye, why not. It's not often we're out!*

A little later Joe tore open two of the salt sachets and poured their contents over his food.

Billy gazed at him in mock disbelief. *Don't you know that stuff is a killer!* he pronounced, pointing to the salt.

*You are approaching Portadown, the welcome silken voice issued from the public address system.*

*That's Kathy Clugston Joe announced, she's everywhere!*

*Yes. She's from Belfast, Billy said.*

*Aye, but not the same Belfast as I'm from. She is known as the 'Posh Radio 4 Lady', you know, Joe retorted.*

*Yea, it's a lovely voice, she has, Billy mused, dreamily.*

The train slowed down, then stopped.

*Portadown was known as the Hub of the North at one time. Trains heading to and from Belfast, Armagh, Dublin, Derry...*

*Aye. That was in the days of railway lines going places. Now it's known for Drumcree, Garvachy Road and the Peace Line, or is it Peace Wall?*

*"Good old Portedown!" And God preserve us from peace barriers, Billy muttered.*

*Aye, and marching. And borders, Joe added. Then, catching himself on, bit his lip.*

*Wasn't Billy an Orangeman. They had never discussed it, politics being off limits at work, but he seemed to know Billy's allegiances instinctively.*

*Billy stared glumly at the passing landscape. Borders! There are borders everywhere. Joe inched forward on his seat, resting his elbows on the table. The border between day and night is the main one for me, Billy retorted. A clear conscience and a sound night's sleep, that's all I want.*

Did you hear about these two fellas were crossing the border up there between Strabane and Lifford when they were stopped at an army checkpoint.

*Where are you coming from, sir? a soldier asked.*

*Ah, just from up the road there, I've come from Killnaman, he replied, straight-faced and glancing at his mate.*

*And where are you going to?*

*I'm going straight away to Killmore!*

*Well, they were in the back of a Land rover and off to Fort George before you could say Brits out! They were not released for two days!*

*Well, nobody likes being the butt of a joke!*

*Ha!*

*Two tongues clashing! A lad from say Liverpool or Manchester and a fly -boy from God knows where! Was he from the North or the South, do you know?*

*No idea, but different tongues, altogether...*

*That would learn them, as they say.*

*I'm not so sure. Learning would require a bit of light thrown on the subject – not less!*

*Why is it, do you think, that we seem to look on borderlands as dark places? The border areas are always spoken of as mysterious, scary places, you know what I mean.*

*Maybe it's because so much has been buried in bogs thereabouts.*

*When I was a child bogs were places where you got drunk on summer while your Da cut turf – I remember the heat in the air, the birds, the bees, the smells – now they are just places where JCBs search for bodies: just wet winter-night burial pits!*

They were silent for a bit. Looking out of the carriage windows to the east, observing the wavering line between land and water, Billy wondering had he overstepped a line somewhere. You had to be so careful. For a moment silence deafening draped the carriage. Then, behind them a carriage door opened and closed. Billy fidgeted with the knot on his tie.

*A decent enough old spud*, Joe considered, observing Billy out of the corner of his eye.

*Fellow-travellers through the working week*, was how Billy had explained their friendship. Gradually they grew into the habit of going for a pint on a Friday after work but didn't socialise outside that. Their wives had never met and neither one had ever been to the other's home.

Billy broke the silence. Taking the extra mile, he labelled it, smiling inwardly. *The place is covered in history – like this Boyne Valley here*. Billy indicated the world on the other side of the glass *We are invited to step right into it. All the time. And you can't take two steps without intruding on one or another no-go area!*

*True enough. Like at work. You always had to be careful what you said!* Joe muttered.

*Do you miss the job?* Billy asked.

*Not a bit of it! I've plenty to occupy my time. Though, I do miss the Friday pint after work.*

Billy replied, *Well, there's no reason we can't have the odd drink. Thanks for suggesting this wee outing. I enjoyed it. It's been good.*

The train slowed as it approached Connolly Station and the stranger who had been sitting quietly and un-noticed in the seat opposite stood up and collected his luggage from the overhead rack. As he left to make his way to the door he hesitated, stopped and leaned over Joe and Billy.

*Couldn't help overhearing your most interesting conversation about borders, gentlemen. I'm an American and just passing through so you will excuse my ignorance of these matters, but it strikes me that the whole of Northern Ireland is just*

*one big (and dark, to use your word) borderland! Great Britain on one side and the Republic of Ireland on the other. One could say you are border-blinded!*

He tipped an imaginary hat with one hand, heaved his bag off the floor with the other and was gone before either could respond.

*Bloody cheek! Who was that?*

*Don't know, but he might have a point!*

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## THE FLOOD COMETH

He was a tall man, tall and shallow chested but with a tall man's stoop making him appear shorter than he was. Like a willow, swaying in the wind on a winter morning, someone once remarked of him. What most strangers first noticed about him was the bush of wiry black hair that stuck out all around his head, shaped as it was like a round chimney sweeper's brush. When he moved he rolled forward on the soles of his feet, the way a boxer might, heels barely touching the ground; he seemed to skitter around, not taking the straight way between any two points, but like a crab erratically inching from left to right, never in an east-west or north-south direction, but in a manner that suggested his sense of direction, if any, was at best ill-informed: which it was not.

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He was a painter, by trade. "Rogan and Son, Decorators" the sign on the side of his rickety old van said, but who or where the son was nobody knew. Perhaps he was the son. Or the father. Nobody could say; nobody bothered to find out. Equally, his role as a decorator was in doubt and not for years, if ever, had anyone approached him to ply his trade; where his money came from was the subject of occasional and impromptu discussion in the public houses of the town, but by and large nobody much cared. As quietly as he had come to the town, so he quietly lived in it; one day he was not there, then he was.

One who thought he knew him said he had a cousin who lived in Inishowen, on the banks of the Foyle, a man who owned a boat he believed. There was a period – it



lasted on and off for perhaps a dozen years – when Rogan occasionally slipped across the border, quietly and under cover of darkness and returned in the same manner, always by a different route.

He had a way about him that suggesting usefulness. He'd appear by a man or a woman's side and without offering or being asked he'd somehow 'fit the bill' and before anyone knew it the job would be done. By this means for someone so scantily known he quickly acquired a lot of clients. He was a man who was master of the principal of outsourcing; this was what he did; he invited others into farming out their wants, seduced them into turning their backs on their responsibilities to the common good, he sub-contracted their desires to growing his own profit, allowing him to smother their consciences under a convenient blanket of ignorance.

His hair he did not like, it said wildness, it shouted nihilism, but more than that, it made him stand out in a crowd, something he did not want, so he treated its identifying characteristic with caution for there was little he could do to tame it, being superstitious and believing his good luck (for this he believed he had) would fade away if he interfered with his hair.

When out in the van he wore an old felt hat that disguised his mop; when out in the town he went bareheaded, as if he did not care. At other times, when driving his little blue car, he wore a tight tweed cap, his hair captured within, his tie and jacket oddly neat and calming.

Rogan's van might be seen of a dark evening inching its way up high-hedged lanes and down narrow roads. A few times it was stopped by suspicious police or bored customs men, but nothing was ever found. Just a jumble of old rags in the back together with dried-out paint brushes in a wooden box. His other vehicle he kept in an old shed behind the house.

He'd park, jump out and fetch a parcel made of newspaper and string from under a tarpaulin in the back. He'd never be seen at the front door of any of the restaurants or pubs he visited. Setting his sights on a back door or a side entrance he would veer and sidle towards it, drawing progressively closer until, as if by magic, he would disappear inside.

Following his visits in and around the townlands of Derry and Donegal in his tidy and anonymous little blue saloon car, wearing his tight black rain coat and cap and smilingly handing over the package of fish or tobacco, or in the city, handwritten signs would appear, indicating the fresh salmon that might soon be available.

In select homes where polished door handles gleamed against the dark mahogany frames the lids of fridge freezers would be lifted and a fillet or two, or sometimes even a whole fish, carefully laid by against the day when the priest or minister might call to celebrate with the new bride and groom or to grace the table for some old relation's funeral feast.

He would never be seen near the boat nor indeed never much associated with his cousin, in public at least. His purpose, as far as he thought of a purpose, was to be happy, to carry on moving others towards happiness that a firm-fleshed piece of fish, or cheap tobacco or illicit petrol might represent.

For a time, he handled the proceeds of other people's secret lives, carrying fat little packages of cash from one hand to another. In this work he was trusted, also, well-versed in how to keep to the shadows, dodging from one to another.

His other intention in life was to avoid danger, to be unseen even when in full sight of danger, to avoid, to step around any potential trap or pitfall. He was strangely insensate to any notion of his own attachment to responsibility.

The last night of all was a night of a full moon, heavy-aired after much rain that day, but the radio had forecast more rain and had warned of expected flooding. Clouds flew fast and loose across the sky; like clothes on a line, they rose and fell, obliterating the moon and tossing shadows across the landscape.

A mile behind him the oil tanker sped along, the two men in its cabin leaning forward, tense, peering out, watching for unwelcome activity ahead, the passenger holding his telephone out at eye level in case a warning call should come. Half a mile ahead, Rogan kept his eye fixed on the road, ready to signal if any customs or official car or road block might appear. He had the ability to keep one eye on the road ahead, looking for a red light that might indicate police activity, while with the other scanning the dark horizon ahead, seeking any sign of light against the sky, any glow or flicker that might suggest a distant checkpoint. His phone lay within reach on the passenger seat, ready for action, if required. He whistled softly through his teeth, fingers drumming lightly on the steering wheel. He had reconnoitred the road half an hour earlier and all had been clear, but you never knew. His job was to warn others, his aim not be implicated in the warning. It had nothing to do with him, that was his motto, a phrase he kept repeating to himself, like a protective mantra whose existence he did not care to share with anyone else.

He came around the corner just before the bridge and was on it before he knew what the dark place in the roadway meant. The storm! The river! The bridge must have collapsed! He braked violently, the van slewing wildly, jig jaggedly crossing the road and stopping just on the verge of the black vacancy, its nose pressed against the remains of the bridge's stone wall. The engine cut out and through the silence he could hear the thunderous roar of water. For what seemed an eternity he sat there, then he wrenched desperately at the door handle. It did not move. Before he could

try the handle again the tanker came charging around the corner, its lights blinding him in the van's mirror, like a great dragon bearing down on the van and on him it descended.

The next morning, by first light, a fireman saw the familiar words "and son" painted on a slice of green metal that stuck out from under the oil tanker's wheel and it was then they guessed who this was. Later, when they got the body cut out of the car and laid him on the grass verge his head with its wildness of hair was the only part of him to remain untouched.

Someone had placed his old hat on the grass beside his remains. The men there had arranged his body together with its broken limbs as best they could, out of respect for the newly dead.

While passing close to where the body lay at rest a fireman noticed the black sphere of wiry hair, how for a moment as the sun and clouds and shadows danced. He thought he saw a circle of light form and fade away and was about to say something to those beside him but did not, fearing he might appear foolish. Later he told his wife, using the word halo, but she displayed no interest, yet the memory of that fleeting radiance came back to him often.

Passers-by who had paused on their journey to stare remarked how bent his body was. In conversation they noted coolly how it was twisted and circuitous – one adding, as dishevelled, as would be a thorn hedge an indifferent storm might had blown over and wrecked.



**LARKSPUR**

He sat at her table, directly opposite her, leaning firmly into his chairback, his left hand and arm hanging inertly by his side, his right hand holding, she notices such things, she considers, like some old Greek warrior, the ever-present cigarette, the ultimate prize grasped and displayed vaingloriously like some great implement of war.

They had just been to bed.

*Your clock is fast*, he observes, breaking the silence that has hung since they sat and indicating the evidence with a nod of his head. *Not a good thing in a house. It can lead to confusion.* He pauses. *Missed trains!*

*Surely not!* she replies, *not missed!* Then, seeing the offence caused adds, *sorry, it's just that I always— have always – kept it like that. Haven't you noticed.* She smiles, atoning for the slight. *No. I've never seen a warrior huff*, she thinks, an expression of extreme seriousness masking her face.

He has carelessly placed her saucer, the one that acts when he is here as ashtray, by the table top's edge and now bending over, and with exaggerated care, flicks ash into it. His used matchstick lies there in the scattering of cold, grey tobacco ash. The burnt end is black and curled, the saved end is of white wood, virginly pristine in contrast. He pokes the old match with the new one. *I'd appreciate being taken seriously*, he grumbles. *Occasionally!*

It was always like this, she thinks to herself. Always has been. A drink, bed, then the stink of cigarette smoke pervading my kitchen. Then a silly argument, then an excuse, leading to a sullen departure. Yet, this time it is different, she reflects,

sensing a change in his demeanour. The speed of today's the attack, the so-obvious insolence the strange expression semi-concealed in his face, this is what is new. She turns her head away and gazes towards the window. Each tick of the clock marks a pause. The early evening light falls through the glass and drapes itself over the half-silvered taps. How could two lives overlap so, so triflingly, she wonders. The living silence that envelops them. *How like Velcro strips we are? So strong when joined together, but so easily parted*, she reflects, observing him from behind lowered lashes.

His complaint – he has one, she knows – has not been spoken, yet she is aware that a grievance is at this moment being nurtured, it is here about, she thinks, loitering, waiting. Like a bad aura surrounding his Greek head and shoulders, his athletes body.

*You are very quiet*; his voice breaks the silence. His words are measured and cool, his tone is cold, impersonal.

*Larkspur*, she replies. He glances up at her and she notices the suddenly brooding dark eyes.

*I was thinking of Larkspur*, she lies, looking straight at him.

*Larkspur?*

*Yes, the flower...*

He does not ask for an explanation and she does not fabricate one. They wait. The room is devoid of motion. The air and the walls and the tiled floor is all present tense. The table and the ashtray that yesterday was a saucer waits. Growing darkness weighs heavily, draining what had been colour to monochrome.

A match flares; he lights another cigarette.

*Your sheets!* he says, ominously.

*My sheets?* She marvels at how childishly peevish this man can be.

*Your silk sheets. I hate them!* He pauses. *I have always hated them.* Now he shudders mightily, his shoulders roll in a grand dramatic gesture, his lips curl in a show of disdain.

She waits. In silence. She often asserts that she believes in non-aggression. He knows this. Yet, behind his armour of self-confidence he is aware of her sense of power and resents it. She does not speak, merely raises an eyebrow. She will not help him. She wants to ask; *do you wash the soiled sheets?* but holds her tongue. He pauses and sighs. He stubs out his cigarette and stands. *Why do you make me use this awful saucer? Why don't you have a proper ashtray!* Pushing the saucer aside, he stalks to a nearby chair and take up his overcoat, draping it over his arm. Then, he sits down, his manner suddenly changed. The subdued warrior, she notes, finding herself on the verge of gloating, resigned, wheedling

*It must end!* he pleads. *This ... we ... we must end!*

Yes, she says, evenly, waiting.

*I don't like your namby-pamby ways. Your silk sheets. The milk jug, when the milk bottle would do fine!*

*We no longer have milk bottles,* she replies quietly. *And, my sheets were never made from silk!*

His response comes quickly and he goes directly to the door. She observes how his shoes make an odd scratching sound on the floor. She is aware of the clock ticking on the wall, the drip of a tap, a car on the roadway outside; the light crumbles; she is aware of tightness across her chest and moisture forming in her armpits.

His hand reaches out – in what seems to her in slow motion — he opens the door; he turns to look to where she sits, motionless on her chair, her elbows on the table



top. He shrugs enquiringly, his face apparently open and innocent. *Why Larkspur?*  
he asks.

**EPITAPH FOR JOHNATHAN AARENS**

Out of the grey pit of sleep, slowly so slowly, Johnathan Aarens grows aware of the sound of water – *a shower of rain*, the thought emerges slowly, for now he feels the sound's weight falling on his side and back.

He is lying in the foetal position, his knees under his chin, his hands clasped about his knees. From far-off he grows aware of voices, not the words spoken but the rhythm of voices ebbing and flowing in conversations, drifting as such desultory talk does.

There is laughter of sorts, too; now he feels warmth; it is spreading from the wet that saturates his covering, it comes from what has seeped through the thin coat that covers him. This is not cold rain. He can hear now but cannot see. His eyes remain tight shut.

For the briefest moment he recalls the roundabout at the bottom of John Street, in that same moment he recalls again a gap in a stone wall, he sees a tree, he recalls thinking shelter, he remembers lying down, between the wall and the tree, feeling through the haze hidden and safe and sheltered there.

Now, the wet. His mouth – his lips – are open, his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth, he mumbles *Daddy, Daddy, Daddy*, the words muffled and incoherent.

*Your daddy is not here, you old fucker, you!* He shrinks from a familiar sound. Spit flies, he feels it land on his head.

He feels the impact of something harder, a fist, a foot, it strikes his chest, he smells the scent of ammonia lifting off his clothes; he knows it is piss; he recalls from some

depth the smell of places where rats have been; he hears footsteps; they parade, then seem to fade into the distance.

He turns, or attempts to turn, but sinks again onto his side. His head lolls. A long road or avenue opens out, it stretches ahead. It is lined with chestnut trees; a pale sun throws thin shadows across the faded landscape. The roadway is scattered with polished chestnuts and their discarded green and brown carcasses. Spiked. Like a blinded man he cautiously fumbles his way forward.

A field of flowers – a field of poppies; now acres of daisies; now meadows of crimson clover – this is what opens out before him. *Daddy, daddy, daddy*, dazed he repeats the mantra, his lips barely moving. As far as in his mind's eye can see the poppies spread, black-eyes, red-faced yet he cannot gaze upon the poppies, he cannot countenance such an expanse of red and black. He feels suffocation and gulps for air.

The wet, cold clothes cleave to his body; he shivers. *Daddy!* The road home beckons. The past lies at the end of a long tunnel that stretches into the long ago. He tries, but a gate bars him entry; *Daddy*, he cries, but no sound emerges.

Far, far away he hears feet scuffing the road's surface. He hears voices. He hears the rattle of a tin can dragged across a rough surface. Something gurgles, in a moment his mind is alert and clear as a bell, the gurgling's significance floats upwards in his mind connecting somehow with the smell of petrol. A splash of something liquid, wet and overpowering, stings his face, it soaks his shoulder, it fills his nostrils, causing his head to turn, to twist away.

He attempts to rise. He must be off. A foot, a boot or a shoe digs into his stomach, rests there before pressing, pushing. He is forced back to the earth.

*I must leave. I must visit my son!*

*You have no son, you drunken old bastard!*

*You're a lying old bastard!*

He thinks, is it a shoe or a boot? He is aware that the leathery thing is indifferent is to his body's scraggy skin and thin bone, to the weightlessness of the tissue that is his flesh and pulp, his meagre bulk. It invites his submission to a greater reality. *Dada*, *papa*. The sounds emerge as whispers. A weight collides sharply with his head, darkness engulfs him; from far away he hears the voices of angels lifting and falling, *Papa*, he mouths, *Papa*; he senses far off the pleasant lullabies of wood-pigeons, their dark talk like honey drips off mahogany-coloured branches.

The heavens brighten, stars glow and spark, they leap as flames leap, the small flames trail behind. He feels the heat; the heat of the sun invades his body, folding his body to itself.

As though acknowledging his frailty, his mouth twists in what might be a smile; Johnathan Aarens submits to the sun's blistering embrace.

**A SMALL ACT OF KINDNESS**

She stands with her back to the world, facing the front door. She is not old, yet her shoulders are hunched, her back is stooped, the bow of a key is clamped in her hand, its tip just short of the darkness that is the key chamber. God, she remembers, is to be found in small places. She does not know how long she stands there. Time swells around her like some vast ocean of silence. Or it may have been only for a second, or two.

She hesitates, then turns and follows the path round the bungalow to the back door. She chooses and inserts the larger of the two keys on the ring into the keyway of the lock, turns it, opens the door and goes inside. The kitchen is a perfect square-shape and is large, its walls painted in cream, its floor covered in mottled beige-coloured terrazzo. Her thoughts return to this today's sermon and this idea of God being found in small spaces. She concludes approvingly that a space like this is may be too big for such a God, the space filled with swathes of emptiness. She reaches out to move a chair. It scrapes against the floor, the noise echoing off the hard surface, the winter sun that drizzles through the window glances off the cream and green tiles that cover the walls above the worn oak-topped work surfaces

She sits down, resting her elbows on the table top. How could she have loved this – this vacancy – how could she have loved it for so long. She rubs the flat of her right hand over the table top, feeling with some shock how the open grain retaliates against her skin. She shivers and removes her hand. She gazes at the window above the sink. Shadows from a tree in the garden intrude from the window, from the work surface they fall across the terrazzo. As they dance their solemn dance the

light has gone. From outside a smothering greyness advances, cloaking the inside world.

For what seems to be another eternity she encompasses in her imagination the approaching evening and all that that means. She considers the long night ahead, she wonders briefly and inconsequentially what she will eat. She recollects that there is a tin of salmon in the cupboard, then immediately forgets about food.

What if God is not so small, after all? What if – far from lodging in tiny cracks – he -- or she – encompasses the world! Everything! What if – she remembers learning how this, one, universe contains a million, million stars – what if God encompasses everything? What if God is everything. All the stars and everything that exists in between them. All the suns and all the moons. Why should he attend to this insignificant dot that is humanity?

All those moon-struck lovers on all the faces of all the worlds. Unaware\_what, she wonders, what do preachers know of such a God!

The God who sustains us, whom we eat and drink. The God who takes away so much and to what purpose.

The God of loneliness and pain and suffering. She grimaces. The God of indifference, she thinks.

A new born baby dying in its mother's arms. A husband struck down by a drunken driver. There in the silence of the empty square of her kitchen she whispers his name, but for once does not cry. How can she cry when her heart is scalded, and her soul is seared, and her eyes are as dry as if filled with desert sand.

A squall of rain strikes suddenly and bounces off the window pane. The room darkens. An indistinct white blur appears on the other side of the streaming window

glass. A pallid white arm for a moment raised in blessing before moving up and down pawing the pane.

Without a thought she feels what the poor cat must feel. The gap between the thought and the action is slender. It is of the slightest duration, for she is already on her feet and opening wide the window, inviting the cat to enter. You poor soul, she whispers, come here, come here, taking up a towel and cradling the cat therein.

She opens the tin of salmon and places its contents on a dish. She pours a little milk into another dish. She places both dishes side by side beneath the radiator and sits at the table, prepared to witness this communion of which she feels part.

The cat eats, then laps. A breath of air comes in through the gap where the window has remained open. She feels the air's touch as it brushes her cheek. Watching and waiting, she understands that another heart is beating in the kitchen.

**THE INTRUSION OF LOVE**

On her way from the stove to the dresser she passed the window, as she had done before. As she had done before, she paused, remembering suddenly and unexpectedly that other passing, then as today, to listen to the song-birds; now, in a kind of unmindful prayer, she gloried in the scent of the year's first new-mown grass that wafted over the raised sash.

The lawnmower started up and James appeared in her view and as quickly disappeared, his old cardigan dancing in the air as he walked – trotted almost, she noted, slightly amused, as stately he followed behind the machine. Once he would have been impatient with the pace dictated by the mower's engine, but not now.

She stood at the dresser where she had placed her dish of boiled potatoes, her hands resting on the wooden surface. It had been a day much as this, the song, the smells; sparks of sunlight tumbling off wet leaves; the sudden clink of a scythe, its blade striking stone.

Her eyes had searched for the source of the noise and had found love, she remembered, even now puzzled by how this had happened. She saw the man, she saw him lift his head, a new gardener, his blonde hair lifting in the air, the unbending of his long back. In this manner and uninvited, love passed from the lawn and entered her mother's kitchen.



If I had then known what I now know would I have run upstairs? Would I have run upstairs and hidden? All those struggles for supremacy between man and woman? The aching years of children born and growing passed before her mind's eye, dragging her heart high into her throat, their passing from infancy to childhood. An unacknowledged smile touched her skin, lighting up her face.

The time she told him about that first morning she saw him, about how love had come into her life, how it had slipped without warning, slipped in through the gap between the raised window sash and the sill. Carried on the scent of the new mown grass you had just cut, she went on. She mentioned noticing the sparks of sunlight, like diamonds, she repeated, diamonds leaping off the leaves; she felt shy then and quite suddenly foolish.

The only diamonds I ever brought you, he replied, not laughing as she thought he might but with a shadow overcasting his eyes. Then he glanced at her and seeing her concern he had smiled, lightly touching her shoulder. He laughed now, as if knowing it was expected, turning away, saying he had to look to the sheep. There was a fence to be mended.

That night she lay awake for a long time, the pleasure she customarily experienced in cool, newly-changed fresh bedlinen unavailable. She tossed again and again, troubled by the memories stirred by the morning's incident. Once more she relived that first day; the seizure of my heart, she thought. Love can be dangerous her mother had said; her father did not speak of the jobbing gardener, did not mention love or lack of love. Instead, he tended more and more to the cattle and sheep he loved. Smiling involuntarily, she relived the growing joy of those days, getting to

know James, his ways uncovered and uncovering. Turning now she stretched a little the better to see his face, the curve of his cheekbone, the lock of fallen hair revealing his bald spot; his lip trembling, his breath whispering.

She had been walking past the stackyard wall, its stone warm to her dragging hand. She thought she heard her father's voice, that was all. Yet, the air seemed to tremble, to change, charged, she knew, with some awfulness and then she heard the bull snort. She ran then, ran to the end of the stackyard wall and stuck her head through the bars of the gate. Her father lay against the far wall, the bull stood over his body; it swung its head, sensing her presence: she remembered the string of salvia whipping out, like a silver rope curving through the sun's bounty to the day; the day of death, she thought.

Her father was buried, her mother died not long after, fading away, a silent figure dwarfed by a great sadness. She and James married; they worked the farm, drawn together by their love but a love tinged with something else – sometimes on nights like this she remembers her mother's words.

**THE WAITING ROOM**

Mr Spilling stood on the edge of the pavement directly opposite the surgery door. He rubbed his jaw tentatively, but despite much probing could find no evidence of the excruciating pain that had kept him awake for the previous four nights. It was Mrs Spilling who had insisted he make this appointment but now the whole exercise seemed redundant. Don't be such a baby, Mrs Spilling had said, standing, eyeing him sternly and without sympathy, her fists lodged, one on each hip bone. Go now and have your mouth attended to: I can't stand this up-and-down all night long – the smell of the concoctions you use is driving me crazy!

The door was painted black with a round door knob that shone, bright and hard. Mr Spilling's heels overshot the kerb stone and at that moment a motor cycle roared deafeningly as it accelerated past. He felt the turbulence that caused his hat to lift as he turned to stare at the two black figures who clung to the machine, a man and a woman no doubt, he speculated, one being bulkier than the other. Such freedom, he thought, watching them as they and the bike leaned, curving into the bend, before disappearing out of sight.

The waiting room was small, hardly big enough, he thought, for the three seats that stood against one wall. In the far corner a piece of furniture stood, to his eye like an old-fashioned high desk. As the door shut behind him a red head appeared above the counter.

Miss O'Dea, the card propped up on her desk said and below was inscribed her title: Receptionist. Hardly old enough to be let out of school thought Mr Spilling, smiling brightly and announcing his name as he approached. Miss O'Dea - barely noticing his smile - pushed three pieces of paper into position on the counter top meanwhile articulating her brief instructions; sign here and here and here... The Dentist will not be long, she added. Have a seat while you wait.

A window was open, inviting the early June warmth indoors. He heard birdsong and joyful voices raised in the park opposite. He heard from the other side of the surgery door the sounds of the ever-present radio and then the sharp whine of a drill. In his mind's eye he could see again the steel box in which the dentist disinfected his sharp little drills, and the trays of pliers and pincers laid row on row. Instruments of torture, Mr Spilling decided, shuddering, his hand instinctively creeping towards his knee, Mr Spilling rubbed his right knee joint, easing a pain that resided there for some months. He noted the razor sharp edge in his trouser legs; Mrs Spilling had wielded her steam iron that morning; he decided. Under her keen eye the hot iron glided up and down my trouser legs. He glanced now at Miss O' Dee, her flame of hair, her rosy cheeks, her red lips: he had heard of young girls who had run off with older men, bringing unaccountable excitement and wild joy into otherwise dull lives. From the other side of the waiting room wall the drill screeched on and on. He recalled his mother saying often, I have known hard times! Me too, he thought darkly. That dimmable drill! What's the man doing? Drilling for oil? The bird song rose and fell. Mr Spilling thoughts turned to needles, his thin lips tightening. The smell of such places! In the hospital his wife had called out. Mr Spilling remembered that. He remembered sitting in an adjacent room, one situated at the extreme end of a long

corridor, but still he had heard her voice, calling out, down the corridor, traveling into the room where he had been placed to wait. At times indeed, he recalled, she had sworn and cursed in a strange, high raucous voice. Hardly human was how he had considered it at the time, shocked that a wife of his should know such words.

Twice this had happened and all on the one day and was not ever after mentioned by husband or wife. Two big-hipped daughters had been the result. Fine girls he reflected, even if he did not often see either, both living far away.

Adele O'Dea made eye contact with Mr Spilling, signalling that he should now proceed; she accomplished this with a brisk gesture of one hand, indicating the surgery door. Mr Marcus Spilling felt his stomach muscles grow heavy beneath his belt. His breath seemed locked like a lump of lead lying deep within his chest. One final, wild thought of escape came and went.

The surgery door was thrown open and the dentist stood there, silhouetted against a fierce backlight. A fine coating of hair appeared to shimmer on his bared forearms. His outreaching hands, scrubbed; the white jacket glowed like marble armour. From the open window a symphony of child-laughter and bird-song wafted inwards; from deep within the surgery, the radio played low and insistent. Mr Marcus Spilling climbed to his feet, his back straight and stiff; he swayed a little, as if unsure of his step for the air was growing foggy as he proceeded through the aroma of mouth wash and antiseptic that now pervaded the room.

**ALONE BUT NOT ALONE**

She had not slept. Each time she drifted to the verge of consciousness, the memories crowded in, swirling inside her head, like snowflakes in a storm, growing more and more dense, counter-instinctively obliterating everything else in her world.

She had decided to get up, to walk, to return here to the place they had both loved. The place where they had watched the Clippers, coming and going. In darkness, she smiled, remembering: the excitement of it, her happiness, the laughing, the dancing, the boats, their colours – and their speed, this was what he had remarked on in his measured way, the thing that excited him.

She had not been back since that terrible day when she had lost him to the river he loved.

*The sailboats are coming, their sails are in sight...*

She half-sings the words, but tonelessly, half-speaking, half-lilting them. She is aware she is making something of a dirge of a song they had both found uplifting, even humorous. As she mouths the syllables, she cautiously gauges each step along the dark path, the dog pulling frantically on his lead, dragging her off-balance in his excitement.

*The sailboats are coming, their sails are in sight...*

Her hair is damp and clings to her head, her small face a glimmer in the pre-dawn light. She peers into the greyness; close by she imagines she hears the Foyle slapping against the shore. Twice now, she remembers the Clippers, spray-tailed, flagged and charged, raced silently between these banks; she remembers him

standing on the bank, feet apart, binoculars to his eyes, intent on the spray sparkling in each boat's darkening lea; lodged in her memory now, colours and rippling water mesmeric, mirrored hue-and-hull tinted, dyed, refracted.

Tomorrow the boats will come again; for months she has dreaded such a day, fearing her own lack of light and joy. Yet last night she had ventured out to walk along the quayside, the air buzzing with life and colour, she could feel the people's anticipation mounting. This morning the greyness lies heavy on her heart once more, those moods she has learned to hate and fear.

She walks on. *Good boy*, she says, *Good boy*. He is pulling again, and jumping and she bends to release the lead, sending him bounding off free, only to disappear into the greyness.

She is at the earth's edge; she leans backwards, rigid, fearing she might overstep the world's brink. In her mind she is falling, falling to the centre of the earth, falling through the innocence of silence that lives here, down through the murky, failing, faded day, past shafts of light, through clouds of protoplasm and ink- and yolk swirling, down, down to where the grey-faced dead wait, deep, deep.

There! She sees the familiar form, dancing far off, moving ever and always away and back. She knows him, he who is part of her being, yet she cannot put a name to him; she cannot utter his name, her tongue is stiff in her mouth; she cannot call on him to remain, as further and further into darkness his shadow floats. But still, it returns in its terrible dance. She feels hope, she feels despair.

Her reaching hand touches a park bench and she staggers, plunging gratefully, to sit; as she rests vague shadows seem to emerge – battleships and dredgers and fishing boats, longboats moving under cover of darkness with muffled strokes adorn with fancy this watery hyphen, this artery, this border, this bridge, these frontiers between east and west shores. Confusion reigns as men call out from craft to craft, only to find good intentions are thwarted. The curse of babel,

The dog has returned and is beside her, as she knew he would be. Grateful, she fumbles in her pocket, feeling for a biscuit and feeds it to him, stroking his head while whispering sounds of endearment.

She straightens, the rising sun's rays touching her face, its enchanting light revealing to her eye, for a moment only, the lough's crazy carnival – there she imagines Columcille, he of the grey eye – island bound – Lundy, hurrying past, fleeing north to Scotland; the Mountjoy and the Phoenix, Vikings coursing along on white tipped waves, spears gleaming. She squints through her hair for her windswept hair obscures her view. She focuses deeper, deeper to where that great worm, the dragon, and a grey heron, are locked as always, in mortal combat. Such stuff, she exclaims, shaking her head, rising to her feet.

The tired dog has flopped and lies slumped and heavy as lead and immobile on the grass, head on paws. The grass is greening, now. The sky is flushed. A skimming shadow darkens her face. She blinks her eyes, wakens to the day and makes to move away. The dog rises, stretches, eager now to follow. She turns her back on the



swift-flowing water. She crosses the headland. The sun's thin beam brushes the grass, casting gossamer shadows where many feet have trodden in the night; she stiffens with grief.

She stands alone, gazing out over the wetland ponds that lie below. There must be more than the legacy of loss, she whispers, the words coming to her lips, uncalled. This morning I had that, now I have this. I have all this. She feels clean and refreshed under the morning's cool, soft mizzle of rain on her brow. The flags – she considers tomorrow's arrivals – the white sails, the signs of many nations, waving and weaving as they pass the Point. What might be the shadow of a smile touches her mouth: *he is not alone*, she thinks we are all here – all of us are here with him, all humanity, together, proclaiming a hope tested, a faith that the many dead travel as the living do, crossing and re-crossing the line.

She moves through the park under the blue dawn light, the woman and her dog, finding peace beneath the pitying net of birdsong – a woodpigeon speaks, a thrush, blackbirds, crows clatter; her memory tells her the peewit and the curlew are here, together with this chorus line of seagulls, lifting and falling, bedsheets ballooning up and out on these gusting winds. She is alone but not alone.

## THE UNRAVELLING

The first time she heard herself described as being 'open' she was perhaps five or six years old. Her mother was in the kitchen, talking to her older sister Jean and she herself was outside, in the hall, on her knees by the window, trying to catch a fly in a glass jar, the way she had often seen her cousin do. *That Beth, she's very open*, her mother was remarking, and Jean replying, *what do you mean 'open' – what does 'open' mean?*

*Well, it means she is – open – there's no side to her, she takes people, adults, at face value ...as a child, she's very accepting...*

*...You mean she's a gullible wee thing! The kids at school will take a right hand out of her, when she goes, if she ever goes!* Her sister had, Beth thought, even then, the ability to be so very scathing – and what is more, she smoked; secretly, she had seen her, her and her friends!

That conversation had taken place nearly forty years ago, she recalled, standing here in this same kitchen, hearing in her mind's ear again her mother's voice, following it, as it changed timbre, becoming softer, full of some strange thread of emotion, a wistfulness, perhaps? *she is not a gullible wee thing, she's a fey wee thing!!* Then Jean's response, a querulous *Huh!* and a tossing of her head as Beth came into the room. *And you're just lovely, so you are!* Her mother holding out opened arms, eager to embrace this late child, Jean stomping off.

She goes now towards the hall door, ignoring the table still untidy with last night's supper dishes, a skein of wool spilled across its top and falling unnoticed and

tangled onto the floor and pulls on her old wellington boots. Outside, a new morning stirs; she looks at it, takes it in, her heart as always swelling; stopping on the doorstep to embrace her world, the mist that clings to the distant hedges, the flinty light just beginning to strike off the stone walls that delineate the rise and fall of each field. She glories in the brittle coating of white that rests on grass and on late leaf, the hoary tinge that decorates the carpet of wild irrawal that blankets this trundling land.

A thin sliver of moon remains hanging in the sky, an emblem of the night that still is, or is to come. Yet, this day's sun is well on its way. Here – caught between night and day – she has always considered, to be not a visual thing only; rather, it exists she thinks as a hunger, she feels it hungry impatience alive at her core; still, she is content with this ambiguity, aware as she is that such a thing is needed while containing a need of its own – the soul's longing to be nourished and cherished, a need also to be pushed and pulled.

As she takes in the landscape familiar words stir, their meaning blooming in her head: *They sing to the tambourine and the lyre and rejoice to the sound of the pipe*, and she rejoices as she listens to the music of the world while it ebbs and flows under her attention.

She steps off the doorstep, pulling the heavy door tight-closed behind her, the sound of its thud reverberating through the empty house, attacking its silence before fusing in a series of dunts and claps, noises that come and go, rising and falling.

She listens intensely: the earth shudders. It is as if, suddenly, symbols are crashing, crockery and rocks smashing before their ghostly echoes fall lazily, decaying and dying in the house's distant recesses.

She pauses and for a moment remains there before the doorstep. The yard lies in quite dimness, moss and weeds cling to the stones that are shaded from the sunlight by the empty outhouses, their tin roofs red with rusted. The sun has just lifted over the horizon. The sky's filtered light caresses the blue and black bruises that live beneath her eyes, chalices that might once been attractive to passing men, but are so no longer. Now they speak of fatigue and sleeplessness and grief. Then, they had whispered vulnerability and the boundless possibilities of seduction.

Beth releases the dog from the barn her face suddenly alive at the prospect of her walk, she is enthused too by the dog's eager excitement. She is in danger of his causing her to fall, circling her ankles, jumping up at her midriff. She reaches out and places her hand on his head and he sits on his hunches, suddenly obedient.

The woman and the dog cross the yard and walk a little way down the lane then go through an open gate. On an earthen bank beneath the hedge a blackbird moves, stab, stabbing at something in the grass. As she enters the field a Magpie leaves the tree beside the gate and Beth raises a hand in greeting. *Good morning Mr Magpie*, she says, *and how's your wife?* The bird drops, sudden as a falling stone, and disappears out of sight behind the hedge. The field stretches out before her, a becalmed sea of frost-tinged green that clings to the rise of the land. Not one breeze threatens the stillness. *It's very calm, this morning.* She hears her mother voice tremble inside her head as she turns to the thin track that runs through the field, the path she takes every morning, has taken every morning each day of her life, marked over the years by her feet. The collie trots ahead. He too keeps to the worn track, sniffing the air as he goes, stopping to read invisible signs as they progress, causing Beth to clap her hands to hurry him along, yet fitting her desire to his wants. This is

how it is, she thinks, nothing changes but with the thought another thought arrives, one that suddenly weakens her knees.

As she tops the slope a crowd of crows hangs rise up, heavy and black, as slowly and ponderously they negotiate the air. Above and below her boot progress and all about her head, the amassed company of days attend to her, all lived and long-gone but in this moment alive and present. She turns, and all is converged, it sways and clings like silky, wispy clouds about her being. The sound of the hall door's echo lingers, echoing again and again. This is the yard where she so coldly watched the three corteges move off, those of the father and mother whom she thinks she loved, the sister she knows she could not.

As she moves down the brae, she remains aware of numerous thinly vaporous translucent forms, less than shadows more than bits of mist, promenading, children of the clouds, stepping lightly, pirouetting, drifting, swaying, clinging always. The white tinged green grass flattens under the imprint of their many feet, before rising, as if yeast-pushed. In the fresh dawning the woman's face is radiant: she nods acknowledgements and whispers welcomes, engaging with the many voices that pierce her head, that penetrate her being.

\*

Inside the house, Beth is standing in what once upon a time had been the dining room. She remained there in front of the fireplace, gazing down at the dent on the parquet flooring. The light falling in through the window lies momentarily trapped and gleaming within the shallow bruise in the floor in front of the fireplace, a little cup, still

visible after all these years. She raises her eyes to the mantle shelf where the horse once stood, rearing up on his hind legs.

How she had dreamed of riding that horse when younger she had habitually delayed for what seemed hours, day-dreaming, staring up at him before performing the actions appropriate to a child of cantering, trotting, galloping around the dining room table.

She pauses. Had she been the rider, or had she been the horse? She struggles to remember. Perhaps in her mind she had been both, for at certain moments she and the horse became one – two, beings breathing as one.

Standing here now, she so clearly remembers running to the stable that day, anxious to see her sister's new pony. How filled with anticipation she had been! From the door she could hear her sister's voice, speaking so intimately, as she imagines one does with a friend. She stops; she listens. Can a sister not be a friend, she wonders? The stable is mysterious, dusky, dark. The air inside is still and silent, broken only by the incantation of Ruth's voice.

Then, in her eagerness to meet the new pony, she charged forward, sending waves of fear ricocheting through the air, causing the nervous new arrival to start, to whinny and rear in its stall. She stands now, frozen, hearing again in her imagination's eye and ear the pony's terror, seeing its hooves flaying out, feeling their weight strike her sister's head, throwing her to the floor to lie so still, devoid of life.

She had confessed the fact, not the guilt, for she felt no guilt. Her father had never – no, not once – he had never blamed her for what had happened. Standing on this spot beneath that other horse rearing on the mantle shelf, he had looked at her with expressionless eyes. *He did not see me*, she thinks. *I was invisible*. Then he looked over her head, out through the window, memories recalled softening and shadowing

his eyes. He turned away. His hand abruptly sweeping the horse off the mantle shelf smashing it to the floor. He never spoke of the death of his daughter, never again in her presence did he speak aloud his first daughter's name.

Her father took to sitting, silently grieving, on a chair beside the kitchen stove, farm work for the first time in his life ignored. Her mother carried on with her housework, but she also moved, muffled in a cloak of silence. Beth sitting at the kitchen table, watching; Once or twice she caught her mother staring at her, a strange expression on her face and on such occasions, she remembers that phrase and wonders, *a fey wee thing*, and averts her eyes or drops her head.

The three funerals had taken away, she now considers, what little sunlight there had been out of the farmyard, taking it away, sucked away into the three boxes that were carried over the gravel and down the lane. First, her sister's, then a year later her father's and some twenty years after that, her mother's.

Sunlight slides back and forth across the wooden floor, seeming to flicker about the spot where her father in his despair had smashed the black horse to the parquet. She gets down on one knee, then after a moment onto both knees. She dampens her right index finger with her tongue and rubs the dent where the floor lies damaged, circling this way, then the other. At first, the little crucible is shiny and smooth, but her spit quickly causes the wood to turn abrasive, her skin grows sensitive to the stringy roughness of the grain.

She feels pain course through her finger, feeling through the paradox that is hers alone to endure the pain of others. She rubs faster and faster, embracing the feelings

she knows her mother had felt, the loss, the empty years. With each circling motion again feeling the anger her father felt and suffered, in silence.

The room darkens. She persists, hardly knowing what she does, long after the spit has dried, and the wood's silkiness has returned, her finger grown more painful, she now realizes; looking, she can see where the skin is frayed and broken – a little fleck of blood, released and left behind, has tarnished the aged perfection of the indentation.

As she straightens, rising, smiling now, she hears a car's engine, changing gear as it enters the yard. The air in the room is filling with joy. As the car's wheels turn, they rumble among the loose gravel stones. She whispers an incantation, her lips barely parting. She senses the dog moving outside, follows it in her mind's eye as it slinks behind the corner of the porch, hears its low growl. She straightens her back and raises her head, her voice unites with the ripening chorus of the many voices that now rise, swelling as they do so. Footsteps crunch among gravel: then the door knocker thuds, its dull thump reverberating, before quickly decaying and dying. An ecstasy stirs the air as united they sing to the tambourine and the lyre and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.



**WILL THEY HAVE SKYLARKS THERE?**

He had just passed the place where the Big House once stood; *you are passing the hollow tree where the devil danced*, the voice inside his head says...

*In twenty yards you will have reached your destination*: the implacably cool other voice states this, startling him for already there on the left and now in view is the bounding wall his concentration had been fully focussed on.

Ignoring it, he swings the Ford into the Sunday morning vacancy of the car park on the left. *You have reached your destination*, she says. He stops but keeps the engine running. He sits here, his hands grasping the wheel, waiting for what seems an eternity; inside his head two voices din on and on. *Look! Don't look!*

He must look; yet he does not look, the effort required suddenly seems too great. He sits as a stone sits, outside time, mute, waiting and not waiting.

Yet look he does, for something beyond volition moves his head. There behind a set of low railings stands, or possibly kneels, the figure of a girl. Or rather, it appears to him, a young woman with a young woman's body, strong and firm. Her arms are raised, her hands grasping her head, attempting, he imagines, to cushion her ears, her head turned, the movement rooted in a tension he too has known. Avoiding a terrible configuration that had been conjured up by some unknowable force; *she is*, he whispers, *both accepting and shunning what is about to overcome her*.

Nine names are listed here, he knows that, but not whose they are. He has never known, has not wanted to know. Nothing beyond the bare number, six men and three women. He knows the date 31<sup>st</sup> July 1972. He had been barely twenty that year. *Old enough...* one voice says. *A child, easy led...* another replies.

*An explosion too loud for your eardrums to bear,  
and the glass and the dust and the terrible dead.*

He eases the car into gear while names of places run through his head – *Omagh, Guilford, Birmingham, McGurk's Bar* – the car bumps forward. *Turn left onto Church Road*, the voice articulates its message unambiguously. He does as instructed. *You are on Church Road, the voice continues coolly*, but is interrupted by, *The dead lie deep*; the thought enters his mind, uninvited. *The dead lie deeper with each passing year*, a voice suggests. *No, they wait just beyond the horizon*, murmurs another.

He follows Barnahilt Road until instructed by the dismembered voice: *turn left onto the A6*. Without being aware of what he does he turns right but immediately the commands comes, *Turn around, when possible, turn around when possible ...* *Damn!*, he mutters, slowing down, searching for a turning place and then still absent-minded, his head full of words, driving, listening to the voice advising him he finds he is *continuing along Foreglen Road*.

He passes on his left the church where a traveller's light habitually burns during the hours of darkness. *The only road is the love road*; he remembers the words, speaking them silently, the sounds emanating out of the endless depths, the deep dark silence, that lies inside his bottomless dark mind.

He names them then, half seen as he passes by, an exercise in reason, seeking the rootedness he craves: *hawthorn and blackthorn and holly and ash*; the hedges flow, so. *Chestnut and oak*, he remembers: *I climbed them*, he utters the words, *as a teenager I climbed that oak*.

*Yes! But you fell! You fell!* Someone replies, gleefully he thinks.

*When I was twenty, that's when I fell!*

*Yes, and others with you!*

He closes his eyes, for a second while the words hang about his head:

*and young children squealing like pigs in the square,*

*and all faces chalk white and streaked with bright red,*

On his right, he notices an ancient Bawn, silent; as he passes by he is aware of its age, its walls of weathered stone still miraculously intact after all these centuries.

Another damnable voice: *there is no turning around*. History has been made and will not be remade. This he knows. Another speaks, *Redemption is possible*. He ignores the growing clamour, engages instead with the sky, the clouds, the hedgerows, the black road ahead.

Thus, he speeds along. The hedges and the trees become a blur, the fields falling away to his left, then rising in blossomy blurs. *You are twenty*, his mind's voice speaks to him; then, in the silent dusk inside his head, he hears a blackbird sing.

He pulls in where the sign says Brackfield Wood. *You have reached your destination*, that implacably cool voice speaks to him again. He stops the car and checks to make sure the radio is turned off. Off course it is. It is silent. He takes out the ignition key, drops it on the floor at his feet, applies the handbrake, bends over and searches with one hand beneath the passenger seat. He retrieves a plastic bag and from it extracts a gun. He holds the gun in both hands, allowing them for the moment to lie inertly on his lap, gazing out through a gap in the hedge, seeing the young trees as they cascade down the slope, down to where he senses the river flows, flows, flows on its way from the Sperrin mountains, flowing down to the sea. He senses but does not

hear the wind as it so gently moves the trees. Through the open window he hears a bird sing. *Is it a skylark*, he wonders? *Will they have skylarks there?*

14/

## GUNS

He did not know what the boss's real name was, he knew him only as the leader, the man who now slid into the back seat, beside him.

No words were spoken. The gun appeared, lying naked in the palm of the man's opened hand, presented like an offering of some kind, a thing revered, then with a nod of his head but without speaking, he slipped it into the pocket of the car seat in front.

The leader told him what had to do. Like a chef, or a scientist pursuing the outcome of an experiment, he knew he would recognise the command and follow the recipe.

\*

It was a week later when he strolled to the top of the designated and previously much-reconnoitred location. He waited inside the bookshop there, as arranged, watching through the window while pretending to examine a succession of books. He spotted his target, as described, and stepping out onto the pavement following him closely. Walking casually until they were outside the post-office when he stepped up behind him. He withdrew the gun from its paper bag and holding it close to the base of the man's skull pulled the trigger, once, twice. He stepped around the already falling body and turned right at the bottom of the street. He did not look back. There he stepped into the waiting car, was driven onwards for a few minutes, got out as soon as the car stopped, strolled around the corner and climbed into an old van that was waiting, engine running.

\*

He had been here seven days, lying low, as instructed. The safe house was a cottage built from the local stone that lay scattered about the rising slopes, standing half hidden in a V-shaped hollow between two hills. Its approach road took the form of a gravelled, weed-and-grass infested track that had been laid years before, cutting through the surrounding fields. The first day there he sat in an old armchair beside the open fire. The third day he took down the bottle of whiskey. The fifth day he finished it. That night he was gone – the whiskey had done for him.

The whiskey and his thoughts: his thoughts were all about the leader.

He had been unable, deep down he knew this – was it that he was too young – to read the leader's mind – he was as deaf to what he knew to be its generational echo and blind to its pre-historic cob-webbed maze of hurts and hatreds as he believed the leader was wide awake to his.

The leader, he mulled on this, was such a dainty-faced man; but he had a reputation; he had a ravenous appetite for action that led to product; let it happen, was known to be his watchword.

\*

He had no radio here. There was no television. The only punctuation to his days was the sun's setting and rising, the unremitting coming and going of light and darkness. In the night there was no moon and the stars were hidden behind cloud. His circadian rhythms moved and stalled, melting, one into another.

The landscape it occurred to him had been built vaguely on the template of ocean waves – little hump-shaped shadowy figures, some lying head to toe, yet

interspersed with other bodies, the lot thrown down willy-nilly in the cross-current of history with each one having shouldered over itself a comfort-covering of dried ancient ferns, curled and webbed and laced with wisps of dried dead grass.

During the dreariness of these final three days of constant rain-fall he had grown more and more was fretful, with both his body and mind in a state of mild agitation. He now stepped out into the still, calmness of a new morning: he rocked gently back and forth on the heels and balls of his feet in unconscious time to the breathe-rhythm of the hills: last night's storm had been and gone, sweeping the hillsides clear of their accumulated debris while the rain had washed the grass, leaving it a pristine carpet of a brushed green.

Below him, the icy blue of two small lakes, reflecting the sky above, rested, at blind peace, inset on the green slope. For the first time he wondered...

He had not, he allowed himself to realise, he had not seen or glimpsed the policeman's eyes, or his face, had not known, nor did he now know, would never know... The leader had appointed another to walk towards the pair, the stalker and the stalked, and to use a pre-determined signal to confirm that this was the one, that now was the time. This other unknown would raise a copy of a newspaper and then lower it as he passed what was a mere, an anonymous, cog in a wheel, the representative of an oppressive force engaged in a dirty war, a legitimate target.

A black animal – no, not an animal, a bird, a bird of prey, it must be, though, on closer inspection, whether it be a rook or a crow or a raven, he did not know, he could not tell. He stood, ignored by the animal as in its ravenous hunger it fed off the carcass of a dead sheep. He gave no consideration to his own ignorance, nor did he

think it strange, but rather mechanically noted this – he did not know the name or nature of the wildlife in his own country!

\*

The headlights of two vehicles intermittently traversed the hillsides and occasionally directed their beams high into the sky as they accelerated bumpily along the approach roads. The roads – it was really one road that came to an acute bend just where the gravelled track led off to climb to the cottage.

One vehicle approached from the north the other from the south.

From his vantage point outside the cottage he turned and dashed into the house where he delved his hand deep under the cushions of the old sofa. He hauled out the gun and ran to the yard. There he halted for a moment before a low stone wall before dropping the gun down through darkness to the bottom of the well. He waited breath-bated till he heard the abrupt splash as it struck water, before sinking.

Then nothing.

Back in the house he stuck both hands into a pail of icy cold water that sat in the porch and held them there for a bit, before wiping them dry on his trouser legs. This in the belief that any residue from the gun would be washed off his skin

He returned to the porch where he stopped and stood still, prepared to wait. The vehicles too had stopped, their lights blaring like searchlights, seeming to seek him where he stood in shadow.

He had emptied his mind of all thought.

He had been well versed if the time came what he should do, how to behave, to say nothing, to empty his mind, to admit to nothing.



He was just for one instant peripherally aware of movement among the bushes by the yard's perimeter. Then his body slumped, heavily but neatly as if in one protracted rhythm, to the porch floor, arms spread in almost perfect symmetry, his frame pirouetting in an arch of beauty to the sound of a gun's explosive stutter.

14/

## **A MOMENT IN TIME**

In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.

Albert Camus

He had been sitting on the same stool for he did not know how long. The pints kept coming and he kept supping and the dark day that existed beyond the door, beyond the wide window with its frosted glass and its glowing mahogany frame, seemed to creep and creep into the bar, creating for him an increasingly warm and cosy and comfortable world.

*One in three people believe in angels*, he remarked softly, unaggressive in tone, looking up over the froth-touched rim of his newly emptied Guinness glass. He did not gaze into her eyes or even at her, rather his look by-passed her as though he were measuring something across an in-calculable distance in time and space.

She was a fragile looking girl, young, at least youngish, he gauged. With dirty-blond hair; mid-length; thinnish, scrawny really; no lipstick; no make-up; she exuded timidity, a critically-minded onlooker might have said. But he was no longer critically minded. A young woman with little enough self-confidence, he had thought, on first seeing her. Her gaberdine coat hung off the back of her chair, its hem trailing on the floor, unheeded.

*In a moment in time...*, he continued, ruminating, his gaze returning to her face, his eyes refocusing now on her eyes, before scanning again her face, her hair, her

demeanour: *She thinks I am assessing her*, he thought, *weighing her up*. Next thing, *she'll be reaching out, putting her hand on mine, to stop me...* He could see her, moving her hand, placing it first on her knee, then quickly slipping it into her pocket.

*What do you mean?* she asked, not because she cared what he meant, he knew, but really just for something to say, he could see that, rather for something that would distract him and pin him to his seat.

He raised his glass, shaking it in an up and down motion to draw the barman's attention, then nodding to him to indicate his desire for another pint. He pointed to her glass, his eyebrows raised in an unspoken question.

*No*, she said. *No, thank you, no. Only to be expected!* he thought.

*It's from the bible. Luke's gospel.* A gloom had settled over him. He seemed to her, or so he supposed, so detached, appearing to have fallen into a dream state. Then, with a shrug he threw it off. *And the devil, taking him up into a high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time...*

The girl lifted her glass of orange, sipped from it and stared intently over the bar top, embarrassed, she might be. So he now considered understanding such a feeling, as he followed her gaze – past the woman who was washing and stacking glasses at a sink, looking deep into the mirror, trying to avoid seeing herself and succeeding – avoiding making eye contact with the man seated beside her – he followed the journey of her eyes as she observed the rows of coloured bottles, the sparkling glasses stacked on the shelves, the mechanical cash register with its rows of buttons, the bowl of lemons, cut and waiting. She examined the silent television, the apparently antique mirror that proclaimed *Guinness is Good Good for You*; the menu

of beers and spirits printed on paper sheets and stuck onto a board, each item with its price marked beside it.

So absorbed was she in cataloguing the things that jostled for position behind the bar – the cardboard holders mounted with packets of nuts, the boxes of crisps, spirit bottle in rows, the big black clock with the proclamation “*No Tick Given*” pinned to its body, obscuring in part the steady, unrelenting swing of the pendulum – that she seemed taken by surprise when a cold draft of air blew through the opened door and struck her bare legs. Startled, she turned on her seat and glanced behind.

*It's the shortest day*, the man was saying. *It's the 21<sup>st</sup>... of December ... the shortest day...* As he spoke, she was just turning to see where the cold air was coming from and unavoidably their eyes met. The door held open long enough to admit three young men.

*Are you by any chance a tennis player?* the man asked but she ignored him. *To my mind, you have a tennis player's physic.* He was drunk, she thought and best ignored. The three young men advanced across the floor, eyeing her, ignoring the man beside her. They brought with them measures, indeed gales of cold air together with a storm of energy, vitality, danger. He could feel her body grow tense. They crowded around her, two on one side one on the other. Someone's hand fell on her shoulder. One bent down and lifted her holdall, placing it on the bar counter. *Are you waiting for the bus, love?* The barman asked, approaching for he did not want bother in the bar and he sensed trouble ahead. He looked at the clock. *The bus will be here in a minute*, he said.

The man on the stool raised his head and looked to left and to right. The room was hazy with a warm fog. Three young men stood at the far end of the bar, talking loudly and cheerily. The bar lady had taken a seat on a high stool and was applying lipstick. The barman stood ramrod tall, polishing a glass. The man gazed down to the empty stool that stood by his side. His face grew blank, with wonder. *An Angel*, he murmured, *An Angel*.

15/

## MIDGE

She stood under the tree that itself stood at the end of the garden. As her name suggested, she was small, a tiny figure, especially so at this moment, dwarfed as she was by the old chestnut.

The tree's shadow seemed to wrap itself about her and where that same shadow was dappled by the waltzing together of leaves and sunlight — the effect was that of an exercise in deftly applied camouflage.

To the naked eye she was only fleetingly visible.

A few feet away, a robin had appeared on the grass at her feet, expectant of food, for Midge was in the habit of coming here most mornings before school, with a handful of bread ready to be made into crumbs; these she fed to the bird.

Today, she did not see the Robin. She saw only the school bus, Sylvia stepping off the step, the car overtaking the bus, did she see the car or did she imagine she saw it?

Sylvia in dreadful slow-motion stepping down from the bottom step. Stepping off, stepping out. Stepping out and onto the road.

The car, Midge asserted, when asked, had appeared from nowhere.

The Robin turns his head. She can see his tiny eyes, both eyes today, as black and hard as the small black pepper grains her mother's crushes in her pepper-mill. She sees them so clearly, one on each side of his narrow skull.

Earlier, In the dark of her bedroom she had once again recast the scene in her mind's eye. The bus drawing to a stop, the clatter of shoes on the corrugated hard floor, the swish of coats and bags, the bustle of bodies, the smell that always presented itself when wet coats and warm air comingled, the calls, *goodbye, see you tomorrow. Cheers*, someone had shouted out, in a cheerful response.

*A witness statement*, the policewoman had called it. *Just write down what you saw*, she had said, patiently. *Take your time*.

In bed, everything had wound out in her memory, one sequence of events, as in a line-up, one, two, three, like the happenings on a spool of old film she had once seen, unwound when the spool had accidentally been knocked off the table and then wound again before being shown on a small projector. The events depicted there, unchanged in their order. Why could life not be like that, she thought. Events depicted and fixed, in the way a journalist might have reported them. Sports day at her father's old school, the film had been: the race, him crossing the line, head thrown back, the cup presented to him, his smile as he received the award.

The smile on his face that night when he watched again the then boy on the screen. How surprised, how proud he had looked. The truth, that was what they called it. She knew this from school. Her English teacher had talked about poets and artists and how they sought to capture the truth. A boy who became a man but who remained a boy, running a race, winning a contest. That was a good reporting.

But this? Already there were disputed facts.

For her part, she had shoved Sylvia, she knew that, for someone behind had shoved her. Had she pushed too hard? Harder than was necessary? Was she guilty of pushing Sylvia off balance, off the bus step, onto the road, into the path of the car?

She re-run the incident once again; this time she was on the road, seeing the car bare down on them. She could clearly see the car, but if this had really happened in this way, why had she herself not been injured?

*You know, from some far-off place the policewoman's voice emerged, you know, we want to get the truth of this absolutely pinned down. Just as it happened. You said the rain was in your eyes. The policewoman read from her notebook. You said, I was on the road. The rain had run down my forehead and into my eyes and I could not see. Anything. They were in her parents' house. The police had come to the house and they were sitting at the kitchen table. Referring once more to her book, she went on, yet you say earlier that you were inside the bus when the accident happened?*

Midge knows she had been following Sylvia with the shove came from behind, jamming her and Sylvia tightly together. She thought, or did she imagine it, that this was the moment she heard an approaching motor-car. If so, she could have caught Sylvia by the shoulders, could have stopped her. *Did I hear that car, she wonders, or did I just think I did? Afterwards?*

What if, she only imagined she heard the car's engine, dreamt the roar of its engine. She hears again the swish, swish of the bus's windscreen wipers, the rattle of rain on its metal roof, the chatter and clatter of those directly behind her.

For a moment her consciousness shifts and now she is standing in the bus when she hears the sound of an approaching car. She hears the sound clearly and sees in anticipation the imminent danger of those on the bus spilling onto the road. The car fills her mind, it spells danger for she sees an event she has seen before, on the television screen, a car speeding along a country road, its radio blaring, a bend



appearing suddenly and the car running out of control so that it crashes through a hedge on the bend of the road. A group of children sit on a rug that is spread on the grass; a birthday picnic, she thinks, filling in a gap in the story, mixing fact and fiction, developing a meaning.

Here, the car on her road roars, louder and louder. The car in her mind hits the children, sending them though the air. Sylvia seems to jolt forward – brakes screech - had she pushed Sylvia, or had another's hand moved past her arm, shoving Sylvia forward?

Midge knew others had told different stories about what happened.

How she got from the bus to the spot where Sylvia was laying, she does not know.

She looks down at her clenched fist, pauses, then opens it. The handful of breadcrumbs that rested in the palm of her hand, is compressed into a misshapen ball.

She stands under the tree that itself stands at the end of the garden. She looks all about. She whistles the little whistling sound she makes to attract the Robin's attention, the call that brings him here to her feet every morning. She glances all about, but the robin is gone. She is alone.

She is alone and lost. the only map available to her is the certainty of her fluctuating memory. This memory has already become the memory of a memory. She takes her bearings then, from across the grass, she hears her mother's voice calling; she senses a hand reaching out, carrying is it were the voice in its palm, *Midge, Midge, are you there? Come in; your breakfast is on the table; it will get cold!!*

**OLD BOOTS AND MARMLADE**

A pair of old boots was what she had just at that moment and quite suddenly remembered. The boots were at one end of the man, in her memory of him, that is, with his hat, and his face under it, at the other end. She could see the boots, still, dung-and-mud caked, they dangled at the end of his legs. Where he sat on his cart, they hung over the edge in a perfectly still, in a totally isolated, manner. It was as if they had been abandoned, at the end of his lower limbs, and left—she half-expected (she was young then and inclined, as her mother often said, to be mischievous) to find a message, *to be collected later*, pinned to one soiled toe cap.

Under the hat - she remembers this very well – rested his head and pale face. *It must be well over fifty years ago! No, closer to sixty, she thinks. A casual encounter.* She had been a girl, a young woman really and he, to her, was an old man. *Just a casual encounter.* At the end of her lane, just where it joined the county road.

There he was, sitting on the road verge, on his weathered wooden cart with its rusty iron clad wheels. The chance meeting had lasted only a few seconds. Yet...here she was remembering it...the quality of it...How at the conclusion of their encounter she smiled and tossed her head, her heavy hair swinging and spreading behind her, as she strode away, unthinkingly, not knowing what her future might hold in store.

Yes, his face. And above it, offering partial shade, the bonnet (why did that word come to mind? His hat was nothing like a bonnet! She associated the word with Scottish clans, not with the hills of Co Derry) the grey form above the face was what then was known as a felt hat: she had never known why. It mattered little, now, she

seemed to give a half-shrug. Her strong memory is of this grey, dinged old thing, an entity that was set there, as immobile as the boots below, and she remembers finding herself wondering if he slept wearing it. It spoke of a special kind of carelessness, a life tholed but contentedly so. A life of changeless permeance. She remembered noting what she took to be the cheesy stain of melted candle wax that had adhered to the hat's brim, there above the man's ear and below the crown.

She was standing at the kitchen sink, absent-mindedly drying the last of the breakfast dishes, looking out, through the steamed-up window pane, wiping it occasionally. half-listening to the radio, keeping an eye on the hungry cattle bunched by the gate to the field beyond, remembering, those boots and that hat. And the pale face. *Odd*, wasn't it, she thought, lifting washed cups and juice glasses, taking them, two in each hand, to the dresser, placing them, each in its appointed place, *odd to remember such a casual meeting, after all these years.*

He had been sitting on the very front edge of his cart, just at the intersection where the shaft meets the body, the reins resting, at peace, in his folded hands.

She returned to the sink, pushing a strand of hair behind one ear, suddenly alert for sight of the tractor; she can hear its droning on and on as it approaches. Yes, here it comes, crawling around the corner of the farmhouse soon it passes before her eyes, just a few feet away. What irks, yes irks is not a bad word, what irks her about this unfolding story is her inability to see the laces on his boots! Laces there must have been, but black or brown? *Black*, she thinks, *yes black* must be the colour they were.

Alexander, for this is her husband's name, sits hunched over the steering wheel as he passes. He moves backwards and forwards on his seat, with that rocking rhythm

he has, as if impatient to have whatever job he has in hand done and finished with, urging the tractor on, on, on...

For some reason, she paused in passing the man on the cart and as she halted, he inclined his head in acknowledgement. The hat's brim shaded his forehead. He raised his head and as he did so the shadow lifted from his face. Light embraced his brow. It was as if a window blind had been raised. And for a moment, eye to glowing eye, they communed together. Standing here today, she remembers still that seared moment, of seeing his face's pale skin beneath the old felt hat: *our souls are written on our faces*, had sprung into her mind at that moment, *like the words of a poem, scraped onto parchment*.

And his eyes; two pools of light they seemed in that instant; she read in the luminosity of his eyes, something akin to a promise.

Only after a long time had passed did she come to believe that grace, dormant in her till then, had somehow taken root in that moment, only later to flower.

Alexander glances towards the house as he trundles past on his tractor and seeing her at the window, he raises a hand in what seems like a cartoon gesticulation of greeting; then he smiles, or rather he grins, the wide grin she knows so well, as their eyes meet. She too raises a hand and gestures, smiling across the yard, smiling across the decades.

As her husband passes out of sight she turns away from the window; she pauses in the middle of the kitchen floor from where she examines in her mind the flooding memories of that other experience. She does so now in a very cool, a very considered, manner: *his face, the smile, the meaning of grace - the favour of goodness freely bestowed*, she thinks –remembering – the horse's sudden champing

at the bit, and the raising and tossing of his head, one front hoof scraping the gravelled ground. The old man's two arthritic hands (*were they arthritic?* she wonders, unthinkingly and painfully clenching and unclenching her own, *or is it that I only now imagine that to have been the case,*) still clasping the reins, meekly following the tug, the rise and fall, the ebb and flow of the reins and the horse's head, dancing in time to the music of the creaking harness, the beat of a metalled hoof pawing on gravel.

Now she can see – the big bunch of red-berried holly, untidily stacked red and green on the cart's tailgate. Her glance takes in the familiar kitchen, the scene of another continuing story, so many other memories of a life, of a husband and children, a place of laughter and tears, of disputes and reconciliations, so many painful, so many glorious, moments. Her eyes take in the pile of old newspapers spilling off a chair, the work boots discarded on the floor by the back door, the pot of marmalade from this morning, opened and left on the table by Alexander, a scattering of bread crumbs spilled from his toast. She had recognised and had taken, as one takes an uninvited gift, the glimpse of grace the man had shown her that day. Eventually, she had come to know the meaning of grace, glimpsed for just a moment, for what it was, and had given it a home in her heart.

But enough. She will sit down for a moment, in her old chair by the table. Just long enough, she promises herself, to restore her energy. Alexander will return soon, the cattle foddered, the tractor stowed away in its shed. She will make tea and they will sit and chat for a bit, companionably. She will say thank you to him for his gift of these cuttings of holly that he carried home last night. She will not tell him of her ruminations. She will perhaps touch his hand in passing. She will not speak to him of

stories invented or real, of another branch of holly given and accepted, of other lives,  
of distant memories. No, not today.

## THE MIDDLE CHILD

There they were, trundling home for Christmas: two girls and a boy, all coming from different places, all heading to the same fireside in the foothills of the Sperrin's, on the outskirts of Strabane. Suzy, the youngest, was flying from Edinburgh to the City of Derry Airport; Billy who was the oldest was flying also, but from Perth in Australia, to Dublin, then by bus to Strabane. Lizzie, the middle child, was coming from Liverpool to Belfast and then by bus or train, she did not know or care which, to Derry or Strabane, again she was uncaring – at the end of the day, someone would collect her, wherever...

After much complicated proposals and complex discussions – conducted via Skype and various other platforms that were still a mystery to their parents - they had coordinated their arrangements, so they would all arrive on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. This would give them one full day to spend together, before Christmas day. They had not been together in one place since the precious December.

At home, their mother was working her way through the chaos that somehow always erupted in her kitchen at this time of year. The tree in the corner still only half decorated, boxes empty and filled and wrapping paper and coloured name-tags and balls of string underfoot and overhead, the radio turned on and up high and tuned to Lyric FM, blaring its version of December good cheer, the kettle at a bubbling boil, a pot steaming. This is Christmas, she thought, wiping her brow, this is how Christmas should be! The children all on their way, the woman on the radio warning of a traffic snarl-up at the Brown Cow, where ever that is, she thought. She just hoped it would not hold up any of the brood!

By some miracle – and more by good luck than good planning - they all arrived at roughly the same time on the 23rd: their father picked them up from what he now insisted on calling Londonderry since there was so much debate about Derry, Londonderry, Derry-Londonderry, Doire Colmcille, each name carrying the baggage of some particular story, a situation much exasperated since some by now forgotten councillor had stood up to propose the Council's name be changed. A jolt to the fixity of his world, indeed; he frowned, remembering it, thinking, what's in a name, after all! But knowing in his heart the secret ways of words.

He drove them home, not saying much himself, joyful they were here, glad to eavesdrop on their lives as they talked excitedly and gossiped and shared bits of news they felt could not wait. How gratifying it is, how proud it makes me feel to have such outward looking, engaged children, he told himself, smiling inwardly, each one so full of life, the three of them living such interesting lives, doing such important things, out there in the wide world.

Their mother was waiting on the doorstep, tea towel in hand, stepping forward, arms akimbo, tears and smiles mingling as she greeted them, embracing each in turn, then all three together, before saying *Tea, who wants a cup of tea?* and leading them inside, leaving the father to lug bags from the car before carrying them indoors.

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What seemed like hours later and only after the initial hubbub had died down his mother asked Billy if he would climb up to the attic to find and bring down a bag of last year's Christmas decorations. He could finish off the tree, she laughed, happy to be able to ask his assistance. He went to the landing cupboard and extracted the long pole that was kept there and used to unlatch the trap door, before using it to pull down the ladder. He climbed into the roof space, jerked the string to turn on the roof



light and was searching for the decorations among the mountain of stuff piled on the floor when he heard a scuffle behind him. It was Lizzie: *Just me, the nosy middle child, coming to see what you are up to*, she announced breezily, climbing through the trapdoor. The light bulb dangling from the rafters swung gently to-and-fro, throwing shadows as it moved.

Together they found what he had been sent to collect and he carried it down. *I'll just have a little exploration, on my own...*she said, lingering behind and poking about through this bundle and that pile before finally lighting on a collection of old photograph albums she discovered in a huge cardboard packing case.

She looked at the photographs, randomly, reaching into the piles of bursting cardboard slips, selecting this and that, here and there. Mostly family photographs which she idly glanced at, combing through them, her memories rekindled of birthday parties, first days at school, days by the sea, when she spotted a small object wrapped in faded tissue paper lying squeezed into one corner of the big box.

Later, as if breaking a spell, her mother's voice calling up the stairs, her words ringing through the house, *Lizzie, Lizzie, are you coming down? Coffee ready!*

Somehow or other she got down. She stood for a moment surveying the scene. Her father sat in his chair by the Aga, smiling at nothing in particular, oblivious to the world, as usual she thought, just happy to have the children present and around and about him. Her mother bustled by the kitchen table placing a tray of cakes in the middle, moving a knife here, a fork there, standing back, head on one side, observing. The other two sat, waiting patiently, exchanging indulgent looks, waiting for the preparations to be completed.

It was as if, for the first time, she noted the similarity among the faces, between the faces, in the faces, the same shape of heads, the same small snub noses, the sober, soft brown eyes, everything was all the same. Her own nose she well knew was not snubbed but slightly roman in shape and form. Her eyes were a blue-black, a fact often remarked on when she was a child: but not for years mentioned.

Lizzie remained standing there between the posts of the doorway, frozen in a time that was not of this time.

Her hand tightened on the small package nestling in the silence of her pocket; it was a photograph wrapped in a covering of tissue paper. Two images lay there, trapped or secured; one, a younger version of the woman opposite her, her own mother standing at the table, the other a man long known to her, a family friend of many years. Like two strangers they stood in mute companionship, shoulder to shoulder, smiling out of a different time and into the eye of the camera.

The man, known to her always as Uncle John, his nose not shown in profile, but suddenly known for what it was, she reached instinctively and without thought to her own face, but halted her hand, forcing her fingers into submission.

The hot, noisy kitchen radiated everything she loved, but she turned away from it. She had to turn away from it. She was no longer part of it.

Unnoticed, she slipped out through the back door and walked across the yard till she came to the rickety wooden bench that for all her life had stood half-hidden by the fuel-shed wall. Traditionally, a place of refuge. She had no need to check dates. She knew now what she had really always known; without acknowledging the truth of it. She was suddenly groundless. For a moment, without volition.

She would not ask her mother for confirmation or for denial – a denial that might or might not be forthcoming. And why should her mother be called upon to scratch at an already healed wound – if wound it was; she wondered; her innocent-minded father, the man whose benign physiognomy was not her physiognomy – no, he would not be called to speak, neither would her brother or sister.

Ripples crossed the sea wrack of the world; shivering, dead ferns and old long grasses doused in cold tea long dried in sun and wind, burnished black and brown.

An hour before she had been Lizzie, a perfect fit inside her name – Lizzie, a middle child; with the speed of an accident suddenly an orphaned soul; now, empty, bewildered, battered by an expanding cacophony of feelings and emotions

The past was the past – the photograph lay in her pocket – in swaddled darkness - it would be allowed to remain there, buried beneath the shadows of their shared histories for her secret was not hers alone, but belonged to all of them. Through the open door she could hear their voices, chattering, as always, rising and falling. In a few moments she would go back inside. She would join in; she would smile and laugh and make merry, it was right that she should, right that she should continue her existence as the middle child.

## A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

He sat down for a moment on the raised flat stone that acted as a stile and surveyed the unfenced hills spreading out before him, rising into the distance before disappearing in the haze of a late autumn's afternoon sky.

He was an American and this was his first time in Ireland; well, not the first time, he reminded himself, wryly. He contemplated the view and considered how he had left this very landscape behind, what, sixty-five, sixty-six years ago? Had left without seeing it, buried alive and well, deep in the darkness inside his mother's belly.

He straightened, stretching out his arms, before pulling closer his heavy tweed overcoat – bought only yesterday, in an over-stocked drapery shop in Omagh, adorned with a tag that stated, 'Best Donegal Tweed'.

*Now there's a bit of genuine cloth*, the shopkeeper had said, holding up a sleeve for closer inspection. *That's none of your foreign rubbish!*

*No?* he had responded, doubtful of the etiquette required by such a statement, doubtful as to what 'foreign' meant in the context, he himself feeling, since his arrival here, he might be despite his previous expectations deeply foreign, nevertheless examining the fabric, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, anxious to show a willingness to accept this man's judgement.

*You're from the States*, the shopkeeper said abruptly and as if reading his customer's mind as he wrapped the overcoat, creating a parcel in brown paper. Was it a statement, a question or an allegation? He did not know, had no way of knowing.

*You'll be needin' a muffler and a cap*, the shopkeeper went on. Looking at his upper body appraisingly, while he nodded his agreement, gazing out through the widow where rain fell. He had not cared to reply to the first question, and now waited silently till called upon to count out the amount of money asked for, carefully as he was still unsure of the unfamiliar fives and tens and twenties. The shopkeeper secured the parcel with a length of string, knotting it before snapping the piece of string into two, between his two strong hands, before handing the package over.

He recalled to mind the woman with a little boy who was just about to step onto the sidewalk as he entered. As he stood aside to allow her to pass, he overheard her remonstrating with the child, *would you hauld your whist*, she said, and *stop your gearnin'*. He remembered this exchange as he himself departed, the door's bell clanging as he pushed it open, the shopkeeper already having turned away, busying himself with some task or other. He had no idea what the woman meant when she spoke, he remembered, thinking, *I am a stranger in the land where I was conceived!*

He examined the landscape that spread out before him, his eye settling at last on a spot further along the stone wall. A famished-looking tree grew there, crooked and naked and alone. He shook his head, still feeling irritated by the brief encounter in that draper's shop – the confusion he had felt about the muffler (wasn't a muffler a part of a motor car? He wondered) about the woman and the child – had his mother stayed here, he mused, might he have been that man, spending his days selling socks and pretending an interest in the affairs of strangers? He stood up and made his way towards the tree; he sat down on the earth, protecting himself against dampness by using a plastic bag that he had brought along for just such a purpose. He opened the brown paper bag he had secreted in one of the coat's deep pockets and took out the bottle that he now laid flat in his hand; it seemed to be looking up at

him, as if remonstrating. Bourbon it was, bought from the duty free and carried all the way here. Perhaps he should have gotten some local liquor he thought but had been uncertain about what brand of Irish whiskey would be best. The bourbon had been carried here for a purpose. Still, for what purpose? He shook his head, not knowing at this moment what answer to conjure up as he rested his back against the stone wall, his shoulder against the tree's rough trunk.

He had left the hire car at the roadside, parked neatly in a gateway, had locked it and hidden the key on the top of the offside front wheel. Last night, on his way into the hotel's restaurant he had stopped at the bar; On looking at the array of shining bottles on display behind the mahogany counter he could not decide what to have. Then he spotted a bottle of his mother's old favourite, the familiar Jim Beam, and ordered a glass, then another. While he sat sipping the whiskey, he listened to conversations going on around him. The language was English, sure enough, but he understood little of the meanings that here murmured, and there shouldered, their ways about the room. His attention was caught by one man who was advising another to watch out for the police – *they are everywhere these days and they are the devil on the drink-and-driving*, he said in a loud, slow voice, *if you are caught with drink on you and a car key in your pocket you'll be done for! – even if the car is a mile away. Best leave keys with the car – technically speaking, you're not in charge of the car!* – Then, lowering his voice, *I put mine on top of the front wheel*, his audience of one responding and raising his near empty glass, *God but that's a good one; you're a right cute one, so ye are!*

Later, in the combined shelter of the wall and tree he feels as if he is falling into a state of deepening hibernation, so warm and cosy is he within his overcoat, the muffler and cap doing their bit, the whiskey lending a hand; his mind floating on a

softly-lapping, swaying lake of alcohol, the wind has risen and is threshing the tall grass that embroiders the comforting, the all enclosing, the circling arms of the stone wall. He is safe enough if the police ask him – he too, he thinks, is a cute one!

Out of it all, memories stir ... his mother speaking...about this...he can hear her voice – about how gold was to be found in the tumbling Sperrin streams – and he now seems to sense where might lie, this much sought-after stuff, its dull-eye-glint hidden, sleeping beneath the grass and the bog or hiding between black pebbles, polished by running water; or, his mind runs on, her memories of a childhood here with stories of clegs, trailing about the rumps of cattle, of how the children tested one another for their liking of butter, with yellow buttercups held beneath their chins to see if the skin glowed, yellow and rich.

These stories were told and retold; usually, when she had once again fallen off the wagon and the narratives had the full licence of alcohol. She had existed through her unreliable memories, he only now fully realised, and he too had been mis-shaped by the same nurturing half-truths. He had almost expected to hear her voice out here, the familiar tones rising up out of the landscape. The streams were too far off for him to catch any lyrical messages today; the leaves had gone and the branches above were bare, with not a crinkled leaf left to rustle.

He looked about: the wind had gotten quiet now, and the grass lay mute. Not a bird was to be heard. Silence lay on Gleneely. What a bare and empty stage setting for a life betrayed and one left with so little drama, he thought, bitterly. He hefted the half-empty bottle in a gesture to her memory. He owed her this last drink, here on the hillside, mother and son, alone and yet together in death as they had been in life.

He raised the near empty bottle and his lips moved before he drank.

Of his father, he does not think... That man in the shop? His brother? The silent, officious barman in the hotel? The one he asked last night about clegs and buttercups. The one who didn't even answer him, who just turned and strolled off, off up the bar. Perhaps a sibling? There must be at least one, somewhere. Now, the landscape bubbles, his heart beats, heavy and hard, it beats sudden and hard and then lies shockingly silent and sullen, refusing for what seems an interminably long moment to sustain his corporal being.

His mother had died in his arms: her fairy body, light – like gossamer on his arm. Her voice, so faint, *go back, go back*, her last words. Other than that, he recognises this with a start, his memory of her is fading. Except for this thing that lives inside his being, his sense of who he is, her telling him about the smell of rain falling on warm stone, its rising, steaming, the call of curlews coming across the bog, the taste of fresh, still warm cow's milk, straight from the bucket...

He had nodded, stiffly, there where he sat on the hospital seat, he could not speak, and she had closed her eyes and that was that. Afterwards, remembering, a plan formed in his mind: he would travel to the land of buried gold and would walk on the hillsides and on the bogs, an orphan alone in the strange world of another's memory and there he would drink to a young girl's courage in sailing, all alone, sailing away across the sea.

*Here I am*, he thinks. *My mind*, he understands what he is about to consider quite clearly, even though he is aware of it largely through a haze of drink, *my mind, since I arrived here, is repeatedly emptying itself*. He knows there is nothing to be discovered here to replace what he has lost...



*Here I am*, he thinks, as the earth slumps another fraction of an inch, another incremental indentation under his body's weight, he thinks, *a request addressed, a debt partly repaid, a promise half-realised, back to where she started off from, back to where I was begot, where I began a life, barely*. He squints up through a raggle-taggle of bared branches, peering through their meshed arms, their fingers laced, staring into a darkening sky. *Here I am*, he thinks, *a stranger in a strange land*.

## THE DREAM

you ask, what was it? a dream, I answer – it was a dream, nothing more, nothing less

there was nothing before it – there was, there will be — nothing after it

can you imagine this – one bright star, alone in a black sky? can you see it? a light where no light at all should be – not behind or on any side or in front – the non-light is a nothingness, not emptiness, for emptiness implies a something, while non-light is more than mere blackness, yet it is just – a mere- nothingness

this is my dream. a something being where nothingness exists – or, since it is nothing, it does not exist

yet, it just is

i see my foot, i look, look at my by now larger foot, in its growing largeness it is the colour of the yolk of an egg, set in blackest albumen; rather, it is the colour of the yolk of an egg – but as if the yolk were made of butter with the huge butter-yolk afloat on a measureless sea of black milk

i am standing on a leaf on a river, floating on a sea, floating there; or rather here, where nothing else is

my only friend – the shadow of my only friend – this nomad – this albatross – his ghostly dimness, light as thistledown, moves in stately silence ballooning across the rills of my watery domain, this desert – i look up still, i do not look away, but he is gone, only a shadow of her shadow remains with me, then it too is no more

i want to tell you this – how can i describe its ‘it-ness’ – *what* am i to describe – i  
want you to know – I want you also to own the dream, the dream in which unallowed  
knowledge cannot be known, or unknown

i speak only of honey in hives; of a dew-pond of such lusciousness, a pool of  
rainwater, trapped within the running river, a pool of cool shadows and shifting  
reflections, a lake into which i dive, a long, slow dive

you are that pool, pond, lake, that ocean of life, you

i set my foot to a leaf that passes, on a bed of dew-beads floating on water, from  
moment to moment the leaf grows bigger, it becomes big enough to take my feet –  
one foot following the other – laid on the foundation it represents, what was a pool  
becomes an ocean – i float, away, away

everything is here to be known, to see, hear, touch, taste, smell: the grass is green,  
the sky is blue, the air – I feel it – grows salty on my lips, the ocean laps, explodes in  
small poems to love, poems of love, poems and songs, both sweet and salt

here is a forest, of trees, an alleyway or alleyways, there may be more than one  
(between rows, among lanes) flanked by rows, rows of trees ranked in files, lanes,  
light and shade running up and down, washing tree trunks, root and branch  
splattered with the hues of fear, tinted dread frozen insignias of the long-forgotten  
dead

i am in a pit, falling through eternity always and suddenly down, down through the  
clamours silences of darkness, down, down

I wake

i tread water, under a sun the colour of cooked egg, rising over a sea of jet black milk

i wake – where I go, light goes with me, or will follow on, or is there, was always  
there, will always be here

i walk water, under a sun the colour of cooked egg, rising over a sea of black milk

the sun

you

you

## FICTION and FABLE

### THE PARABLE OF THE CIRCUS

Helen is recumbent on her sofa. *I never remember my dreams*, she thinks, even this recurrent one. It does not cross her mind how she knows it is recurrent if she does not remember it. But that's the thing about dreams, they make no sense. Casually, lazily she fondles the cat's neck and head. She is bored, she feels it; she feels boredom lurking in her bones. She lights a cigarette. But what is there to do, she wonders? Sleep? She shrugs. One naked foot rests on a wicker stool while the other occasionally executes little circular dances on the wooden floor. The cat rises to its feet and without apology jumps from her lap to land lightly on the floor before striding towards the open door. She stubs out her cigarette, dropping the long, unused cylinder into the ash tray. Helen's eyes follow the cat as she throws her now redundant arm, with its attendant and empty hand, across the back of the sofa.

Her eyes close ... open ... close.

A large cat, a lion perhaps, crosses the floor, its tail swinging, sending little spurts of sand flying into the air.

A tallish, wide-hipped woman materialises, not as a wisp of smoke, not enveloped in clouds of glory, but as a solid, fully-formed being. In one corner (a man, seated at a high table, dressed in a dark suit) this man holds aloft a rolled-up newspaper, waiting patiently for a fly to land on the table where a cup together with a piece of half-eaten bread and jam sits on a side plate. When, eventually (somewhere, a clock ticks and ticks) the fly lands, he smashes down the baton of newsprint and the fly is no more.

Helen's eyelids have closed of their own accord. The big-hipped woman moves, in actual fact she glides, then plod-plods, then once again rising on her toes, takes off and once more glides across the circus ring, causing spurts of dusty dirt and sand to rise and drift in her wake. She is grim-faced. In the twinkling of an eye she appears to have shifted her place; from where she was to yet another location, she bows and waves, gesticulating to left and right, acknowledging this or that favoured one as she passes. She stops, she raises her arm and cracks a whip. A lion springs onto a circular box and sits on it, while the people who are seated, banked in rising row upon row, cheer. They raise their arms as one and wave, calling out, *Bravo! Brave!* Her whip cracks, sharply.

A littler woman (dressed in black) races across the floor; dark of feature, she does not smile but acknowledges with the smallest of gestures a few of her own favoured, those who now rise to their feet, who crane their necks attempting to catch her attention as she passes.

The sleeper – the woman we know her as Helen - half-raises her eyelids, stares vacantly, then closes them; she feels; she is aware; and oddly she knows this; she is not wholly conscious, she is aware of that; aware also that she is adrift, but how or where she does not know – abruptly, she is confronted by the circus; it is like a scene painted on a huge balloon (puffed and ready to burst); it remains static, in a state of paralysis, there is no wind to ruffle the fabric of this world; no colour to enrich it; no scent of animal or of human sweat to awaken the senses.

The screen doors are pulled apart by some unseen force. A troop of pure white horses appears. One by one they enter the ring. They take turn and turnabout to enter, veering to left, to the right; cantering they invade the ring, one by one. The bells on their leather harnesses jingle and jangle. The ring mistress cracks her whip

and they stop, turn, and start again, carrying their burdens of young and not so young men and women each one of whom perform their familiar acrobatic stunts as they canter, canter.

Some wear green cloaks with gold linings. Others wear red cloaks with blue linings. Uniformly, they hold reins with left hands, they raise right hands in bold salutes.

The horses stop, turn half circle and pawing, stand head to head in the centre of the ring, dropping and raising their heads, pawing, pawing the sandy ground. Their riders' cloaks shimmer, blue and white, red and green, their colours shimmer and mesmerise the blank-faced, anonymous crowds on the tiered benches who hesitate for a moment, before rising, cheering; they raise flags of many colours that move as waves move on the ocean; they shimmer, they move into and about the ring dressed now, battalions of them, men and women and children, innumerable children, dark-suited men, white collared in tandem with their summer-dressed women.

Even though she knows she is in a dream and she knows that dreams are not places where one take decisions or interferes with whatever action is decreed – rather, one perceives – but does not participate – she thinks these thoughts but is not sure what to make of them – she views the circus ring and the children's' faces and the clowns and the horses and the acrobats swinging to-and-fro with everything so colourful and she suddenly longs for the sun to shine on it, not these strobing bright spotlights but the bright, even-handed sunlight.

There are clowns who run in and run out and run in again. They attempt to climb up dangling ropes, aiming for the sky, but fail, falling to the floor. They attempt graceful acrobatic procedures and fail, banging their heads, one against another. They douse

each other with cold water, thrown from buckets. They are funny, but also pathetic and somehow sad.

A sudden skirl of pipes; the four doors are thrown wide open and into the ring roars convoys of vehicles – jeeps and tanks, tractors pulling trailers, flat-loader lorries, tractors and tractor-trailers loaded with bales of hay with collie dogs on top, carrying innumerable people of small stature, dressed in various uniforms. They speed around the ring before disappearing

An elephant, sags across the floor, its trunk waving, its call blaringly shrill.

The strangest thing is, she can see herself clearly, body supine with head raised, stretched out there on her green sofa, in the middle of her dream – in it but not exactly of it, not exactly here or there, but where, she wonders. She has no voice, she cannot be heard for she knows – somehow – that she has no function or place, nothing that can be realised, but here, there I am, she thinks, somewhere in the circus in a dream and wearing that old grey cardigan, the one with holes in both sleeves.

Mrs Helen Bertha Rankin (for this is her name) floats up out of the deep ocean of her slumbers; the afternoon sun that thrusts in through the window rests comfortably warm on the back of her neck. She opens her eyes and sees standing there her old solid green sofa and recalls sitting on that same sofa with the cat on her lap. She had a cigarette in her hand, she recalls, seeing in her mind's eye its wisp of smoke rising, remembering being asleep and dreaming, being informed that she is to go out and about and bring back information regarding the peoples' language – *tell us what colour their words are, their intonations and speech rhythms*: the messages (for a message there was, in the form of a command) instructing her in this manner, *go out*



*and be a traveller, a watcher, an eves dropper one who sees everything and listens well and report.*

Mrs Rankin closes her eyes. She slips into another dream. Perhaps it was her daughter who was given this task, Mary, the one who is a journalist, perhaps she was given the task of reporting. Mrs Helen Bertha Rankin floats away as one on a cloud of thistledown might float; in and out she floats, her dreams come and go, and she with them and she cannot tell what the dream is and what it is not; she travels over the countryside, passing mountain tops and bogs, traveling through mean streets where hard images are harshly painted on rough-cast, white-painted gable walls. She has been and she remains the watcher, the witness, the onlooker. She is an emissary, the sense of this attends her, she is an emissary with a mission. She sees herself, as if through a telescope, distant but close, reconnoitring. She has done this often and habitually; this, it seems to her, moving through town squares, nosing around, and in and out of numerous living rooms where television screens overflow with the word Brexit tumbling, the words traitor and betrayer pouring over the edges of the screens and flooding floors – but always she returns to the circus, to the roar of the crowds, the noise like a splash of colour – primary colours, it strikes her – with graduations blossoming and flowering out and out as the thunder of the crowd rises and falls, resounding as it does.

She swims in a sea of noise and sound, she floats among swells of syntax, carried on the rhythms, the ebb and flow of vowel and consonant, the angry, rasping harshness of words crashing against rocks, then the gentle ying and yang lispings of wavelets kissing gravel, while thonder and thither the poetry of the wee wimmin walkin' up loanens, the thee and the thou, the hard no (repeated, till it is burnished

with smiles), the bargain sealed with spit on the palm and the ding-dong of many hand-slaps, *his word is his bond*, the sudden shot in the head and then – silence, and then only darkness. No false love lost or expressed or felt – these things she notes, as she floats: only to be broken *yer a spy, yer neithan but an auld turncoat* – by an anonymous voice calling out of the shadows; white feathers fall; a bullet with the scrawl (it looks like someone's name) scratched on its brass casing, appearing, nakedly, before her very eyes.

This is what she will report: she will not hear herself say the words; she does not know whether or not it is she who will form these sentences: yet, their meanings already exist, ready to be spoken.

She knows – and she knows she knows – in her bones she knows that she has been sent to ascertain the contours and colours of their speech, these tight-jawed circus people, to understand and gather the mystery of their being, the raucous laughter, the salt and pepper eyes, the shy, I'm sorry for your trouble, the dismissive shrug of the shoulder. Their speech (she knows she knows this and is responsible for realising the existence of this knowledge, for crystallising it), their language is that of the summer and the winter of their ancestors' lives, their speech is the language of their fathers and their children's spring and the autumn is the colour of well dried peat moss, crumbling or crumbled under the sun and understood best when seen against the sheen of a turf bank, shaved smooth, polished till it shines, by the blade of a turf spade, their speech is as dark-and-black-oiled as the water that lies deep in a bog hole, their speech is as brown-and-green and soft and intricate as the lining that creates such melodious comfort as exists in a wren's nest.

In her dream way she vacillates above them like a feather attached by a long string to a floating kite. The lights flicker and change: a troop of clowns race in, tumble,

throw buckets of water, race out; a large black poodle – entering by one door and leaving by another – deftly balances itself on two hind legs atop a large coloured ball. In this way, the carousal continues, yet does not change.

Looking down now on the circus ring, the trapeze on which she now rests temporarily halted, seeing the tented canvas that stands about this fortified melee of life, she realises that her mission will result only in an overview, that it will not reveal any great insight and for this she feels sadness – except perhaps for this, she will in her report state that *language is more than mere words imprisoned between the covers of a dictionary*: she will say, *language is the beginning and the end of being*. A great lake appears below her with a commotion of snakes and eels, massed in numbers, their black and brown bodies dynamically commingling, swirling, tumbling and writhing, creating a rumpus of storms on the waters. The tumult fades and disappears. She will be able to say to we who sent her – was it us who sent her? she wonders -- *it is a miracle that I can do this, a miracle that I am able to know and to articulate and to share this knowledge that rises out of the paradox that is me, straddling as I do in time and in space this dream and this reality*.

## THE LAST POST IN THE FENCE

*The last post in the fence*— those were the last, the very last, words Joe's father spoke to him, his head cradled in his hands, the last words he ever said to him: *you're the last post in the fence*. After that he walked out.

His da closed the door as he left. He was never seen again. Certainly, his son never saw him. Never heard from him. Never heard about him. Silence. An all-pervading silence.

That might be the end of that story, but no story ever has an ending.

Thinking about his father later, as he did often, he felt pleased, proud even that his father should have said that about him. He began to think of himself as *the last post standing*, gradually a picture formed in his mind of himself as tall, straight, unbending, iron-like entity, a guardian of a kind.

A month after his father had gone it was generally accepted that he would not return – *a bad one, that one, always was*, he heard his aunt say, under her breath; then his mother finally opened up to them. *Never mind. You're big now. You're a big boy. You are the man of the house. Now*. And other such things. She died nine months later. *Not fat, but big boned*, he can still hear her say this. Hit by a car; just crossing the road; on a Saturday morning, it was; the road was the road to Strabane; at the end of Craigavon Bridge – that was where it happened. The car, they said, ran the lights and the driver, a young fella - some who knew these things - said, was never caught.

Afterwards, his granny and the unmarried aunt took him in, reared him. It was the granny who found him in the shed, sobbing. The boys at school, he muttered, head down, avoiding her eyes, ashamed, *you're a big boy, now*, the echo reverberating

inside his skull. *Not fat, but big boned*, his mother remarked. He turned nine that year.

People kept saying things to him but more often they said things about him, as if he could not hear, as if he were not there: comparing him to this and to that; he came to find comparisons as odious as the insult of descriptions: *a chunky child; not fat, exactly, but big-boned*. His aunt remarked one day; another time, *you are like one of those marshmallows you are so fond of*, ruffling his hair. *Big, but soft inside!*

For he had grown, week by week it seemed, becoming by the age of thirteen the size of many a fully-grown man. *A big sausage roll!* one of his school mates called out. Others heard and it caught on like a fire in a dry hedgerow and for years that was shouted after him as he passed groups of children or gangs of young people, hanging about street corners, *Sausage Roll! Sausage Roll!*

It was as if, as he grew older, as he grew larger and larger, it was as if the world and especially its streets and roads and its corridors and its alley-ways, grew narrower. He felt constrained but did not know this was how he felt. He had no words that he could attach to his feelings.

There was a difference between himself and others. He knew this. He thought, *I have become a near orphan, my Dad gone, my mother gone, my Granny gone, now*. After his granny died his aunt grew somehow colder and more and more distant. The stain of silence spread across his little world, sullyng his being. He felt guilty, which was a disturbing thing to feel because he knew somehow that he was filled with goodness and therefore beyond guilt or shame. He felt he was filled with good but knew he lived with a compulsion, a demon he could not see or know or understand but one he would recognise, if once he saw him or it.

Only later did he come to realise that silence is a stake in the heart, a corrugation imposed on the tenderness of youth by the narrow-eyed aged, a weapon constructed by adults designed to imprison the childhood they themselves have squandered.

During these long years, deep down within himself, he was at war, or rather he was at love which is much the same thing, it all depended he sometimes thought on the particular chemistry of the thing: the intangibility of the important thing one was attempting to understand. But these concepts were hazy to him and he struggled as a blind man might crossing unfamiliar terrain.

As he steps out of a morning, on his way to the job in the coal-merchants or later working for a local security firm – ‘A Ring of Steel’ was their slogan – his inner life feels refreshed after a night of solitude and silence. Sometimes, he remembers what he has forgotten, what he knows, has known for ever, rekindled into a surge of bewilderment when occasionally he meets one or other of his old schoolmates on the street. He registers their greetings or, if there is a group of them standing on a street corner, he hears *Puffball, Fatso or Piggy-Wiggy, Piggy-Wiggy*, voiced in half whispers, followed by laughter.

Despite it all, there came a time when he discovered he had grown vain of his girth, of his black hair, of the light in his black eyes. Around that time the other boys stopped calling names, instead they looked up at him, if not to him, they stepped aside when they met him on the footpath. The girls gazed at him and smiled. The eyes and the hair and the commanding body were things they liked. What he thought or felt, he gradually realised, they neither knew or cared. Sometimes, catching a glimpse of his big hands he felt pride in their strength and a little trickle of ecstasy would then run through his body.

One day a squint or two of sunlight scrambled over the window-sill and lay for a moment embracing his raised fist. A mug of tea stood hidden and silent within that great lump of curving flesh and bone until he set it down and in so doing caused the fist's shadow to dance across the scrubbed board. He gazed at the shadow, at the frill of its knuckled bump went quietly bump, bump, just like the drumlins of Co Monaghan, he thinks. He smiles, recalling the excitement of seeing such drumlins once from the front seat of a bus on his one-and-only trip to Dublin. He spreads – he tentatively splays— his fingers, viewing their lengthening and abrupt fore-shortening there on the wooden table top, the sunlight warm on the back of his hand, his memory enriched by the suddenly recalled images of those soft round Drumlins: the strange girl on the seat beside him sensing his excitement, how she had explained their nature and origins to him, smiling as she did so and he has smiled -- no he had grinned – in response, glad-hearted. He had bowed to her when they stepped off the bus in Dublin and she too waved goodbye, smiling and liping *Goodbye, Goodbye* and he had stood there watching her fading into the distance, into that place where the future and the past commingle. into the old yearning for what would not be but might have been.

Little did he think on that soft, warm day that this same hand – raising it, examining it – would on another day move to squeeze the life out of a fellow human being, that he would hear the soft, the sharp crunch of bone as this hand squeezed hard and unfeeling as ice on an unloved, thin, cold and scrawny human neck.

He had turned up for work, as usual the previous night for he now worked nights as a security officer – a bouncer, he knew this was the word but he preferred security officer. Showered and shaved, his white shirt and dark suit immaculate; his shoes

polished and gleaming; the lights flashing above the door adding glamour to the scene; the billboards and photographs on the walls radiating life, hope, joy, promise.

As soon as they appeared, he knew they were trouble, a group of six lads, staggering, loud-voiced, dazzle-gazed. He held up two hands, shook his head in unspoken warning – normally that was enough to discourage such, but one of them moved forward, a thin, scrawny youth, unwilling to accept a mere doorman's authority.

Later, the incident forgotten, he walked home taking the short cut down to the river and along by the park. As he stepped onto the bridge, he saw his way was block by a group of youths. As he approached, they spread out, denying him passage. He heard a noise behind and turning his head he recognised the youth he had had words with earlier. Then without warning a bottle crashed into the side of his head and darkness engulfed him. When he gained consciousness, he was lying on his back on the tarmac only to find a booted foot on his throat, then the same boot was raised, hesitated then stomped down on his forehead. Again and again, it struck the side of his head. Then running footsteps and then silence.

That might be the end of the story, but truly no story ever has an ending.

He heard voices speaking out of some distant darkness, *Glandular disorder*, they discussed his case, with him lying on the hospital bed, listening. Eventually they decided what was to be done with him and so they left him to his stiffened silence.

And that might be the end of the story, but truly no story ever has an ending.

Joe met the scrawny youth a few weeks later. By chance. In a laneway, another little-known shortcut between two roads. They met more or less face-to-face the young fellow, startled, averted his gaze and hurriedly squeezed past, hands stuffed deep



into his trouser pockets, muttering when he was safely past, *Big lump of lard!* Joe turned and all the descriptions applied to him for all those years, accumulated like accretions and materialised as a ballooning fury inside his chest, his head where the bottle had made an indentation in his skull throbbed and he found his hand reaching out, grasping, enclosing the thin neck, halting the youth's forward movement, hefting the fellow by the scruff of his neck, one-handed. As his grip tightened, he felt the neck-bones crumble and give way, crumbling as it were; he heard them crack; he felt the power in his tightening hand, the big fingers and thumb almost totally encircling the neck, as a human's hand would a chicken's neck.

Yes, and that might be the end of the story, but truly no story ever has an ending.

After what seemed an eternity, his head filled with a mis-mash of never to be forgotten odds and ends, of jumbled put-downs, a hotchpotch of carelessly addressed comments, a messy, muddled stew of dislikes and disdains. Such a catalogue of disparagements filling all those years when he was the object of other's scorn and disdain and contempt – all this exploded in his head as his hand tightened and then quite suddenly the growing thing in his chest deflated and the fury melted away.

For the picture had come into his mind of a fence post, erected from his father's words, against just such a flood as this and with this memory his hand relaxed and fell away and he stepped back from the edge.

*The last post in the fence*, he whispered, looking dreamily into the other's eyes, looking but not really seeing, remembering instead his father's last words. That was all; he walked away, light on the balls of his feet, his arms swinging loose, his body free and floating on air.

1989

1989

## **Gravity**

I remember very well the first time I saw Robert. He was carrying two large cardboard boxes into the house next door. The house had just been sold and I learned he had bought it, that he was lately retired and that it was just him and his wife. That first day – and unusually for him – he was wearing a pair of old jeans and a jumper and was unshaven. I think that was the first and last time I saw him unshaven and untidily dressed.

I saw him again the next evening. He and his wife appeared, sartorially transformed dressed to the hilt and ready, it appeared to me, to hit the town.

He was wearing a very well cut, very natty black suit, white shirt and red tie. His suit's breast, just above his heart, was adorned by the red triangle of a carefully folded pocket handkerchief, a custom I soon learned to associate with him.

Happily, I got to know him quite well and I like to think we became good friends. I discovered that in his younger day he had been considered, or so he claimed, to be light of foot and that he was a bit of a dancer and that he could carry a tune; he was known to sing at parties, but had to be coaxed and cajoled to do so before he gave of his best.

Their front room was festooned with photographs of he and his then wife. Anne died not long after they moved in and he took her death badly. In the photographs, he was as a young fellow thin and lanky. As an adult he had filled out but remained of a tall, lean build. After her death, and during the years I knew him, the mature widower seemed to shed flesh, becoming thinner and thinner.

He had one peculiarity. His arms were extraordinarily long. When he was sitting down, say at our dinner table, and especially when engaging in conversation, he invariably folded his hands on his lap, as if putting them away, tidily. But when he became in any way animated his arms took on a life of their own. They would flail about and because of their length and therefore I suppose because of their weight – relative to his skinny body – his frame would contort and follow the lead of his fists. At such moments, his trunk and limbs contrived to dance a dance of great wonder.

At table he would break a piece of bread, say, and one piece would inevitably fall to the floor. Crumbs would begin to litter the cloth. His napkin would slip out of the place he had carefully chosen as its resting place while eating and it would fall, silently and so swiftly to the floor. Or, he would occasionally have a piece of steak impaled on his fork when, between plate and mouth, it would be propelled to the carpet as if struck by some invisible hand.

Dammit! Gravity! He would exclaim, in frustration. Gravity! Eventually, he might proclaim, it is getting worse!

He became the victim of gravy stains and the stains of fried eggs were evident. But this was after his wife's death.

He depended on a regular, measured life and apart from the curse of gravity in many ways his life was very well regulated. He had developed an annual routine of visiting London each Autumn. When there, he would go to the theatre, visit a couple of museums, wander through Tottenham Court Road book shops, or just walk around China town. He loved to visit the Ritz, where he would partake of one very expensive Gin and Tonic and observe what he would later describe caustically as the world's hoi polloi. I happened to be in the city when he was on what turned out to be his last visit to London, and we agreed to meet and share a meal.

He directed me to what he claimed was his favourite French restaurant, quite close to the Five Dials. It was a small dark place, down three or four rather steep and narrow steps that opened onto a corridor festooned with many doorways, each leading into a warren of small snug-like dining rooms.

He was there when I arrived, waiting patiently at the small bar, a pint of Guinness at his hand. We were shown to our table and then began his battle with the twin depots of food and gravity. It is getting worse, he confided and then in response to my raised eyebrow he continued, it's this damnable gravity, it's getting worse.

It was just after ten when we left. He insisted on paying and I accepted – graciously I hope, for even though I am sure it was my turn I did not want an argument. I made him a promise that the next meal would be on me and he agreed. Next week, he suggested. It is my birthday on Thursday, he added.

I looked at him, my unspoken question hanging in the air.

Eighty, he replied, his arms spreading wide, his head weaving a weft of mock despair, but with a glint in his eye.

We mounted the steps, with him taking the lead. Through the open door I glimpsed the red curving flash of a passing London bus, the arc of a light-studded black taxi, I could hear the vibrant, the unceasing, buzz of city life. And then everything stopped.

It was the top step that did him in. He seemed to stumble, then fall backwards, arms akimbo, feet scrabbling for a purchase on the air, desperately seeking for a foothold. He flew up and down and brushed past me while I stood, frozen. My head moved, my eyes followed his flight, that is all.

The city life, its light, its vibrant buzzing life ceased: I saw and heard his head strike the stone floor – I can hear the impact still, inside my own head, the dullness of it – and that was that. It was that top step that did for him. That and the damnable gravity.

## The Last Hug

### Chrysanthemum

When was the last time you hugged anyone? Or, to put the question in a slightly different way, when is the last time anyone hugged you?

Before the Puritans set sail from Plymouth for the New World, they sent a few foot soldiers into Ireland. As time went on, a succeeding generation appeared who grew older if not wiser and who in time were forwarded to the same United States of America, carrying with them the hand baggage of puritanism. What these gentlemen had in common was a determinably fierce grip on the truth and an analogous strongly held belief in their right to share that truth with everybody else. Now, I have no intention of getting involved in the national pastime of arguing about religious beliefs. It does no good, leads nowhere, is growing less obvious though it's still there in our genetic make-up. And, like the pestilent conovis 19, it may be invisible to the naked eye but remains lurking out there ready to pounce and invade. Its deeply planted twin mottos being, Bide Your Time and Seek and Destroy the Other.

But enough of that. My Uncle had a sister who lived in the States, as they were called. When I was a child she came back to the black North every couple of years and my memory of her visits at that time is of the way she would hug me. I was terrified of that hug for it was a piece of behaviour alien to my experience. Not many – not any – men hugged I public and I as a six or seven year old - an apprentice male - acutely embarrassed when called upon to sacrifice my private space. Now, we are free of hugging, for the two-metre rule has saved our dignity.

Which brings me to my Aunt's brother. My Uncle Jeremiah was a powerfully built barrel of a man whose body was the same circumference all the way from his chest to his thighs. Although not very tall – he was no more than five feet ten or eleven – he had well-developed biceps and prided himself on the way he could toss a half-hundred weight over a fence.

He had a strong jaw and was prone to grinding his back teeth when a question of right and wrong presented itself. Like alcohol – he was strong on the evils of the demon drink, although it was the drink that brought him down in the end.

One lovely warm and balmy summer evening a neighbour called to return a piece of farm equipment he had borrowed and my Uncle had a lemonade bottle of poteen sitting on the kitchen table. Now, my uncle was not, as I have indicated, a drinker and he had the poteen in the kitchen only in preparation for dosing a sick cow. The neighbour spotted the poteen recognised it for what it was and to cut to the chase the two boyos tried a little sip each and before they knew what was what, the bottle was empty.

The neighbour staggered home, my uncle staggered to bed. The next morning, still staggering and bleary-eyed, he appeared in the kitchen. My Aunt Maura was

washing the breakfast dishes and she immediately started complaining to him. She was, if anything just as strict in her observance of matters of conviction as he was. Anyway, he went to the sink and helped himself to a mug of cold water. He followed this with another and then a little more. His wife chattered on and on, drying and stacking and rattling mugs and plates, opening and shutting, bang, bang, the drawer where the knives lived. The cold water made a sudden and immediate impact on him – it made him as intoxicated as he had been the previous night.

Now, Aunt Maura was a small, thin woman with a narrow head and face and two prominent front teeth that – to me at least – made her look remarkably like a famous cartoon rabbit, one I am sure you will have seen. Turning from the sink my Uncle attempted to push past her, staggering as he did so, and causing her to drop the white pottery plate she was carrying. It fell to the floor where it smashed into a dozen pieces and as a result of confusion he staggered even more and grabbing at her as he half fell. From chitter, chitter to scream she moved without a pause, powerfully, like a trained opera singer, and he instinctively clasped her – whether to silence her or not I do not know. He clamped her to his chest, his big arms enveloping her thin body, squeezing and squeezing. I could see, his eyes were shut tight his lips fastened, one to the other, and she made not a sound. Not a cry or a sigh. Not a sound was heard, not even that of a single bone cracking. I was sitting on the leather sofa beneath the kitchen window, half-hidden behind the curtain, watching, frozen. There was just this coldly eerie silence broken only by his harsh rasping breath.

Don't get me wrong. I loved my aunt and uncle. Nevertheless, I recognise that she was a woman with strong views, these combined with much prejudice and intolerance. As was my uncle. Considering that scene now, I wonder did he feel such a weight of guilt that he welcomed her intolerance of his one mistake, his one fall, a kind of confirmation that he had been right all along and now here was being offered redemption.

She died, of course. The result of that last hug. It was no contest, given her size and his strength combined with the satanic fuel of alcohol and that dimmable chitter, chitter. Hugged to death, she was, hugged to death.

## **THE SHOOTING PARTY**

The dog runs wild, moving about his feet in ragged circles, anticipating what is to come, waiting for the short sharp calls. They are out on the hill field, seeing to the sheep. The day darkens. The sky is settling lower than usual and gloomier. The image of another sky flows into his mind. Somehow or other he sees what he knows is a far off, a distant Boxing Day: a skiff of snow lies on the ground. Men stand in a half circle. Maybe a dozen of them.

Two spades lie on the grass. The digging out is finished. The fox's rump is exposed. Its tail curled tight against the body.

One man is bent over, both hands fixed on the fox's partly exposed body, attempting to loosen its tail. Straining, he succeeds in pulling the fox's body partly out of the hole, its hind legs peddle in air.

The man stops pulling, allowing the fox to stay there, in limbo, between life and death, balanced, half in half out. The man breathes deeply, resting. He looks up and catches the boy's eye. The dreamer is the boy and yet he is not. He sees it all and is seen. The man's voice, take this and whirl it round and round, for speed. Then throw it down the field. When the men are ready! Mind! Wait till I give you the word!

The men form a straight line, shotguns raised, all eyes forward. The boy holds the fox by the tail, pulls it out, slowly, feels the weight, then the animal's sudden wild squirm. Its instance for freedom is real; it has weight and life and substance. The boy rises on his toes, pirouettes like an athlete, going with the animal's weight, one two three times he turns with each turn rehearsing exactly when he will ungrasp the fox, throwing it out there into the eyes of the guns.

He loosens his grip, he sees a colour that is a blur, it is red or brown, brown, it seems to fly, fly, drop, run, running off at a slant, he thinks he hears its heartbeat or perhaps it is his own heartbeat that he hears as it coincides with the thunder. He smells cordite.