

Rebecca's Journey

Extract from a novel (in progress)

Introduction

Set against the backdrop of the troubles, the novel follows one woman's journey between the richly diverse outer physical and cultural worlds of Northern Ireland and her inner world where psychological loss of balance intervenes in her pursuit of an understanding of her own history.

On the one hand, this novel aims to carve out a new and, I believe, importantly different framing of Northern Irish people and their contemporary culture; on the other hand, I have the usual self-doubts as to my ability to achieve success with what is a great challenge. This is my first attempt at creating a novel.

What is it with these days? A dry leaf, rattling across her path makes her jump; a cloud shadow moving just at the edge of perception startles her imagination.

It is the early 1980s in Belfast. As the result of a random yet calculated act of political violence Ruth Porter dies on a city street in the presence of her twin sister, Rebecca. For the next twenty-five years Rebecca, and their two boyfriends of the time, live out their lives by continuing to pay homage to a consistently maintained, if unfulfilling and apparently static, set of relationships. In this regard, they are unwilling prisoners of history.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of Ruth's death approaches and Rebecca, now on the surface a successful and respected career nurse approaching middle age, finds herself increasingly bound up in a quest for meaning that involves journeys that are inwards as well as outwards; this activity culminates in a visit to a ritualised stone-age burial site among the hills on the outskirts of Belfast.

This novel aims to endorse the heroism shown by many ordinary men and women.

An extract of a novel

One

(Autumn, 1983)

I am called Rebecca. I often walk these streets, sometimes in the early morning when I share the city with the seabirds and the starlings and occasionally a single, prowling cat. The world is still asleep then, taking long shallow breaths, easing itself off its back, getting readied for the day ahead.

Sometimes I walk these streets at night, but at night I make sure I am not alone. Sometimes Robert is with me, sometimes James. I feel safer with one of them beside me, even on warm summer nights when the place throbs with life, with cars and buses and taxis, men and women in twos and threes, or in drifting crowds, wandering. We pass bars, cafes, restaurants; music and conversation flow out, carried on waves of light, choruses of voices murmuring like bee-filled hives. On such nights, the city is all laughter and life.

In the depth and darkness of winter the city is different – it slows down, its joints creak and it grows heavy and old. If I venture out, I take comfort in the familiar. I avoid the injuries we have done to the place. I stay far away from the iron, brick and steel, the concrete-block and netted-wire of the sutured lines that seam this city's body. Out there in the darkness I can see the blue flashing lights of police vehicles; I can hear the wailing of ambulances and fire engines. I can hear the insistent racket of a helicopter, high above the roof tops. On nights like these, my eyes are drawn skywards, towards the stars and the distant past. I look and see out there, through the openings between building, in the cold blackness, the stars as they once were. I feel the weight of the city's sadness and I mourn with it and for it. Almost always, on such nights I remain indoors.

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Time. As a breath lives inside one's body, invisibly leavening one, this city inhales and exhales life.

Waiting. It breathes continually; smell its breath; listen to its breathing. Yet, invisible is the life in this

city these many cities. Until, gable walls explode, in monochrome, in bursts of colour, with flags, guns, painted faces, names, dates, words. The democracy of the dead. History embalmed in paint. Light reflected off brass and glass; light mirrored from window-glass and refracted from piled milk bottles, the thick stink of petrol hanging in the air.

This is my city. I walk the windy streets. Inside my head, the city's face is wet. A certain odour particularises the air. A clap of thunder, a bin-lid, a gunshot, an explosion – something engages in noisy congress with the music of running water, steaming slightly up off slated roofs and then streaming, always downwards, downwards, coursing off tiles, caught up in plastic guttering and racing through ancient metal downpipes, into culverts and along old, stone-lined drains; under High Street it runs, secretly swelling underground rivers, burying itself stealthy in the deep and dark of the city's bowels; burying itself in fissures, hoaching, churning with rats and vermin, slimy with snails, gluey with snails' trails. The city weeps. I lift my hand. My cheeks are wet.

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The wind comes and goes and fallen leaves scuttle in and out of corners: trees sway, bow, bend and straighten; clouds appear and disappear. Everything changes: yet nothing changes. For me, one thing never alters, an image, frozen, unchanging and unchangeable: I see myself turn to look, the scene before me static, something caught in a painting, framed darkly, and partially glimpsed in passing; a painting that hangs in a stairway or an image that exists in some old photograph, half-seen, carelessly glanced at as it waits

quietly in shadow say in a half-open drawer – the pregnancy of a moment caught then but fleetingly so and quickly lost, leaving behind only a fleeting remembrance, a scent of something real, yet elusive of touch or recall, like a snowflake, caught up in a warm hand, caught, but shy to death.

As I turned to look back, like Lot's wife, on that September day in 1983 I became aware of a clutter of people immediately behind me. They appeared to be positioned around and about my sister, like a human garland. They were set somehow or other between me and her, thus forming a barrier. Then, there was a movement, a change in the atmosphere, like a wind's sudden brush across a field of corn, realised as a fleeting shadow, followed by a sudden hiatus in the crop of people that left a gap with Ruth, alone, a girlish figure, very frail, very delicate, very gentle, so slight, at its vacant

heart. She has stopped to peer, in that short-sighted way she has had at something, some displayed goods on sale, in a shop window, dresses, I think, and I remember catching a glimpse of something white and thinking it was probably a wedding dress... but, of course, I was in such a state, in such a rush...

Ruth looked so vulnerable that day, alone in that empty space, but I could only think to call out, impatiently, sharply; a lemon-voiced, 'Can't you hurry, please!' Then I become aware of figures moving into the foreground, now in front of her, they were milling about; now some have stopped, frozen, a few are caught in the process of turning away. Ruth alone remains still, peering in at the shop window, oblivious to all that is around her.

No, that is not it. That is not right. Time, that is what I think I mean. Time seemed to become somehow slower, to somehow...shiver. People moved, slowly, without hurry, or were still; but quietly so; something moved them; something caused them to shift their ground, in odd, old-fashioned, old-people's sluggish ways. It was so... choreographed, a dance, graceful and slow and silent, deep in the past, moving in lamplight, or candlelight, something seen through a lace-curtained window.

As I turned and as I took in the scene, time, or something like time, did indeed appeared to stop, the shiver frozen, it ceased to exist. I became aware of an all-pervading, profound and powerful silence – its presence was like a great weight, pressing down, closing in. Then, the day emitted a sigh. A sigh a comma elbowing apart the elements of a sentence, a slow falling pause the result.

Then a great sound imploded upon the world and some force shifted me, physically, lifted me off my feet and hurled me away, away. Noise, or was it silence, then noise, wrapped itself around me: I saw Ruth, I saw nothing but Ruth, rise up in the air.

She was taken from me, quite literally, snatched away from me.

She hung there; it seemed forever and ever and ever, like a puppet; limpid and translucent, presented against a backdrop of make-believe smoke and red pantomime fire. And the silence, like the silence that is born and dies between performance and applause. Then she, her body, was returned... it descended... or rather, that is too firm, too purposeful... no, it floated... drifted, towards the earth. From whence it came.

As she fell, as she was lowered, her outer clothes were taken, plucked, from her body. I think that word is right, is correct, for I have to be precise about this, I must not lose it in mis-remembrance, so I say 'plucked' because I remembered, when thinking about it, later, in the nights, when I fought against and then craved for sleep, of how, when I was a child I saw, in some farmyard, once, a chicken's feathers being plucked and then tossed aside. I remember seeing in my mind's eye, a hand rising and falling, casting billows of white and grey feathers; this was the same, this careless separation of a body and the body's covering. I recall this, repeating it, often, for I must not forget.

The clothing remained, or at least the shapes of empty clothing in the form of shredded threads, remained. They hung there; they clung there, in mid-air, stationary and still for a long moment, before descending earthwards, light as eiderdown, parachuting as easily as drifting dandelion seeds, soft and silent as feathery down... As they descended, they broke up and scattered, pieces of unnatural plumage, light and yielding and slow and silent; and now as cold as snowflakes; they descend, descend so condescendingly, so waywardly towards the earth.

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I advance, the heels of my shoes strike the concrete, my eyes are focussed on the pavement, my right hand clutches my bag, my left hand is fisted and swings in rhythm to my stride. As I proceed through this brick and stone nightmare, this concrete forest I am remembering; I remember that explosion, a bunch of flowers, hurtling skywards, dispersed, a fragmented rainbow of colours. And through it all, the bright shards of shattered glass bursting and flying outwards and upwards, attacking the day, spreading out, spinning hard and shining in the abrupt, dusty sunlight. As they fell to the pavement, they glittered and sparkled, like diamonds. Through a curtain of dust, they screamed, articulated the sheer hardness, the sharpness, of their sparkling lives.

And then it was over: this economy of destruction and all was changed and the world inside my head was over-flowing with far-off voices and sirens and blue lights and white tiles and more and many and brighter, blinding lights...and then, Ruth. She was – her body, lying there.

And that is how my sister Ruth's life here, in this world, was ended.

It is how her body met its end, even now, for in truth, when I dream, as I do often, I dream the same dream; it never changes: at its core, the simple rise-and-fall motion of her body as it is pushed and pulled, as it is lifted and then thrown to earth.

That was when I discovered the terrible dance of death.

And yet there is more. There is the sense of her translucent spirit rising up through a melee of feathers and flowers and the sharp glint of diamonds, a bright centre, rising up, unstoppably, irretrievably, through a storm of dust and fire, rising through that terrible, blanket of silence.

That was when I discovered this dark and everlasting night of the heart.

Two

Autumn, 2007

(Thursday; Friday; Saturday; Sunday; Monday)

Shall the thing formed say to him who formed it, why hast thou made me thus?

Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the one lump to make one vessel unto honour,

and another onto dishonour?

Roman 10.20-21

Thursday

She finds it impossible to acknowledge her body as a real entity, as something with a centre and outward edges, as a thing of actual, solid physicality; for her, it does not exist; it is an empty shell, hollow, without substance. She cannot *know it*, she often thinks. Now, she walks but without violation. The grey sky hangs overhead, inert and mute, cradled behind jumbled strands of telephone wires and electric wires. Their filigreed outlines sprawl on the concrete, their softly meshed, delicately figured patterns failing to redeem the pavement's concreteness.

All about her the city attempts to stand upright, its shoulders back, its back straight, yet it makes a sad melody of shapes and sagging forms. A composition without colour.

Trees bend in the wind, smoke rises from one chimney; it drifts into black, into grey, into white, into invisibility as it curls, trails, becoming one with the sky and the sky's clouds. It lives and it dies and then it lives again. It becomes part of the veil. She wonders, idly, *or is it that it has gone behind the veil? Is that where my real body is this body whose reality I cannot conjure up*, she ponders, *is it over there, on the wrong side of appearance?*

It is now mid-afternoon, and the city has eased itself up and off its haunches. Its many restaurants and pubs, its numerous eating-houses and cafes have disgorged their last customers. Past alien, outstretched, begging hands, hands that are successfully ignored, they stream back to employment. With many sly farts enjoyed, and many covert belches emitted, in crowds they ebb and flow. They pass under a weak sun whose light is suffused with petrol fumes and diesel fumes, past winos and down-and-outs and around and about fat farmers' wives.

The city is alive and well.

At times she appreciates this drab blending of old and new. In some way, she is fond of the old, familiar uniformity. Sometimes she rather enjoys the anonymity to be found moving among the new shopping centres and office blocks and apartment blocks. Yet she dislikes the necessary outcome of that same anonymity, the bland undercutting of her own, inbuilt sense of belonging, her

sense of who she, Rebecca, is or had been or might be. Her once-strong, now long-lost, sense of being, once rooted in a place known and loved, now no longer available.

I have been uprooted; she thinks.

Increasingly she finds this modern town a hard place. Looking at it again, today, all she can see is surface. To her eye it is all façade, uniform and shiny and firm and hard and impervious to the assault of her gaze.

She feels like the ghost of a memory existing thinly against this cold backdrop.

So, as she steps out, the heels of her shoes again strike the concrete. And for now, she keeps her eyes directed to the ground. It is as if she has chosen to travel through a long tunnel of her own making.

I am ghost, she repeats, I am a memory. I exist only as a hollow thing, as an emptiness.

And then and as always it happens suddenly and without warning out of the corner of her eye, gliding past in the periphery of her vision, the hard, polished veneer having melted away, she involuntarily catches a glimpse of a figure sliding silently and unheedingly into vision and then out of vision. Then, as quickly as it arrived, the moment is gone, the fissure closes, the figure is no more. Only an impression of its disinterest, of its otherness, remains.

She hesitates, there on the street corner, uncertain; then, after glancing about her, she continues on her way, pushing blindly through the crowds. Her feet feel heavy and she has to force them to form the steps that drive her forward. At the same time, the world inside her head is light, without content and without sound and, oddly, in her consciousness, she is aware of this contradiction. She is aware also of her own fatalism. She fears, yet she is beyond fear. She does not fear the figure that appears and then disappears so frequently. She loved it, once. Is that too strong? Yet, when she observes that image, for an image it must be, and when she considers her own reaction to it, she does so always in a wholly disinterested way.

But she is aware too, that for her, a sense of peace must remain beyond reach. She is acutely aware of the expansiveness of the sea that seeks to carry her along and of the meagreness of the husk of her body as she resists. Soon, she knows, she may be overwhelmed by this as she fears being

overwhelmed by the heavy swell of people. For a moment, her resolve crumbles and she wants, desperately wants, to be taken over. For an interminable moment she longs to be swept up, finally to be able to succumb, to be cradled in the waves' arms.

The moment passes.

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A lull in the flow of cars and black taxis allows her to step off the pavement and cross the road. It is mid-afternoon and the sky above the city has turned blue; it provides a perfect backdrop to an army of scurrying regiments and battalions and companies of fluffy white clouds. It has turned into one of those big, blustery days that are to be found in the agitated, jittery, uncertain periods that occur intermittently between late summer and mid autumn. The wind is rising, coming in directly off the Lough, causing the sudden, erratic skittering of pieces of old newspaper and scraps of detritus. These dart on the wind and dance through the air, stammering as they go.

There is a sub-text to such a day; its meaning is there to be read easily and instinctively by men of a certain age. Such men can be heard speaking of the promise of rain to come, raising their noses and sniffing. Boys, or even young men, might simply smell a hint of heat in the air but these older men contain within themselves an ancient, instinctive sense of impending disaster, for country ways die hard. They sense fretfulness in the tiny, fleeting oscillations of sunshine and cloud-shadow. The air is full of many turmoil's of wind from the east that leaves a few with distinct feeling of elevation, but whose sharpness conveys to others uneasy feelings of an approaching dislocation.

Rebecca pays little heed to the day or to the people who surround her. In turn, she is another anonymous figure to those who pass her by as she progresses swiftly through the thronged streets. She is going towards her home. That means skirting the city centre, then crossing the Lagan before navigating a maze of little streets. She is deep in reflection and soon, she finds herself traversing Donegal Place without knowing quite how she got there. Instinctively, she turns eastwards into Castle Place, the wind in her face. As she approaches the Post Office, and just as she puts one foot forward to step off the pavement, she feels a hand, heavy and commanding, on her shoulder. She is halted in mid-step, pulled back onto her heels, just as a large, yellow Roads Services tanker turns into Bridge Street, passing within inches of her body. The driver swerves abruptly, leaning out of the open

window, sounding his horn, but she ignores him. She is hardly aware of his or the vehicle's existence, and cares nothing for its driver's mood. She looks over her shoulder, murmuring an instinctive 'thanks you' to the man who warned her before continuing on her way. She is propelled by an impulsive need to find the river bridge.

She is lost to the world, totally. Only vaguely and instrumentally conscious of her surroundings. The impact of the morning's meeting weighs on her shoulder, tight and heavy. Without thought, she brushes away a stray wisp of hair that has come loose. She ploughs on.

All about her the air is heavy with movement, with the strange, sad melody that the city emits. All about her the traffic moves, wave upon wave. The snoring of motor cars, the scuff, scuff, scuff of the lazy-footed, and the flat-footed; the click, click, click of sharp heels on pavements; the thin squeal of motor vehicle brakes, the hiss of the occasional liberation of air from the pneumatic system of a passing lorry.

The city is alive and singing a soulful song.

Now she is on High Street and now she is passing the Albert Clock. A forest of white feathered quills has appeared – they are dancing across her path. As she advances it dawns on her that they are jets of water mere public art, street decoration, a distraction for pedestrians the thin streams of water struggle and stutter against the combined forces of gravity and the gusting wind and the intentions of four or five small boys who are kicking at the gleaming jets. They attempt to slap hand-sized splashes of water over one another. As she passes, an ice-cold splash strikes her legs and abruptly re-awakens her to the outside world.

For a brief moment the symphony of their high, childish voices mingles and comingle in the air, only to fade quickly away. Her attention has been caught, if only momentarily. She looks about. The street is busy. An old lady is being pushed along in a wheelchair. Despite the blustery day, three men are sitting at separate tables outside McHugh's public house staring into glasses of Guinness. A thin, poor-looking, foreign-looking woman, wearing a shawl and carrying a baby, makes her way towards Rebecca. Her head bends forward, and her eyes are directed downwards in a gesture of submission, an application for help. She stops and holds out a magazine. Without thought, Rebecca's hand goes to her pocket and she hands over all her spare change.

She is only partly aware of all of this, seeing the scene as a whole, unaware of all the details; yet, somehow, she knows the men are unemployed and she knows the woman is alone in a strange land. She does not hear the boys' yells or the sound of water falling onto the concrete slabs; she is unaware of the water's slow, silvery, snaking passage through the air, she is unaware of how its changing form is highlighted against the grey slabs of grimy concrete. She barely sees the drinking men; nor has she really been conscious of the traffic on the roads she has traversed in her mute odyssey through the city. She is hardly conscious of the presence of the woman with the child, only their plight registers and calls for a response. She is half-conscious of the woman in the wheelchair, but mechanically, noting how young she is and wondering, in her trained professional way, what her story might be.

She is aware, though not fully conscious, of this morning's encounter. Of the man, Bond, of his blonde head, of the room and the table, of the stairs, of the door, of the door handle. She knows she has failed, for she feels the guilt and the shame of failure. She has let Ruth down. Once again.

She is tired. Still, she does not cease. Yet, she walks more slowly now, for she finds she is breathless. She leaves the Custom House Square behind. She crosses Victoria Street, passing the huge blue and white fish that stands here, elevated, between the roadway and the river. It looks out without interest to where the river water flows past. When she has come this way in the past it has always struck her that there is something high-minded, noble yet stoic, about this fish, left as it is high and dry yet within jumping distance of the water, glued to its concrete foundation. It is so big, so rounded, so... actual. The fish has always intrigued her. It always reminds her of Robert and leaves her wondering if it might be a piece of ceramic. She does not know and has never asked. Today, she does not notice its presence. Exhausted by the intensity of her emotions, she sits down on the first of the riverside seats she comes across.

Just as she sinks onto the seat, and quite without warning, it begins to rain heavily. She is without raincoat or hat or umbrella and within seconds her light-weight coat is soaked. She jumps to her feet, rainwater running down her back and legs and seeping into her shoes. She looks up. The air is thick with a floating greyness, the sky is half-hidden by rain; and the black cloud dropping lower, moving in fast from the direction of the open Lough. She looks around for shelter, then runs, head

covered by her spread-eagled hands, towards the narrow pedestrian bridge that rises up and over the river. She takes what shelter she can beneath its narrow walkway.

She stands under the bridge, watching the rain slant down, watching it drip off the metal struts and fall to the pavement. She recalls clearly how, earlier, standing in front of Bond she had felt obliterated, just as Ruth had been obliterated. Within minutes, and just as suddenly as it had started, the rain stops and the wind – it had strengthened without her noticing it and its being here somehow shocks her – dies down.

The air is fresh the light has attained a tremendous clarity and the scene before her is luminous. She grows conscious of the rhythm of her own breathing, of the coldness of the wet on her legs, of her heightened awareness of every sharpened detail in the cityscape. The moment holds. She notices how the pavement slabs are grey, black pitted, chewing gum splattered, their edges roughened by wear. She remembers not to step on the black lines that separate each concrete entity.

There is something else that tries to impinge its presence on her, but she cannot be sure what it is. Is it something to do with her surroundings? Then a droplet of water falls off the bridge and plops into a puddle at her feet. The noise of its fall breaks the silence. That is it: silence is the quality of which she has been half-aware, a quality to the day she longed for but could hardly name.

Now she moves a little. The traffic passes silently and unnoticed on the road behind. Men on a boat sail past. She hardly marks what has happened, not even the impression that anything has happened. Her mind still refuses to recognise the incident that sent her running through the city streets, here to this place, here beside water.

The river is so still, now, empty, and still. But running, underneath the stillness she feels movement.

For this one brief moment the city remains without sound. It is a little pool of perfect peace and she floats at its centre, concentrating. And then, another droplet falls, so heavily and so fatally complete, into another pool of water at her feet. Eventually, another follows it, and others follow. She finds she is counting the seconds between each flat sound and the number is sometimes six, sometimes seven.

She looks across the river. Out of the grey stillness she follows the flight of white gulls. She sees the two yellow cranes in the shipyard: a small patch of blue in the cloud-filled sky. Rainbows seem to fill the sky. Like voices, they speak to her, but they are voices with no words.

She recalls her flight from Bond's presence. *The way he looked at me. His hands.*

Another thing stirs in her memory.

'Isn't it odd,' she thinks, 'When I see Ruth, I have never, ever heard her speak! It is strange! I have never thought of that before! Yet, there is a sound I always hear when Ruth is present...'

A sound... She cannot recall what the sound is. It is too far removed...it feels as if a heavy, dark curtain separates it from her.

The yellow cranes stand, silent and unmoving, like huge, dead prehistoric monsters; there is no life in them or around them. The thousands of men who once worked and talked and sang and joked here, all gone. The ready wit gone, and the hidden, vicious humour gone, too. The cloud casts a shadow over the landscape, then that too is gone, and she is left with only the cold empty air.

Still, she lingers. Automatically, she pulls her coat closer. It has grown increasingly colder; but she is only half-aware of bodily discomfort. A boat passes but she hardly registers its presence. She exists only within her mind and her mind is all borderless space – she is both inside and outside this vast emptiness that has no light, and therefore no point of reference. Her thoughts come and go, wandering. Randomly, they travel around and about the vacancies that are yesterday and tomorrow. She imagines herself tumbling into the darkness of a cavernous vault, a wondrously expansive vacancy that is without bottom, or sides, or beginning or end.

As quickly as it arrived the thought departs. She shivers a little and again draws her coat closer. Water strikes water. A form of still pervades her innermost mind. This world has nothing but silence to offer, then another drop of water drips, a flopping echo calls out. Perhaps she, perhaps the whole world, is to be saved by the music made by each individual, flattened, un-reverberating note. Saved by water striking water; each drop existing momentarily, real only in relation to the one that went before, to the one coming after.

Slowly, the rhythm returns her to comprehension. Or is it the loss of rhythm. She feels the cold intensifying on her skin. Awareness returns and seeps into life in her consciousness:

Words run, tumble, through her mind. *'I stand here: I am not pondering, not thinking and not mediating, not considering.'* She pauses, considering the words she has uttered inside her head. 'Perhaps these are the wrong words to use, the wrong verbs; perhaps it is not about doing anything, maybe it is just that I have become conscious of the silence, overwhelmed by the emptiness. And that is fine. It is fine to be overwhelmed, sometimes. I have to allow myself that. Yet, I must be aware. And I have to think before I can become aware. This is how my mind works, these days. Meanwhile I shall *cogitate* is a good word – I shall cogitate about thinking. It is as if my mental function has been locked within a strange form of refrigeration. But now, here I am thinking about thinking about this... I could speculate like this for ever and ever, all the time becoming more and more aware of the layers of thought that co-exist within my head.'

And still she does not recall, or think about, or consider her earlier meeting.

Deep within the dark confines of her coat she shrugs, the wet lapels rise and fall. Under the silvery-grey material's sodden surface her body is aware of the dampness and her skin's involuntarily shivers. She looks around. She moves closer to the wall and peers over the parapet, down into the water. The Lagan moves sluggishly, idly almost. It seems to her to have no purpose ; lack of purpose is something she recognises. Debris floats on the oily water. It has been formed, or has formed itself, into three discreet rafts. How lazily patient they seem, she thinks, caught there between currents, imprisoned in the places where the concrete pylons artificially and violently split the river's being they makes her think of a caesarean opening of the water: they are, she considers abruptly, dirty, watery cesspits that have spawned a sprawling litter of plastic bottles, a jumble of bits and pieces of blackened scraps of wood, encircled with ancient twigs, curled and plaited like hair.

She wonders, in a clinical way she has sometimes, at her mind's workings, at its selection of this word 'caesuras', *'it must come from some textbook, read long ago. Why am I associating Caesar's birth system with such a dingy utility? Such a demanding governor of his people. Isn't it strange, how so many disparate things turn out to be related, in some way?'* She remembers James talking about Julius Caesar once and quoting from him to make some point or other. *'If you must break the law, do*

so to seize power otherwise observe it. A scattering of seagulls sits out there, bobbing on the water; a couple of men stand on a rocking boat, engaged in what looks like desultory conversation.

Power. Of course, that was a man talking. And what of birth and death, they are so close, one to the other. No power there. Or perhaps, that is where all power resides.

She raises her eyes, back beyond all of this to the Harland and Wolf shipyard, the yellow cranes standing there – how proudly they once stood – yet solid and strong still. Like their names, Sampson and Goliath. Power again. To her left she sees the Royal Mail building; away to her right stand the Hilton Hotel and BT Towers and the Waterfront Hall. Such energy, dead, decaying and living, side by side.

This is where she lives, a watery waste set in a trap of rising buildings, where so often the hand of death has reached out, searching, groping about in the night.

She looks to the river. The wind has risen again, and she sees where it is driving and throwing slight skiffs of raindrops that leave the water's face pock marked. She sees the many little wavelets beckon; their white lips surround pulsating black-maws. *How the water heaves and humps. Heaving and humping, heaving and humping.*

A feeling of claustrophobia settles about her, like a dark cloud; she experiences the approach of a panic attack. She waits, both hands pressing down on her belly. The feeling passes. She breathes more freely, and she turns her gaze back to the security of the two yellow cranes. She is calmer now.

This is familiar. This is home, this is where I live, this is where I belong.

The gusts of wind subside, and her attention is caught again by and drawn back to the weir itself. It is a shallow trough, formed by seven or eight uniform sections, each one a place where water descends from one level to another. In their long, running form these ripples of light and shade remind her of women's braided hair. The streaming silver strands are highlighted against under-shades of a darker colour. There is something primeval, something pagan about it. The image of some illustration they had as children in a book of Irish fairy stories enters into her consciousness, the long-tessellated hair, floating on water. The thought, in the half-realized form of a vague memory, a childhood story or a legend perhaps, comes to her of women, in the old times, swimming

upstream, sisters, perhaps, their faces beneath the water, their long hair streaming behind them. They are swimming back to the otherworld, lying just beyond the horizon of mortal existence. It may be, she thinks, that they are mermaids, the half-spawn of that great blue fish, their mother. They become in her mind's eye mermaid sisters... eyes, mouths, submerged, changing from this world to another, striving to move forward yet never advancing, always remaining static, imprisoned in the everlasting moment, struggling against the water's powerful push.

Once more, she experiences a sense of suffocation. A feeling of powerlessness sweeps over her. It is as if a clamp has been placed on her chest; her throat constricts. The question forms itself sharply and clearly in her mind, *'what has this country done to me, to us?'* Then it passes. It always passes. As she turns away, she finds her teeth have begun to chatter, it has grown colder. It is that, together with her own wet condition, that finally drives her from this spot that lies at the heart of her world, and as she shakes herself and begins to climb the steps leading up to the footbridge it is as if she is born once more into the life of the city

At the top of the steps she stops and looks back.

Born once more...

Yes, it is like a womb...

'It was my fate,' she thinks, *'to have been born into a world that has such an abundance of tears; yes, but born too into this city's raw, dark humour and its generosity of spirit. Am I not lucky to have been born as one of its people?'* She answers, *'No!'* Today she feels like a hostile witness and growls, inwardly, in frustration.

Here so many generations of individuals were conceived and born; workers of all kinds, labourers and builders, farmers and husbandmen, doctors, nurses, scientists, adventurers, inventors, explorers, thieves, rebels, liars she can hear the submerged murmur of their voices, can feel their energy, rising up out of the river that drew so many ancestors to its sides and then took them away, sailing off – somewhere a memory of some story of a mythical place comes into her mind, of people setting off, sailing in boat of glass, seeking this country beyond that tattered line where the sky and the horizon meet and mix and marry. Slowly out of childhood the memory rises and returns to her of

a world contiguous with this but everlasting, enlivened with youthful, gentle folk yet cloaked in invisibility and long lost to the sight of men.

Such a great melee of imagination and creativity! It fills the air. She takes pleasure in her sudden feeling of pride and affection.

As she resumes her journey towards home her step is somehow lighter. She attempts to deliberate on what has happened during the past short time: Peter Bond and herself. *'Chalk and cheese,'* she thinks. Her mind slips gear once again. It turns to the sounds of water, the fountain, the smell of fresh rain, the sudden, putrid stink of the river water. She feels that the city's sounds and the silences and the smells are jealous of each other yet, she judges, they could not exist apart. Silence without sound would be wholly nothingness; sound, without silence, would be meaningless noise. Balance, acceptance, multiplicity, being useful – these are what count. Her revulsion has turned to pride and remains now as a feeling of warmth. *'This is the strength of my resolve! Responding to the music of big drums and roaring mobs... Yet, this is where I belong; this is where I have my roots. This is where my few friends are. Why then do I so often feel such loneliness? Roots but no shoots!* She continues to ruminate on everything except the encounter that sent her here; that she continues to successfully ignore.

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Just as she opens her door the telephone is ringing but she pays it no heed. It will be either James or Robert, she thinks, and just now she does not feel able to talk to either of them. Eventually, the summons stops. In the meantime, she has taken off her sodden coat and then her damp clothes before going into the bathroom where she puts on a robe and runs a bath.

.....

Soon, she lies, submerged in the safe, warm womb of the bath water. *'I should have answered the telephone.'* She worries a little now, her conscience troubles her, but at a distance. *'The trouble is, I am most wholly myself when I am alone and just now, I want to be myself. When I am with others, even Robert or James, I I, the "me" of me disappears. I feel constricted – I feel like a snail that has withdrawn inside its shell; so tight, so firm, so little space. I fill my constraining shell; there is no room for anyone else to get inside. I am so well protected; proofed, she thinks wryly,'* against even the sneakiest of a Houdini's attempt to gain admittance!' She resolves, as soon as she

has had her bath, she will call both James and Robert! It really is second nature for her to do so. They have always been there, ever since early childhood. When they were children, they had in general been regarded by neighbours as cousins, even though that is not the case for they are not related in any way. Or, at least, Robert sometimes says, jokingly, it is not the case as far as anyone knows! Once, they were four: the two sisters Rebecca and Ruth Porter and the two boys James Ferguson and Robert Orr. Today, as she entered her apartment, as she lies here, soaking, the two men are out there, somewhere in the city or on its outskirts, going about their individual bits of business. On this day, at this moment, while apart they are not oblivious of each other's existence.

She drifts. She moves into a dream state. She returns, remembering. They were born into suburbia and lived in a long, sweeping crescent of houses that faced onto a narrow road. Situated between town and country their middle-class homes, if not immediately adjacent, were close to each other. Each house had a large back garden that narrowed off to a point where it came to the boundary with a field. James still lives here, single and on his own, in his parents' house.

The four children started to attend the local primary school on the same day forty odd years ago and immediately the two boys became friends; gradually, the two girls, who were twins, got to know them and joined them in creating what eventually became this enduring friendship. Enduring if only for three of them. It began by their walking home together from school, and then gradually, they started to get together after school, meeting always at the point where their gardens touched the open fields that lay behind their homes.

It was here that the boys built their first playhouse, a rough shelter constructed from bits of old wood and two sheets of rusted corrugated metal, all this held together by odd strands of wire and string and rope. The two girls brought various things discreetly purloined from their mother's kitchen cupboards – cups, two plates, a knife and a spoon, an old tin box to store them in. The box, she remembers, was green and blue, round in shape and with big, red roses scattered across its surfaces. They grew into it, and into each other. It was to this place, hidden in thick undergrowth that Ruth came on her own to read whatever book she had on the go at the time, always accompanied by Oscar, officially their shared Labrador but in reality, Ruth's special friend. Rebecca smiles. It was here too that Robert smoked his first cigarette, secretly taken from his father's coat pocket and shared with Ruth. He never mentions it, but she knows he remembers it still. It was the day he got his

eleven plus results. It was the day they all got their eleven plus results. Robert was the only one to fail.

Robert, always the failure in worldly terms yet he was always a maker. Inadvertently, Bond's hands take shape in her mind. She recalls the earlier encounter. She feels bitterness rise. She thinks of Robert, someone who had certainly not made widows or orphans, someone who created other things. In an attempt to escape her rising feelings – she is in danger of being overwhelmed she turns her mind back again to their childhood playground, to the undergrowth that developed and grew into a copse of trees. Off to one side, the land was wet and boggy, especially where it ran down to the stream. When they were older, fourteen or fifteen, James would borrow his father's shotgun and shoot pigeons at dusk, as they came into roost. On each occasion, at the sound of that first shot, the girls' mother would blow long, urgent blasts on her whistle, the signal for them to return home immediately.

When they meet now, which they do most weekends, and the conversation becomes companionable and maudlin, they are moved to hunt for warm, shared memories of those days. Then they talk about the field and the small copse it ran down to, and then, in turn, they mention the woods beyond and then the river – in reality, a small stream. They talk about the weather that there was then or about other children who went to the school, or they occasionally recall some saying of the Master or recall Oscar and the way he could get lost, disappearing from view, receding, fading away before their very eyes, only to appear yards away, rising among the bushes.

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As they grew up, they became easier in each others' company. They were more than school friends, more than acquaintances. They remained close and grew in knowledge of one another. They became real friends. Yet, as they came to maturity, each one of them viewed their friendship in a different way. To James, it was, if he had thought about it at all, which he did not basing his life's philosophy on a series of clear and simple givens a matter of pragmatic benefit, primarily so to himself. He was, he would have said, supremely indifferent to any sentimentality that might lurk around their acquaintance. Rebecca and Ruth sometimes talked about his selfish tendency and put it down to his being an only child. Yet, he, of them all, could have told you how many years, months, indeed, he

could probably have said how many weeks, they had known each other, for he overtly valued their being together as a solid foundation, as a concrete reality and as the basis upon which to build a set of good social relationships.

On the other hand, Robert believed, with a deep but wholly unexpressed passion, in the value and worth of enduring friendship. He was, to James's mind, wholly adolescent in this regard. Robert would have asserted, being ignorant of his own behaviour, and if asked, would have agreed that he was totally sentimental about the relationships; he would have said, 'and what's wrong with a bit o' sentiment?' He took delight in baiting any unwary interrogator. He had developed and now often deployed the half-dead Ulster-Scots dialect as an effective cloaking strategy, a method of shielding himself from unwanted scrutiny. And he was a lover of irony; it was something he used as a shield against James's often overbearing behaviour.

Robert was a friend to many people, but although he was naturally and ordinarily compassionate, generous and benevolent, for him real, true friendship was something beyond the ordinary. It was something that was to be recognised and nurtured when it mysteriously appeared. This sense of value was one he had shared with Ruth. Firstly, in their early teens when they had been especially close and had talked for hours together, discussing the things teenagers discuss. Most people move on from the innocence that exists at that stage of life. Robert had not. As if he were glued to them, he stuck tenaciously to the values discovered, developed and shared with Ruth before her sudden death. And despite his apparently relaxed demeanour he had a long memory, one that could hold and harbour any injury done to him or to his.

Rebecca's perspective was slightly different. In some ways, she was at the heart of this friendship. If asked, the others would have said that she *was* its heart, for she was the overt reason why they had come together again, after a short period when they had met only occasionally as a group. She was the reason they remained together and not just because of the two men and one-woman thing, so beloved by mythology and dramatists. To her this grouping meant continuity, a family of sorts – the only family she now had, and one the idea of which she clung to with great tenacity. With James and Robert, she had a special place of rest, security, a space where absolute trust could be requested. It offered her the ability to believe in something outside the self. But of all

of them, she was the most distant. In some ways she remained more absolutely remote than any of the others.

Now and again she became aware of this quality of coolness on her own part and put it down to the fact that she instinctively adopted the role of a woman as opposed to their roles as men. Perhaps, she argued, in these moments of self-awareness, this lent a certain distance to her position in the group – and, deep down, she knew, the other two regarded her with something like awe, always subscribing to her good sense, to her superior sensibility, her woman's instincts. For these reasons, they followed her. She was enabled by this and allowed to play the combined if faintly ambivalent roles of mother and leader. In addition, she encouraged each of them to assume the part of father, brother and trusted friend, thus giving each a recognisable role while remaining untouched by conventional status herself.

And, yes, with this went a certain tenderness, a certain caring, as well as a certain remoteness, an aloofness, a certain withholding as well as a little giving. She was always the first to accommodate others' wishes, always the first to bend this way or that in order to help ease any blockage to professional or social accord. Nevertheless, she dictated the level and depth and degree of intimacy, leaning towards coolness when in doubt.

And love? Admittedly, she often thinks of giving and receiving affection. She wonders sometimes about passion. She remembers – sometimes, she remembers those years before Ruth's death – the bursts of wildness, the blind fury, the passionate abandonment of reason, the toxic mixture that was to be discovered in the giving and taking of pleasure.

Yet that part of her life abruptly departed in September 1983. A chill came and occupied warmth's place.

*

Her given names are Mary Rebecca Anne –an adherence on her parents' part to the tradition of calling grandchildren after their maternal and paternal grandparents. Following this well-established precept her twin sister was christened Margaret Ruth. Their mother was a nurse. Their father was a doctor. A GP who had one of the last single-handed practices once so

common in the North, situated on the edge of the city and attracting a mixture of suburban and rural patients. He worked long hours. He took solitary walks out into the country every evening. He bird-watched when on holidays, invariably in Scotland and read lots of mainly historical fiction. He accompanied his wife and daughters every Sunday to the local Presbyterian Church. He took pride in telling his patients that he had never smoked or drank.

He died, quite suddenly, one evening early in 1984. He had gone for his customary walk. Rebecca remembers it well: the abrupt, over-loud knocking on the door; a neighbour excitedly speaking to her mother; 'your husband is ill, on the roadside'; their rushing out; his body lying on the ditch, crumpled and silent. He was dead, a heart attack the hospital people said. It had happened as quickly as that. He was just sixty-two years old. He died not six months after his daughter's murder.

Afterwards, Rebecca remained living at home, she and her mother, alone. In Rebecca's memory, the following years remain hazy, each one mingling and merging with the others. Only the memory of the heavy silence in the house remained. That and the insistent tick of the hall clock. and the gloom that seemed to hang in the air; and of course, the painful meals taken in silence, yet always taken together.

It was never spoken of, but she knew her mother blamed her for both deaths: her mother blamed her for taking her sister into town that day and she knew beyond doubt that her mother also held her responsible for her father's dying of a broken heart. Deep down, she blamed herself, but nothing was ever said, in private or in public. She lives with what she can only think of as muteness, for it is more complicated than mere silence; it is a condition that grows and grows heavier and heavier, that grows around her heart and her body and now her mind.